

Context and participation in curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment

P. T. M. Marope¹

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I am pleased to introduce this stimulating issue of *Prospects*, whose merits extend beyond publishing sound peer-reviewed academic articles to producing well-grounded, scholarly work that responds to today's educational questions and policy needs. These articles help to fill significant gaps in the literature on curriculum, learning, teaching, and assessment. They range from a much-needed discussion about the meaning of “participation” in development and educational governance and about the influence of supranational organizations on educational programme planning in the Least Developed Countries; to an equally needed account of promising innovations in teaching and curriculum that aim at improving the education of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite the diversity of topics tackled in this issue, the main themes of the articles are interwoven. A very clear thread that connects all the articles is an acknowledgment of the shifting balances in the so-called ecosystems of education (Cremin 1976; Darling 2007; Bray and Kobakhidze in this issue). More to the point, they explore changes related to the introduction, expansion, contraction, or elimination of various educational developments and policies. Some articles illuminate the interrelationships within education structures and processes, such as the relationship between policy intent and policy implementation, related to school autonomy and accountability (Patrinos, Arcia, and Macdonald), or the implications of private tutoring on the very notion of schooling (Bray and Kobakhidze). Others analyze the mechanisms that sap the strength of deep-seated ideas and surreptitiously reorganize the functioning of power (see, for instance, Bogachenko and Perry, on *vospitanie* in communist and post-communist education).

Another important unifying theme of this issue is participation and inclusiveness. In one way or another, all the articles are concerned with civic issues, such as the significance of social studies, or developing public spaces in educational settings. It is with this focus on plurality and dialogue that the articles grapple with various issues, from keeping new

✉ P. T. M. Marope
ibe.prospects@unesco.org

¹ UNESCO International Bureau of Education, P.O. Box 199, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland

teachers in the classrooms (De Stercke, Goyette, and Robertson) to integrating immigrant students through curriculum policies and practices (Astiz).

Finally, a recurring line of argument throughout this issue is the need to be sensitive to context—whether in research, policymaking, or pedagogical practice. This idea is thoroughly illustrated, for instance, by Regmi’s plea to for “justified collaboration” between donors and national governments. It is continued by Pellowski Wiger, Chapman, Baxter, and DeJaeghere in their discussion of contextual factors that impact the efficacy of entrepreneurship training in East Africa, including social context, regulatory environment, economic environment, and level of corruption; by Chudgar, Chandra, Iyengar, and Shanker in their analysis of school resources needed to improve learning in rural India; and by Alexander and Maeda’s discussion of various school contexts in understanding student performance in Trinidad and Tobago.

The issue opens up with two commanding Viewpoints:

Maria Yudkevich, Philip Altbach, and Laura Rumbley use the metaphor of the Olympic Games to highlight some important characteristics of the high-stakes, highly competitive contests represented by global university rankings, and the role of rankings in the international higher education system in general. This comparison also allows for a better understanding of the limitations that exist in using ranking positions as an indicator of system success, and why universities should approach the rankings game with caution.

UNESCO has frequently discussed this concern (see, for instance, Marope, Wells, and Hazelkorn 2013), with the aim of encouraging responsible development, transparent articulation, communication, dissemination, and use of university rankings and of league tables. The understanding behind this growing interest is “a received appreciation that such lists will continue to form part of the twenty-first-century higher education sphere” (Marope, Wells, and Hazelkorn 2013, p. 10). Universities should unquestionably strive for excellence in all areas in which they work. Yet, the authors argue, the evaluation of their achievements should extend beyond the tiers of a podium or the rank-order positions on a list. Such evaluation must give attention to the complex and multifaceted nature of the university itself and engage in a sophisticated examination of how the institution can function and develop in thoughtful, steady, and sustainable ways. We need to recognize that not all universities should focus on “Olympic-level” competition but, rather, on providing access, educating students well, and serving local and regional needs.

Joachim De Stercke, Nancy Goyette, and Jean E. Robertson propose a new perspective on why so many teachers leave the profession after a very short time. While existing studies have largely focused on employment and working conditions, they argue that happiness is key to keeping new teachers in the workplace. Juxtaposing two fields that have heretofore been oblivious of one another (positive psychology, and teacher retention and development), their essay offers 10 strategies that might help to keep beginning teachers in the classroom.

Harry Anthony Patrinos, Gustavo Arcia, and Kevin Macdonald contrast policy intent and policy implementation in school autonomy and accountability. Using data collected from 226 schools in Thailand that participated in the 2009 PISA survey, they find that students at schools exercising a higher level of operational autonomy than the level ascribed by regulation tend to have PISA reading scores 6.0–8.6 points higher than students at schools that behave less autonomously. Their findings call for increased school-level autonomy to select and manage teachers, and to allow principals and parents to define the school’s mission and use financial resources—including salaries—more autonomously.

