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***Learner-centered Education in International Perspective:
Whose Pedagogy for Whose Development?***
Michele Schweisfurth. Routledge, London and New York
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One of the latest monographs from *Education, Poverty and International Development Series*, is the groundbreaking work of Michele Schweisfurth which is entitled *Learner-centered Education in International Perspective*. A highly recommended book "for academics and post-graduates with a focus on comparative and international education" (p. i), the book is meant to feature as a contributory work to deal with "global debates about how to achieve education for all" (p. ii). The main theme of the book centers around LCE (Learner-Centered Education), a widely endorsed, yet partially debatable 21st-century concept.

Subsequent to *Introduction* (Chapter 1) which introduces LCE both as a panacea for learning inadequacies and dilemmas and as a traveling policy which is "shaped by the activity of supranational and transactional agencies" (p. 2), the major bulk of discussion in the book unravels in three principal parts entitled: *Learner-centered education as a global phenomenon*, *learner-centered education in lower and middle-income countries*, and *lessons and resolutions*.

Striving to give out a cogent delineation of the term, in Chapter 2 dubbed *Learner-centered Education: Definitions and Provenance*, the author moves toward defining the term by way of first contrasting it to some relevant terminology including child-centered learning, constructivism, problem-based or enquiry-based learning and progressive education, and then by spelling out what LCE is not. The chapter also deals with the provenance of the concept of LCE and introduces a double possible line of derivation for the term, ascribing it to both antediluvian time (e.g. 400 BC, the time of Socrates) and more modern era (e.g. eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Rousseau and Dewey's time). Finally, after going over some critiques of LCE, the chapter closes by providing an

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illuminating definition of LCE: "a *pedagogical approach which gives learners, and demands from them, a relatively high level of active control over the content and process of learning*" (p. 20).

The third chapter of the book, entitled *Three Justificatory Narratives: Cognition, Emancipation and Preparation*, addresses three focal cornerstones of LCE, namely cognitive, emancipatory and preparatory perspectives. Having its roots in constructivist views of education, the first of these three arguments derives from the conviction "that people ... learn more effectively when they have more control over their learning, and are guided in the process, rather than having a fixed curriculum imposed on them in set ways" (p. 21). Under the category of cognition, the author enumerates several pertinent theories such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Bruner's Scaffolding Model, Ryan and Deci's Self-determination Theory, and Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Theory, all of which are concerned with highlighting learners' unique role in the process of learning. Concerning emancipation which seeks "to free people from oppressive forms of control" (p. 21) and to help them "develop knowledge, skills and attitudes for democratic citizenship" (p. 27), the author is of the view that "Education *for* democracy has to start with education *through* democracy" (p. 29), that is students should be given opportunities for self-expression within the classroom. Finally, preparation for future life, which is closely linked to constructivist, emancipatory education is believed by the author to have been facilitated via current outgrowth of information technology (IT). The chapter comes to an end by referring to some pieces of evidence manifesting the effectiveness of LCE, including child-friendly schools (CFSs), which as the author maintains, are not sufficient enough to buttress the efficacy of LCE.

The last chapter in part I, *Contexts for Learner-centered Education: Global, National and Local* mainly deals with six factors delineated in Harbor and Davies' work, each forming a unique context for the implementation of LCE in poor, developing countries. These so-called 'contexts of stringency' are "demographic, economic, resource, conflict, health and cultural contexts." (p. 37) Subsequent to providing a laconic account of Bronfenbrenner's eco-systemic theory regarding LCE, and going over some global and cross-cultural manifestations of LCE, the author introduces change of government, movement toward democracy and state fragility as three major political situations affecting the establishment of LCE. As to the relationship between conflict and LCE, the latter is regarded "as an alternative to traditional authoritarian models," which "has conflict prevention and healing potential" (p. 45). Furthermore, larger student population, lack of resources and insufficiency of teachers, ubiquity of incurable diseases like AIDS and exodus are discussed under the section dubbed demographic context as the problems plaguing poorer countries. Lack of resources and human capacity is referred to as another principal factor underlying the unsuccessfulness of LCE in poorer countries. The nature of curriculum and assessment is the next element which, according to the author, is in direct interplay with LCE. Ultimately, the role of cultural context in providing suitable grounds for launching LCE is expounded toward the end of this chapter.

