REVIEW ESSAY

Merging Dollars with Values: rights and resources in education worldwide

PIETER VANHUYSSE & CLARA SABBAGH
University of Haifa, Israel

The Costs and Financing of Education: trends and policy implications
MARK BRAY, 2002
Manila/Hong Kong: Asian Development Bank/Comparative Education Research Centre
77 pp., ISBN 9 71561 405 1 (paperback), ??PRICE??

Education and Social Change
AMANDA COFFEY, 2001
Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press
142 pp., ISBN 0 33520 069 9 (paperback), £18.99

Education in the Twenty-First Century
EDWARD LAZEAR (Ed.), 2002
Stanford: Hoover Institution Press
192 pp., ISBN 0 81792 892 8 (paperback), £8.46

Education Denied: costs and remedies
KATARINA TOMASEVSKI, 2003
London and New York: Zed Books
205 pp., ISBN 1 84277 250 3 (hardback), £49.95
1 84277 251 1(paperback), £14.95

The International Handbook on the Sociology of Education: an international assessment of new research and theory
CARLOS ALBERTO TORRES & ARI ANTIKAINEN (Eds), 2003
Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
415 pp., ISBN 0 74251 769 1 (hardback), £65.00
0 74251 770 5 (paperback), £27.95
The twentieth century, especially the post-World War II period, has witnessed the multiplication of well-intentioned international treaties and conventions on the right to education, as well as the rapid expansion of access to education in many countries. As Carlos Alberto Torres and Ari Antikainen put it in their editorial introduction to the *International Handbook* (p. 1), this has been the century of education, and the role of the state in the promotion of public education has been crucial. The books under review here, which tackle various aspects of the state of current knowledge on education, go beyond this rosy picture in an attempt to focus on remaining theoretical puzzles and empirical gaps in education from a multi-national perspective.

Amanda Coffey’s *Education and Social Change* provides a general introduction to the sociology of education from a British perspective, including topics such as gender, biography, parental choice and research methodologies. Mark Bray’s *Costs and Financing* provides a concise empirical survey of the hugely varied landscape of educational policies across the thirty-eight countries that make up the Asian and Pacific region. Katarina Tomasevski’s *Education Denied* has a still more explicitly international perspective, focusing as it does on the state of affairs of the human right to education across the globe. Torres and Antikainen’s *International Handbook* offers, in eighteen chapters, a competent international assessment of new research and theory in the sociology of education. Finally, Edward Lazear’s excellent *Education in the Twenty-First Century* assembles the ideas of nine distinguished Hoover Institution fellows on education.

As we hope to make clear, because of their wide theoretical and geographical scope, the books under review jointly advance our knowledge on the comparative sociology of education in a number of ways. A second line of argument we hope to pursue regards the fruitfulness of transcending classic discipline boundaries by taking seriously the contributions of a sociologically better-informed economics to our understanding of educational process and outcomes.

**The Right to Education: the international politics of cheap talk**

Like Torres and Antikainen’s contribution to the *International Handbook*, Tomasevski’s *Education Denied* is inspired by the observation that while education has expanded over recent decades, at the same time funding has often been inadequate and funding promises have rarely been kept. Hundreds of millions of children at present still have no access to schooling, face oppressive schooling costs, or are exposed to indoctrinating and discriminating school curricula (see also the contributions in the *International Handbook* on educational developments in post-communist Russia and twentieth-century Latin America by David Konstantinovski and Torres, respectively, and on the role of international institutions such as the OECD,
UNESCO and the World Bank in education policies in post-war Portugal by António Teodoro. Tomasevski reviews the emerging commitment to universal education from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, through the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education, to the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. Her purpose is to shift the debate away from economic inputs and human capital theories toward a much more normative discussion about what the right to education should really comprise and about how national governments and the international community should effect it on a universal and non-discriminatory basis. The book’s strong prescriptive standpoint is evident from the first pages:

There is both a reluctance to accept that education is a human right and silence about the cost of denying education. ... The right to education operates as a multiplier. It enhances all other human rights when guaranteed and forecloses the enjoyment of most, if not all, when denied. (p. 1)

Furthermore:

