

Federalism and Education: Ongoing Challenges and Policy Strategies in Ten Countries

reviewed by Maria Teresa Tatto - July 18, 2019

Title: Federalism and Education: Ongoing Challenges and Policy Strategies in Ten Countries

Author(s): Kenneth K. Wong, Felix Knüpling, Mario Kölling, & Diana Chebenova (Eds.)

Publisher: Information Age Publishing, Charlotte

ISBN: 1641131721, **Pages:** 262, **Year:** 2018

Search for book at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)



Federalism and Education: Ongoing Challenges and Policy Strategies in Ten Countries offers a detailed examination of federalist education systems in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Editors Kenneth K. Wong, Felix Knüpling, Mario Kölling, and Diana Chebenova present ten case studies that emerged as a result of a two-day invitational conference organized in 2016 by the Forum of Federations in Ottawa, Canada and the Fundación Manuel Giménez Abad in Zaragoza, Spain under the auspices of the “Federalism and Education: Governance, Standards and Innovation for the 21st Century” program, dedicated to examining how countries with federal systems of government design, govern, finance, and assure quality in their educational systems. The conference participants paid particular attention to the functional divisions between governmental layers as well as mechanisms of intergovernmental cooperation with the goal of drawing comparisons among federalized countries as well as those that are emerging toward a federal system.

In federalist systems, the central government plays an important yet constrained role that may complement, strengthen, or regulate the role of the separate units constituting a federation. According to the editors of this book, “federalism matters” and deserves careful study as it has been spreading across countries now encompassing “about 40 percent of the world’s population” (p. 1). The editors propose an ideal notion of federalism where a nation’s constitutional framework regulates the distribution of power and functions between the central authority and the decentralized units and where a certain degree of fiscal autonomy and electoral independence exists at the regional and local levels. Yet federalism and its effects on education have a long and complex history from which much can be learned, whether from the more organically grown federalism of the United States or the decentralization reforms promoted in numerous nations by external institutions such as the World Bank.

The editors of this book are aware of these issues and the chapters therefore provide a valuable contribution to the field. The authors deal with issues such as the uneven capacity of entities to take on local planning, implementation, and evaluation of educational innovations, which in turn exacerbates inequality across different regions in a nation. Wealthy regions will invariably seek and obtain more funding per pupil in schools, a situation that highlights the important role of the central state in ensuring a balance. Issues of religion, language, and national identity are also considered, highlighting how federalization may serve to solidify regions around common and powerful goals or may end up having unintended consequences, fragmenting rather than uniting nations.

As the editors make clear in Chapter One, the country cases that are reported in this book are very different across several dimensions, including their history of federal governance, the stage in their transition from a centralized to a federal system, the level of success in their progression towards an effective and efficient federalism, their wealth, the sizes of their primary and secondary student populations, and their location in the world and in the world economy. What they have in common is that each country seems to be committed to increasing or maintaining shared governance in their education system through federalism. Another notable commonality is that the majority of these countries are part of the European Union, which has been heavily influenced by the market-oriented policies promoted by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). While not in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the U.S. have embraced the same market-oriented policies which encourage fiscal competition based on performance on accountability regimes (amongst states or entities in the federation).

Each chapter is organized to provide the reader with a detailed analysis of how federal systems have shaped: education governance (i.e., the types of authority and power that reside in the central and regional governments); funding responsibilities in primary and secondary education systems; academic standards and quality assurance responsibilities and control; responsibility for addressing the needs of an increasingly diverse school-age population; innovation in policies directed at the education of teachers; introduction and adoption of new teaching and learning technologies; and the education system as a whole.

There are two additional questions that each chapter and the book as a whole attempt to cover that seem problematic to me. One is prospective in nature, asking what role federalism will play in promoting educational quality and progress in the 21st century. This is an inherently difficult question that is nevertheless addressed by the editors in Chapter One without much elaboration, which stands in contrast to the nuance and complexity that the authors of other chapters endeavor to portray. The conclusion in Chapter One sounds more like an endorsement for a one-size-fits-all product than a scholarly conclusion based on evidence. I encourage the readers to read with care all the 10 excellent chapters in the book and make up their own minds as to whether “the education sector is generally well-served by the system of federalism in the 10 countries “ (p. 17).

The second question posed by the text is problematic as it gives undue importance to the OECD accountability regime and the results of the PISA test to determine the consequences of federalism:

On performance-based accountability, how does the case-study country perform in PISA and country-specific assessments on core subject matters in the benchmarking age groups and/or grades? What are some of the key factors in explaining these outcomes? What are areas that need greater policy attention in promoting better academic outcomes? (p. 4)

This question is inappropriate as it seems to ignore the contradiction introduced by the centralizing influence of the OECD via the PISA test. Should not more importance be given to the country's regional assessments as the idea is to evaluate the functioning of federal systems? In fact, another contradiction is that performance on PISA tests can be used to argue for the benefits of centralized systems of governance, such as those in Singapore, Korea, Japan, Russia, and France, among others, a critical fact that should have been analyzed in a scholarly book.

Of greater concern however, is the implication that educational system accountability can be evaluated by the use of the PISA test, which is not linked to the school curriculum and which has been recognized as lacking validity, especially to evaluate and explain the outcomes of elementary and secondary education, which are the main foci of the book.

I refer the reader to an excellent article written by David Labaree (2014) entitled "Let's Measure What No One Teaches," examining the origins, evolution, and motivations behind the OECD's PISA. According to Labaree, PISA "employs an extraordinarily narrow definition of education, and deploys an extraordinarily impoverished metric for assessing educational quality. To hold schools accountable in these terms is to do them great harm" (p. 13). I fully agree. Fortunately, many authors also include results from their own accountability mechanisms as well as from the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) assessments which do align with the school curriculum, endeavor to measure what schools teach, and include contextual measures that help identify reform's impact on learning outcomes.

Evidence that the OECD has been promoting federalization reforms using the results of the PISA test as a tool is abundant in each chapter but never fully acknowledged. An astute author in one of the chapters comments that the OECD creates policy crises by delivering unexpected results, especially in countries that believe they are doing well by other measures (leading to the so-called PISA shock). Countries thus periodically spend considerable amounts of funds on a test that assesses the knowledge that will be needed to succeed in the global economy (as defined and redefined periodically by the test makers) but that does not necessarily measure what schools teach and value. The test also offers no information to explain what reforms or strategies are responsible for students' success or lack thereof.

Overall, however, the considerable effort of putting this book together and the work of the chapter authors is to be commended, as is the idea of carefully describing with clarity and candor the experiences of countries with (or transitioning toward) federal systems of education. As the editors point out, the consequences of federalization reforms deserve more in-depth exploration as much more solid evidence of success is needed before promoting such reforms. The book represents an important contribution to the literature on federalism and highlights the challenges and paradoxes of global education reforms.

Reference

Labaree, D. (2014). Let's measure what no one teaches: PISA, NCLB, and the shrinking aims of education. *Teachers College Record* Volume 116 (9), 1-14.

Cite This Article as: Teachers College Record, Date Published: July 18, 2019
<https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 22978, Date Accessed: 7/26/2019 11:14:07 AM

Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review