Noel McGinn and Ernesto Schiefelbein discuss the installation and effectiveness of a strategy to encourage student class preparation, implemented in a large private university

in Chile. The program, called Class-to-Class, aims to reduce differences in the level of prior knowledge of students beginning university studies. Elimination of these differences should make instruction easier and improve the academic achievement of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reading before class and active participation have an impact on students' ability to learn, which act subtly to increase demands on the professor for explanation and coverage. These small changes in study and classroom experiences, the authors argue, are the first steps toward student-centered instruction. Over time, the authors find, the method's impact could be a marked improvement in instruction and learning.

Mark Bray and Magda Nutsa Kobakhidze draw on the notion of ecosystems in education to analyze the nature and implications of private supplementary tutoring. Private tutoring—relatively new in ecosystems of education around the world—is creating significant changes in relationships, particularly as they concern teachers' roles. Their article draws on data from Hong Kong, where private tutoring has become very visible, to present perspectives on the phenomenon from students and teachers. The authors argue that, while these parties sometimes play complementary roles, private tutoring may marginalize teachers. They highlight the need for further research on private tutoring from many dimensions, including analyses of similarities and differences in the ecosystems in different locations, both cross-sectional and with a focus on changes over time.

D. Brent Edwards Jr. and Steven Klees respond to the need for greater clarity around the notion of participation in development and education governance, by presenting a framework that delineates three overarching and complementary perspectives on this concept: “neoliberal”, “liberal”, and “progressive”. In addition to fleshing out the tenets of these three perspectives, the authors identify and discuss a number of specific practices and policies and extend their discussion to the realm of educational governance, an area that has long been at the forefront of the theory and practice of participation.

Kapil Dev Regmi explores the influence of global financial institutions on educational programme planning in some of the impoverished nations known as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The author takes the special case of Nepal, which has faced policy changes because of two sets of conditions: those imposed by the World Bank and those resulting from protracted political instability following 10 years of armed conflict. These conditions, Regmi argues, are constraining the country's capacity to make sovereign decisions and to set its own educational goals and priorities. Instead, educational planning should break the “education-economic growth black box” (Resnik 2006) in order to allow national and local educational planners to make decisions based on the needs and interests of their own population.

Amita Chudgar, Madhur Chandra, Radhika Iyengar, and Rishikesh Shanker use a unique school-based dataset and data from 88 government schools in India, to identify school resources associated with student performance. They argue that, in addition to adequate educational expenditure and basic infrastructure, other school resources are needed to improve learning. Their study shows that in schools with more learning-specific facilities and more co-curricular activities, children perform well in math, all else being equal. Thus, the authors call for improving the current measures of school resources. They also stress the importance of developing and refining similar school-based surveys, as they can provide valuable data for scholars and practitioners in their efforts to improve student performance.

Nancy Pellowski Wiger, David Chapman, Aryn Baxter, and Joan DeJaeghere look at entrepreneurship training programmes as a means of assisting those caught in poverty to develop the skills to find or create employment. Drawing on case studies from East Africa, they argue that, although such programmes are potentially useful in enabling youth to

access and create job opportunities, they are an insufficient strategy for sustained improvement in the livelihood of participants. Without sufficient attention to contextual factors, the shift toward entrepreneurship training as an approach to poverty alleviation may place undue burdens and unachievable expectations on the very youth such programmes are designed to support.

Tatiana Bogachenko and Laura Perry analyze the pedagogical dimension of *vospitanie*, or character formation, in communist and postcommunist education. They look at how *vospitanie* is conceptualized in two teacher-education textbooks—one from each period—in Ukraine, a post-Soviet country, to show how its definition evolved over time and across political regimes. Instruction on *vospitanie* for future teachers has a comprehensive structure based on the two “pillars” of labour and the collective, with an increasing focus on democracy and humanism in the postcommunist era. Even though regime change and ideological shifts led to some modifications in the concept of *vospitanie*, the authors recommend a more decentralized approach and practical instructions for teachers to ensure the concept’s relevance in post-Soviet society.

Fernanda Astiz examines three schools in the Buenos Aires that have a considerable number of recent immigrant students, to see how they advance ideas of inclusiveness and pluralism through the curriculum and educational opportunities, as mandated by the national education law of 2006 and current core curricular standards. Drawing on data from participant observations and semi-structured interviews with administrators and teachers, she finds inconsistent practices across schools, which leave many immigrant students ill-prepared and unsupported to become acculturated into Argentine society. This inconsistency appears to stem, at least in part, from two factors: the schools’ missions and organizational practices; and the lack of teacher in-service training and sufficient support from the city’s central administration.

Vivian Alexander and Yukiko Maeda look at the complex relationships among student attributes, school context, and student performance in mathematics and science in Trinidad and Tobago. Using the PISA 2009 data, they find that schools account for a substantial amount of variation in student mathematics and science achievement. School socioeconomic status has a significant effect on student achievement. Students who never repeated primary school and who came from two-parent homes outperformed their counterparts on both subjects. Interestingly, females outscored males in science, but there was no significant gender difference in mathematics. These findings suggest the important role of school context in understanding student performance in Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean, more generally.

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