Although the right to education had been written into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it was not used as a template for global development strategies. Rather, education was ultimately converted from a right into a development goal. (p. 3)

As the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Tomasevski is clearly well-placed to review the history and problems of education worldwide and the many instances of discrimination, policy failure, and abuse of power that govern this area. Education Denied is packed with factual observations that speak for themselves on the state of affairs in education worldwide. These range from the educational costs of multi-billion-dollar corruption in Sani Abacha’s Nigeria to the excesses of the Islamic revolution in Iran and of creationist teaching in the USA; from 16% female literacy levels among rural women in ‘nuclear’ Pakistan to the budgetary priority given to defense over education, not just in much of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world, but also countries such as Singapore, Switzerland, the USA and the UK. Naming and shaming just by showing these facts, the book serves as a forceful invective against the guilt by neglect of governments virtually across the globe, indicating how they have systematically failed to put their dollars where their proclaimed values are. Tomasevski claims, for instance, that the volume of international aid, defined as the principal means for helping to achieve the right to education, is ‘at its lowest in history, a mere $53 billion in 2001 for the entire developing world, half of what the former East Germany continues receiving more than a decade after reunification with its population of 14 million’ (p. 11). Raising the alarm in this way might serve important purposes in stirring civil groups to action and in motivating bottom-up educational initiatives. Because it informs, uncovers and (hopefully) motivates, Education Denied is useful and possibly important.
Ironically, while Tomasevski’s attack on the cheap talk and empty promises of governments makes this an explicitly political book, the author’s own politics are surprisingly shallow. To demonstrate that top-level politics is a dirty game is scarcely a revelation. The burden is therefore squarely on the shoulders of advocates of the alternative ‘human rights approach’ to flesh out how it can expect to work in the real world of policymaking. In this respect, *Education Denied* is a disappointment. Tomasevski obstinately refuses to pull off her gloves and dirty her hands in the business of politics. Consider the following passage:

The 1990s will be remembered for having converted education from a human right into a development objective, at a time when the key development goal is to halve the number of people living in absolute poverty. But a lottery-based determination of those to be left out clashes with the very notion of rights. Planning to leave half of all poor people still in poverty after the target year necessitates asking who will be left out, by whose criteria, and – most important – why. The human rights approach prioritizes law in holding governments accountable for their pledges, individually and collectively; indeed it sees law as indispensable. Once a pledge becomes a human rights obligation, failure to attain agreed ends by specified means becomes a violation, to be redressed by compensating the victims and ensuring that it does not happen again (p. 101, emphasis added).

Disregarding the tendentious wording of the italicized lines, I suspect that there is little else in this passage that well-intentioned citizens who care for education and poverty in the world would take issue with – ideally. The fundamental problem, of course, is that in the real world of scarce budgets and self-interested power politics, laws and rights often have the forcefulness of paper tigers. *Education Denied* is itself a book-length, fact-laden testimony to that effect. Yet despite numerous references to the rights, pledges and obligations enshrined in laws and treaties, the book almost entirely lacks any head-on discussion of the scope, feasibility and obvious limits of national and international courts to police and enforce these rights and to punish violations. Exactly where, then, lies the added value of stressing the moral importance of rights and of complaining (p. 53) that ‘international human rights law obliges [governments] to be the investor of last resort’ in education, when there are no legal ways to bind or punish governments to fulfil this obligation? And what is wrong with making education a core development objective in poor countries, when human rights have so obviously proved a matter of empty talk in the past? More worrying still, Tomasevski is plainly misinformed, and misinforms, about the role of economic theory in education and development. To this issue we now turn.
**Resources and Returns: human development and the economics of education**

Tomasevski harshly criticizes human capital theory, an economic approach to education developed by Becker (1964), Psacharopoulos (1981, 1994) and others, because in her view the approach turns people into input factors (e.g. pp. 22, 32) and sees education mainly as a means for achieving other ends (p. 33). Perhaps as a result of her personal experience with instances of flawed economic policy advice, such as the disastrous introduction under World Bank guidance of school fees in Malawi in the 1980s, Tomasevski is at times less than diplomatic in setting the terms of the debate. Thus:

