

***Classroom Change in Developing Countries: From Progressive Cage to Formalistic Frame* by Gerard Guthrie. Routledge, 2018. 248 pages. £115 hardback. ISBN 9780815355199.**

Guthrie's latest book, concerned with improving teaching and learning in developing countries, contains important lessons for researchers and policy actors. Like others focusing on pedagogy in the field of comparative and international education, Guthrie attaches special importance to the cultural context of teaching practice. However, unlike those who argue for the universal value of certain practices or principles – such as learner-centred education (Schweisfurth 2013) or dialogic teaching (Alexander 2008) – Guthrie denies the existence of a global 'best practice' in pedagogy.

The crux of Guthrie's argument is epistemological (i.e. concerning the nature of knowledge). Effective teaching is consistent with teachers', students' and parents' beliefs about what knowledge *is* and how it is acquired. Guthrie distinguishes between 'scientific epistemologies', dominant in Anglo-American contexts, and 'revelatory epistemologies', which he claims are prevalent in developing countries. In revelatory cultures knowledge is based on 'revealed truths...from deities and the ancestors rather than human inquiry' (p.18). Formalistic, teacher-centred pedagogy is consistent with such a worldview, and therefore a culturally-appropriate mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Conversely, progressive pedagogy (grounded in a constructivist view of knowledge) is predicated on individualistic Western values (Tabulawa 2013). The failure of progressive reforms in sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere results not so much from resource constraints, as is often asserted, as from 'cultural incompatibility' (p.117). Consequently, scarce resources would be better directed towards improving existing teacher-centred methods, rather than trying to replace them.

Summarised in the opening chapter, this thesis is developed through the book with evidence from China (Chapter 4), Africa (Chapter 5) and Papua New Guinea (Chapter 6). In each case, the endurance of formalistic, teacher-centred practices in the face of progressive reforms is highlighted. In China, attention is given to strategies which have been successful in enhancing teacher-centred practices, including lesson study and virtuoso lessons which are 'carefully planned, critiqued, refined...rehearsed and repeated' (p.96). The argument is that aspects of Confucian schooling (such as collectivist in-service models of professional learning) may provide a better model than Anglo-American ones for improving teaching and learning in sub-Saharan Africa and other low-income contexts.

Guthrie highlights (Chapter 1) the political interests and cultural imperialism which underpin the advocacy of progressive education by UNESCO and other powerful global policy actors. In an extensive review (Chapter 2) of more than 500 empirical studies from 30+ developing countries, he identifies a lack of robust evidence linking progressive pedagogy with improved student learning, a

point which is supported by my own systematic analysis of the evidence base in sub-Saharan Africa (Mitchell & Rose 2018). Guthrie critiques the value-laden treatment of pedagogy in research which implicitly views progressivism as ‘an axiomatic theoretical starting point and a desirable but unquestioned professional end point’ rather than a theory which should be subjected to systematic testing in developing countries (p.6). The credibility of ‘vested consultancy findings’ (p.37) is challenged on the grounds of external evaluators’ commercial interest in validating the assumptions of their clients – Northern donors and INGOs. However, if we accept that there is a lack of robust evidence linking progressive pedagogy with improved learning outcomes in developing countries, then the same is true of *formalistic* teaching. From the evidence I am most familiar with in East Africa, there are studies which find in favour of teacher-centred methods (Frost & Little 2014) and those which come down firmly on neither side (Ngware et al. 2012).

The final chapters move away from the topic of progressive failure to establish an agenda for future research. This includes methodological guidance on researching teaching within a formalistic frame (Chapter 9), and a typology of teaching styles (Chapter 10) which has been used to inform empirical work in Africa in recent years.

*Classroom Change* is a re-working and extension of Guthrie’s 2011 book *The Progressive Education Fallacy* (Guthrie 2011) and subsequent journal articles. As such, it will not surprise those familiar with his work, but will provide a valuable introduction to newcomers. Aimed at both researchers and policy actors, Guthrie anticipates that this book will not satisfy everyone. His writing has been criticised in the past for its polemical, sometimes inflammatory style, and some readers will no doubt find these qualities in this book. However, Guthrie’s conclusions – the result of many decades’ work in the field – deserve serious attention. The continuing heavy involvement of Northern actors in education in the South calls for reflexivity about the relevance of foreign values, assumptions and models of educational improvement. This calls for greater appreciation of local knowledge and practices, and sincere efforts to *identify* and *promote* teaching methods which are effective at improving students’ learning in different cultural contexts.

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