Part II, the bulkiest part of the book with six chapters, opens with the discussion of *Learner-centered Education as a Promising but Problematic Policy in the Global South* in chapter five. This chapter mainly deals with obstacles, in developing countries, standing on the way of proper implementation of LCE. While regarded both as "a promising 'policy panacea' for myriad problems" and "the driving pedagogical ideal for contemporary curriculum reform" (p. 65) in developing countries, LCE has

always been "a combination of 'top-down pressures and bottom up desires'" and that's why the author claims "there is a 'Trojan horse' element to LCE pedagogy." (p. 64). Indeed, what, according to the author, makes 'paradigm shift' toward the inclusion of LCE in the developing world unfeasible is the subsistence of "huge gaps between policy discourse and classroom realities" (p. 65). Schweisfurth, then, goes on by listing four major issues giving rise to such gaps: *the nature of reform process, national, institutional and professional policies, resources, and teacher capacity*. Among the problems lying at the heart of reform process are the rapid pace and intricate language with which reform is mostly ascribed. The so-called 'resource-poor classrooms' add up to the difficulties faced by those engaged with the implementation of LCE. To this the author adds lack of professionalism and motivation on the part of teacher community. Nevertheless, even in cases where teachers enjoy high proclivity for adopting LCE procedures, their attempts might be curbed by the wider national policies and the cultural context in which they teach. Toward the end of the chapter the author puts forth a captivating argument, holding that 'polarization of pedagogy' under the flag of TCE-LCE divisions might not always prove to be a practicable course of action in developing countries, and attempts, therefore, should be made "to make space for local variations and interpretations" (p. 72).

In the remainder of the book, chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9, the writer delves more deeply into the issue of LCE implementation in the developing world by way of referring to four different, yet comparable, case studies from the Gambia, China, Russia and South Africa, respectively. In so doing, Schweisfurth initially embarks, in each case, on setting the scene via elaborating on the development context, and then by exposing details regarding education policy context. As a concluding part in each chapter, the author explores the potential impact of contextual conditions on the real implementation of LCE in practice. As concerns the Gambia, for instance, she refers to the noticeable potential of the country for exercising LCE axioms despite its small size, poverty and harboring diverse ethnic groups. An avid member of the 'Fast Track Initiative (FTI)', this country is characterized by its urgent call for LCE as a liberating panacea that brings with it a range of varied benefits. Furthermore, as the author illustrates the emancipatory narrative gains more significance among other perspectives in the Gambian context of education. At the end of chapter 6, a number of drawbacks acting against the desired spread of LCE are pointed out, including the scarcity of resources, non-directive and implicit nature of LCE policy making, shortage of highly qualified teachers, their worries about being judged by the officials, and the traditional role distribution and respect issues which hamper the proper implementation of questioning atmosphere.

Turning to the case study about China, in chapter 7, titled *Moving towards Learner-centered Education: China's Multiple Paradoxes*, the writer admits that the main incentive urging her to include China among other case studies is its failure to cater for 'equitable human development' in rural and urban areas. Despite its advocacy of 'quality education', as the author states, China has fallen short of materializing the true LCE principles, but the startling fact is that though the country has been opting for rigid, teacher-dominated, authoritarian methods of teaching, Chinese students have mostly been found to outperform their counterparts in Western countries. Finally, the chapter ends up by condemning stringent teacher control and underscoring the key role of preparation narrative compared to other forms of narrative in the Chinese context of education.