> To refuse to educate children with disabilities on the grounds that there is no evidence that such an investment would help eliminate poverty or enhance the rate of economic growth would be cruel. ... Furthermore, the obsession with enhancing economic growth depletes education of most of the purposes it is designed to serve. (p. 33)

At the very least, these remarks derive from a flawed understanding of the nature and contributions of economics. As a method for policy research, economics is interested in the optimal use of scarce resources in order to obtain one’s chosen ends, thereby freeing up extra resources for less immediately productive purposes such as, for instance, leisure activities, the arts, or indeed disabled children. Many economists would no doubt agree with rights activists on the intrinsic value and desirability of universal, high-quality education. But they would differ in that they generally believe in the greater power of material incentives over laws and treaties as the basis for policymaking, for achieving chosen ends subject to resource constraints. It is this belief, and not a cavalier treatment of laws or values, that led Paul Samuelson famously to quip that he did not care what national constitutions said as long as he could write the countries’ economics textbooks (p. 70). And precisely because of the debilitating effects of extreme poverty on human wellbeing, most economists would indeed be cautious in forcing through compulsory schooling laws, on the grounds that ‘if laws forced a poor household, which is living close to the subsistence level, to send their children to school instead of work, an exogenous shock (for example, poor harvest) would have an unnecessary harsh impact on [the household’s] welfare’ (p. 70). We submit that under conditions of resource scarcity the moral answer to such hard choices is less unanimous or clear-cut than rights theorists seem to believe.

At the same time, as shown by Psacharopoulos (1981, 1994), Bray’s *Costs and Financing* (pp. 11-17) and the contributions by Gary Becker, Robert Hall, Robert Barro and Paul Romer in *Twenty-First Century*, the evidence on the positive effect of education in improving economic welfare worldwide is generally strong. Human capital theory examines how people can get high returns out of education because it increases their future earnings in the labor market. At the macro level, the theory studies how over
and above these private returns, education also has important social returns: advantages for countries as a whole. A more educated population may contribute to higher social welfare by being better able to invent, adopt and/or diffuse new ideas and technologies, or to produce a higher level of output per unit of time. In a context of development and the fight against poverty, where the optimal use of resources is more urgent than anywhere, these are obviously crucial objectives.

Using large-scale cross-country data, Robert Barro finds that both the quantitative aspects and the qualitative aspects (as measured by test scores) of education have strong and significant effects on growth rates. Gary Becker points out that while the private costs of education are likely to be significantly reduced in future years as online learning becomes more widespread, the private returns to education have already increased massively over the past few decades. Thus the earnings gap between high-school graduates and college graduates has grown from about 50% in the late 1960s to 75% in the late 1990s, amounting to ‘probably the largest increases in US history’ (p. 5). Becker further points out that over the last two decades human capital has grown to become the single most important part of the American economy, to the point that our present times can be aptly labeled ‘the age of human capital’. After the October 1987 New York Stock Exchange crash, for instance, the US economy was not affected in a major way, despite equity wealth losses of 22%, because human capital was largely untouched.

In line with recent advances by Akerlof (1998) and Akerlof & Kranton (2000, 2002), a number of contributors to Twenty-First Century transcend traditional economic theorizing by keeping the analytical tools of their paradigm but incorporating findings and variables from education, sociology, politics and other social sciences. Thus Edward Lazear attempts to provide new insights into a longstanding empirical puzzle in quantitative studies of educational inputs. Despite much first-hand testimony and experiential evidence to the contrary, large-scale studies have consistently failed to find evidence of a positive effect of reducing class sizes on student achievement (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987, Hanushek, 1996, 2003). For instance, in a meta-analysis of 276 US studies, Hanushek (2003, p. 76) found that there was no statistically significant relationship between teacher/pupil ratios and student achievement in 72% of cases, with an additional 14% of cases displaying a significant relationship in the ‘wrong’ (negative) direction. While the USA reported the most striking findings in this respect, a large number of studies on various developing and advanced economies similarly showed mainly insignificant or ‘wrong’ effects (Hanushek, 2003, pp. 84, 86).

