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Book Review: School leadership in the context of standards-based reform: International perspectives

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Book Review

School leadership in the context of standards-based reform: International perspectives. Louis Volante, (Ed.). (2012) Springer: Dordrecht, Netherlands. 263p. (ISBN: 978-94-007-4094-5 [Print], 978-94-007-4095-2 [Online])

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Dimmock and Walker (2000)'s turn of the century assertion that educational leadership has failed to keep pace with globalization seems prophetic. Attempting to address that void is Volante's edited volume, *School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform: International Perspectives* (Springer, 2012). Despite a limited scope, this volume holds appeal for scholars searching for a critical perspective on school reform efforts and initiatives in jurisdictions around the world.

Coming in at 263 pages, *School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform: International Perspectives* is composed of three sections. It is bookended by short introductory and concluding chapters that unpack themes covered by the contributing authors and offer directions for future research. The middle section, aptly titled "International Perspectives", highlights a broad range of challenges faced by school leaders within nine different standards-based reform movements.

Each contributed chapter follows a similar structure and begins by offering contextual data about each jurisdiction studied. The contextual information largely revolves around the four elements of schooling and school-based leadership (organizational structures, curriculum, leadership and management, and teaching and learning) highlighted by Dimmock and Walker (2000) in their cross-cultural model for comparative educational leadership. The chapters also describe the rise of educational accountability and current standards-based reform mechanisms regulating the respective education systems studied in the book. The vast majority of discussion in each of the chapters focuses on the impact standards-based reform has on school leaders and the work they do on a daily basis.

A key strength of this book is that Volante and the contributing authors have highlighted four novel and interesting themes surrounding standards-based reform on the international stage. One of the key themes to emerge while reading is that standards-based reform is context-driven. This sentiment is perhaps best expressed by Hirata (2012) in chapter eight when describing Japan's history of standards-based reform. He explains: "standardizations implemented at different times have embraced different principles and meanings, influenced by the social, political and economic background of the time" (p. 174). The same could be said for all of the initiatives, standards, and reforms described by the contributing authors. In the concluding chapter, Volante and Earl (2012) emphasize: "no particular model of assessment is dominating the standards-based landscape" (p. 251). As eerily similar reforms seemingly occupy education systems the world over, identifying and recognizing standards-based accountability as an issue rooted in local contextual factors is perhaps the greatest contribution made to the literature by *School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform: International Perspectives*.

Another theme woven throughout the book is the suggestion of a lack of clarity regarding the effectiveness of the standards-based reform initiatives under study. Though there were some

outliers, most contributing authors looked at the success of the standards-based reforms studied with a jaundiced eye.

Increased professional development and training, and in some cases, credentialization for school leaders came part-and-parcel with standards-based education reform in almost all jurisdictions highlighted throughout this book. Most professional development initiatives mentioned by contributing authors focused on the enlarged instructional role thrust upon principals in the 21st Century. Professional development and training of school leaders is also identified as a tool used in different ways by diverse and distinct education systems to propagate various reform efforts.

The final and least surprising theme identified by the editor is that standards-based reform has fundamentally altered the roles and responsibilities of school leaders on an international scale. Principals' work has become wrought with competing priorities. Collaboration and distributing leadership have become essential as more is being asked of school leaders than ever before.

School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform: International Perspectives is not without its flaws. Contributing authors studied each of the jurisdictions in isolation, rather than conducting cross-cultural comparisons exploring how standards-based reform impacts school leaders. Scholars seem to have developed a better grasp on conducting work that is insular rather than cross-comparative in nature, which is particularly disappointing considering the need for the latter type of work was identified by Dimmock and Walker (2000) over a decade ago.

The familiar structure shared by each of the chapters makes for easy comparisons between the jurisdictions being studied. It is also encouraging that most contributing authors put forward practical ways for school leaders to, if not oppose questionable standards-based reform efforts, at least get involved in the processes changing the local and international educational landscapes. The concluding section effectively sums up findings related to the four major themes evident in the nine chapters that comprise the book. Volante and Earl (2012) also offer a number of interesting avenues for future study, including exploring how policy shifts impact the work of school leaders and the ways in which standards-based reform, professional development and assessment overlap or intersect.

Though *School Leadership in the Context of Standards-Based Reform: International Perspectives* suffers from a lack of cross-cultural analysis of the jurisdictions studied, it makes an important, if somewhat muted contribution to the field. For instance, the identification of standards-based reform as a local issue is a particularly interesting theme that bears further investigation. The book also provides compelling directions for future research and interesting ideas for those seeking a critical and international perspective on the role of principals in school reform. This volume does not quite answer Dimmock and Walker's (2000) call for cross-cultural comparisons of educational leadership, but considering the dearth of work exploring such topics, it provides a good place to start.

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