Russia: Shifting and Resilient Narratives on the 'Educated Person' is the title given to chapter 8, which is concerned with 'Russian educational system' that is claimed "to prepare people who are not only able to live in civil society and a lawful state, but also to build them" (p. 97). Democracy-oriented education in Russia, as the author discusses is marked by several upbeat features like bringing about more class involvement, higher discipline and a more positive view of education among the learners. However, the worsening teacher status in the country has brought with it a range of other consequences such as the feminization of education, as well as "a subsequent decline in respect for ordinary teachers and changes to youth culture away from valuing education ..." (p. 101).

Last among the case studies, the status of LCE in South Africa is the focus of chapter 9, titled *South Africa's Emancipatory Policy Discourses and Classroom Realities*. Though the country is said by the author to suffer from a plethora of problems like the spread of epidemic diseases such as AIDS, violence and high crime rate, its holding on to 'Outcomes-Based Education (OBE)', among other factors, has endowed a more glorious status to it compared to other sub-Saharan countries. Nevertheless, here again the effect of the prevailing gap between 'political imperatives and classroom realities' is remarkable, and discourses of LCE and OBE both suffer from lack of clarity. Low teacher motivation and high rates of job dissatisfaction are other paramount issues referred to in the context of LCE implementation in South Africa. Yet, as the author argues, most important of all is the negative consequence of teacher misconceptions about what OBE incorporates.

The final chapter in Part II, *Mobile Students and New Learner-centered Pedagogies* concerns itself with the question 'What would happen if people were moved instead of the policy itself?' The essence of education in such circumstances is well embraced by the author's illuminating contention: "border-crossing students find new pedagogies their greatest challenge. They change their study habits, and to some extent their behaviours in a learning group. They have positive views of the 'strange' learner-centered approaches, despite the difficulties of transition" (p. 119).

The concluding part of the book, Part III, dubbed *Lessons and Resolutions*, encompasses two chapters, titled *Ten Key Lessons from Theory, Evidence and Cases* (Chapter 11), and *Towards a Contextualised Learner-centered Pedagogical Nexus* (Chapter 12), respectively. The lessons listed in chapter eleven include issues such as the primacy of human rights arguments for LCE, the need for the inclusion of global as a part of the context, the multi-faceted nature of LCE, the negative consequences of a faulty understanding and poor implementation of LCE, and the need for demarcation between andragogy (adult education) and education of mobile learners, on the one hand, and child education, on the other;

Finally, to put together all the previously raised arguments concerning LCE, chapter 12 centers around two focal issues in LCE, that is assumptions underlying it and the minimum standards contributing to its successful implementation. The five assumptions listed are somehow the reiteration of what the author has already referred to in the previous chapters, including the benefits following from the alignment between learning activities and cognitive narrative, the need for considering learners' rights in education, the vitality of classroom experiences for the preparation of individuals for 'democratic and economic citizenship', the scarcity of resources, teaching materials and available time, and the need for adjusting the global practices to the localized contexts

of learning. The chapter and the whole book eventually culminate in listing a number of handy tips called minimum standards for LCE.

All in all, Schweisfurth's Comprehensive explication of LCE in terms of underlying assumptions and principles, implementation issues, practical concerns and hardships, contexts of use, and real-life episodes provides the reader with a full-fledged discussion of almost all issues surrounding the current practice of LCE. The book is, hence, highly recommended for teachers (both novice and professional), teacher trainers, and higher education learners, in that it defies and redefines most of the wrong assumptions held by the educational/academic community regarding the genuine essence of LCE. Nonetheless, there are a number of perspectives from which Schweisfurth's work is open to question. First and foremost, the restrictive and selective manner in which the author approaches what she calls the developing world seems to be partly subjective; had the author garnered wider samples from the real developing world, and had she differentiated between the developing and less developed, the conclusions she has come up with would have gone through considerable modification. The second perspective toward which the author could have paid more heed would be thinking of possible linkages between some psychological variables in learners, say their (socio-culturally induced) personality factors or learning styles, and the success/failure of LCE practices. Finally, as a last case in point, practical explicit lessons and hands-on experiences, particularly for novice teachers, of how to deal with the ambiguities and obscurities of LCE appear to be what is missing amid the vast literature on LCE.