Drawing on earlier work (Lazear, 1999), Lazear in Twenty-First Century argues that these counterintuitive findings can be better understood by viewing a conducive learning environment in the classroom as a public good subject to negative spillovers. While every student benefits from a non-disruptive classroom, one single disruptive student suffices to reduce the
benefits of learning for all. Given this setting, headmasters and teachers can try to reduce the likelihood of classroom disruption by putting better behaved or better performing students in larger classes and more troublesome students in smaller classes. Once we take this procedure of non-random assignment according to ability into account, we can better account for the systematic evidence of non-significant effects or negative effects, whereby larger classes are correlated with better rather than worse educational outcomes. Indeed, the few study designs that have explicitly tried to control for spurious correlations between teacher/pupil ratios and student outcomes do find significant effects in the ‘right’ direction, as is evident in Angrist & Lavy’s (1999) work on Israel, and Case & Deaton’s (1999) work on South Africa during the apartheid regime.

Robert Hall’s study in Twenty-First Century of the value of education around the globe starts by presenting evidence of the substantial private returns that accrue to individuals for earning extra educational qualifications (p. 26), and the positive and strong correlation of education levels with nations’ productivity levels (p. 30). Addressing the question of what causes high levels of human capital in some countries but not in others, Hall points to the role of governments in protecting and enforcing property rights and contracts, enhancing market transactions, reducing corruption and confiscation and generally providing an effective rule of law. He adds to this the conjecture that such good governments will also tend to provide the highest levels of human capital to their populations. So far, nothing new under the sun: the emphasis on market-augmenting governance is in line with important advances on the role of non-confiscatory rulers in promoting social prosperity by Mancur Olson, Douglass North, Avinash Dixit and others (see Vanhuysse, 2002 for a review).

In an attempt to dig deeper, Hall builds on Acemoglu et al (2001) to relate the worldwide incidence of good governance itself to a particular model of former colonial rule. Those places where, because of a lower incidence of mosquito-borne diseases and other climatic factors, the former colonial powers sent settlers to stay put (e.g. Canada, Australia, the United States) rather than soldiers and administrators to extract resources for the home country (e.g. India and Central Africa) turn out to have the best governance. To illustrate this, Hall plots a summary index capturing effective governance components such as corruption, law enforcement and expropriation around the world against a location variable defined as geographical latitude. He shows that the quality of governance increases the further a country is situated from the equator. Moreover, the patterns described by this scatter plot are almost identical to those where a summary index of education levels is plotted against the same latitudinal variable (pp. 38-39). Hall takes this to corroborate his conjecture that effective governments also provide the highest levels of human capital to their citizens. While seemingly plausible, to connect two macro level trends risks being an ecological fallacy, and Hall provides no firm causal mechanisms to substantiate his assertion. This caveat
Review Essay

Aside, Hall’s social-economic geography model effectively pushes our understanding of the connection between education and governance one step further, thereby inviting new research directions.

Paul Romer’s excellent chapter in Twenty-First Century on the redistributional consequences of educational reforms further illustrates the power of sociologically informed economic reasoning in clarifying educational theory. Using a standard model to illustrate the effect of trade growth and technological development – increasingly crucial features of the knowledge economy of today and tomorrow – Romer argues that both factors are likely to increase social welfare but also income inequalities. He also shows that traditional tax-and-transfer redistributive methods to mitigate inequalities are likely to be not just inherently inefficient because of incentive effects, but also increasingly costly over the long run. In line with the evidence on the high returns to education (Becker, 1964; Psacharopoulos, 1981, 1994), Romer then goes on to point to an alternative strategy for governments in the future knowledge economy. By running after the fact in correcting the rising inequalities produced by technological progress, through massive investments in education that reduce the supply of low-skilled workers in the labor market, governments, and only governments, can reap the social benefits of progress while simultaneously mitigating inequalities in a cost-effective ways.

Incidentally, the educational strategies pursued by successive South Korean governments in the past forty years are a textbook example of how this kind of intelligent governance can contribute to economic development for all. By gradually shifting educational spending priorities between the 1950s and the 1980s in line with the needs created by changing industrial and macro-economic circumstances, governments made education a cornerstone of human development. This helped to drag South Korea out of the abject poverty that continued to characterize many of its neighbors, improving both the quality and the availability of Korean education in the process (see also Mingat, 1998; Costs and Financing, pp. 5, 7, 8, 52-56). Yet, bafflingly, the Korean approach is criticized by Tomasevski (pp. 22-23) as part of her invective against ‘treating people as human capital’.

Romer’s chapter also attempts explicitly to incorporate political and social-psychology factors in the analysis of education policies, rather than abstracting these away in a rights discourse. Transcending standard economic models, he dismisses the assumption that the electoral support for the financing of education is independent from the way it is produced. The American Medicare program (for the elderly) is more popular than the Medicaid program (for the poor), in large part, Romer claims, because voters have much more first-hand experience and emotional immediacy with the former program. In the same vein, this immediacy factor may also be key to the persistent support for the public provision of education in the USA, where 89% of primary and secondary schoolchildren currently attend public schools. Conversely, since school vouchers reduce the personal exposure
effect, they may lead to lower funding levels, overall and particularly for the poorest students.

Romer here breaks ranks with large numbers of economists and policymakers who advocate vouchers on grounds of economic efficiency and freedom of choice. His argument is noteworthy also in view of the fact that school choice seems to be part of an increasing policy convergence across many advanced market democracies, whereby state responsibilities for education (e.g. for funding) are being weakened, while state control is being tightened through performance indicators and curricular specifications. These issues are discussed in some detail in Coffey’s *Education and Social Change* on Britain and Geoff Whitty and Sally Powers’s insightful cross-national survey in the *International Handbook*, but see also the positive assessment by AnneBert Dijkstra and Jaap Dronkers of the Dutch case.

**Social Capital, Family Capital … and Great Expectations**

A number of contributors to the books under review also turn their attention to mainstream sociological topics such as the role of social capital, local communities and the family in improving educational achievements. The chapter by Dijkstra and Jules Peschar in the *International Handbook* offers a useful and concise survey of the impressive body of knowledge that has been gathered on the role of social capital in influencing educational attainments since the pioneering contributions by James Coleman (e.g. Coleman, 1961, 1988, 1990, Coleman & Hoffer, 1987). Reviewing a large number of studies from the United States, the Netherlands, Canada and South Korea, Dijkstra and Peschar argue that since the evidence thus far is mixed and the methodological approaches fragmentary, the scientific life of this potentially useful concept may still only be ‘at half time’. Dijkstra’s chapter with Dronkers on the unique constellation of Dutch education, predominantly privately produced but publicly financed, does report results on the influence of religious schooling that strongly support the earlier findings of Coleman & Hoffer (1987).

The most noteworthy contribution under review on the role of families in promoting educational achievements is perhaps Jennifer Roback Morse’s chapter on the family crowding-out effect in *Twenty-First Century*. Morse presents an overview of recent empirical findings that confirms the importance of social capital, and particularly of two-parent families, in promoting children’s cognitive and emotional development and their school achievements. The evidence gathered by Morse is convincing. Children from single-parent families (and typically also those from stepfamilies) complete fewer years of education and are more likely to repeat grades or drop out of school, to commit crimes and use drugs. Consistent with the Coleman thesis, there also seem to be spillover effects to the wider school community. Being from a single-parent family not only lowers a child’s own maths scores, but students from schools with a high proportion of single-parent children had
significantly lower maths and reading scores than those from schools with more two-parent children (Pong, 1997). Moreover, the number of social interactions between parents had a positive effect on their children’s school’s maths and reading scores (Pong, 1997). Similarly compelling evidence is available on the effect of various dimensions of active parental involvement with children’s schools and schoolwork on educational outcomes (Bogenschneider, 1997).

Although Morse’s apt mustering of important evidence, like Tomasevski’s, could serve as a useful clarion call for parents and policymakers alike, she then goes on to deduce largely unwarranted policy prescriptions. Drawing loosely on Hayek’s (1945) famous argument on the inherent superiority of the local knowledge provided by decentralized markets over that available to state planners, Morse argues that parents similarly have a better tacit knowledge to raise their children than any other entity. Yet, Morse claims, families are ‘undermined’ by state policies such as preschooling, breakfast provision and school-based rather than home-based education. Moreover, she believes that the evidence of the superiority in terms of educational achievements of biological two-parent families provides urgent reasons to ‘drop the posture of neutrality among family types’ (p. 159) and to ‘crack down on “deadbeat dads”’ (p. 160). In Morse’s view:

we seem to be asking, what do I have to do in order to maintain my position that divorce or single-parenthood is not harmful to children?
How much money does society have to spend from outside the family to make up for the loss of relationship, so that I won’t have to give up my belief that parents are entitled to any lifestyle choices they want? (p. 161).

Clearly, the policy implications of this view, if taken seriously, may be deeply illiberal, not least in multicultural societies where a number of minority groups may not be willing to defend the rights of mothers and the education of children as a matter of priority (Barry, 2001; Vanhuysse & Sabbagh, 2004??ANY UPDATE??). At the same time, Morse remains silent on the larger question of how to help families, and especially mothers, in combining their household duties with their jobs in today’s increasingly flexible and competitive labor markets, where one-earner families are at high risk of poverty. In juxtaposing the bliss of parental love with the abstract logic of states, she sets up a straw man comparison that omits the superior overall performance in terms of family welfare of models of market capitalism other than the American one. Scandinavian states such as Sweden and Finland, for instance, take on a much greater role in helping mothers to square the work-family circle by increasing the supply and reducing the cost of public daycare facilities and by generous conditions of maternity leave and family allowances. These countries also boast high female labor market participation rates and singularly low child poverty rates (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 2002), as well as comparatively good student achievements across tests and age groups (Hanushek & Kimko, 2003).??2000 IN REFS??
Lastly, the refreshingly candid chapters to *Twenty-First Century* by Thomas Sowell and Shelby Steele, both experts on race and ethnicity in America, concentrate on what is today a less fashionable topic. They stress the role of traditional values such as high standards, personal responsibility and hard work, rather than racism and poverty, in explaining the systematically and persistently lower performance of black students in America. Steele starts his discussion of education for black youth with a vignette of a fictional Charlie Parker. The story narrates why the fictional Parker failed in becoming a revolutionary saxophone player precisely because he could benefit from all the affirmative action programs and deterministic teacher attitudes that were missing from the life of his historical alter ego, who was black, poor, came from a malfunctioning family, was derided by his peers for playing a ‘white’ instrument, and yet became a world-class musician without anyone’s help. Steele argues that the clue to the success of the historical Parker and many underprivileged minority children might well lie in whether or not their local communities are prepared to take up agency: to expect personal responsibility and to rigorously enforce academic excellence as an *impersonal* standard of achievement. Sowell baldly proposes that if blacks in America would accord the same high social status to top achievers in schools as they give today to top achievers in music and sports, rather than stigmatizing high-performing peers as ‘white wannabes’, the results might well be comparable.

Sowell backs this up by reminding us that race and poverty were never the final obstacle in the past. He cites a number of examples of highly successful black schools with poor students. These include Dunbar High School in Washington DC, which turned out, among other things, the first blacks in America to graduate from West Point, to become a full professor, a federal judge, and a Cabinet member, and St Augustine High School in New Orleans, which gave Louisiana its first Presidential Scholar of any race, as well as 20% of all Presidential Scholars in the history of the state. The extraordinary success of these schools was due neither to special minority curricula or minority-only teachers, nor to socioeconomic conditions. Consistent with evidence surveyed by Morse on the strong effects of parental expectations on children’s school achievements, Sowell stresses the role of discipline, hard work and great expectations on the part of teachers and school administrators: ‘the biggest secret is that there are no secrets, unless work is a secret’ (p. 88). In these days of grade inflation and communicative teaching, this may well be a crucial lesson too eagerly overlooked.

*Correspondence*

Pieter Vanhuysse, Lecturer in Political Economy and Sociology, Faculties of Education and Social Welfare & Health Studies, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel 31905, Israel (pieterv@construct.haifa.ac.il); Clara Sabbagh, Lecturer in Sociology of Education and Social Justice, Faculty of Education,
Review Essay

University of Haifa, Mount Carmel 31905, Haifa, Israel
(csabbagh@construct.haifa.ac.il).

References


