

Review of Educational systems and inequalities: International Comparisons

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Educational systems and inequalities: International comparisons is wide-ranging and in-depth exploration of highly pertinent topic of interest to researchers and policymakers around the world. As such, it is a thoroughly interesting read for someone interested in learning more about how we can use the increased availability of explicitly cross-nationally consistent data sets to learn about the topic, as well as for research users who are interested in thoughtfully interpreting the profusion of such research in academic and policy contexts. Work in this area is easily done badly, given how easy it is to misinterpret effects of countries' wider institutions (in the broadest sense) as the effects of their educational systems, but this issue is handled sensitively by authors throughout. Finally, it is not merely a collection of findings in this area, but also highlights important considerations for researchers looking to conduct work in the area.

The book hangs together well as a cohesive volume: no mean feat given the breadth of the topic and the disciplinary diversity that is represented. It begins with a clear account of theoretical bases for understanding the link between schooling systems and educational inequalities, discussion of measurement issues, and consideration of issues with modelling data that necessarily involve pupils nested within schools, and schools nested within countries and where factors at all three levels (and possibly more) are all important to the questions we wish to answer. This is followed by a selection of high-quality empirical studies, first those engaging with different aspects of school system design (including the importance of tracking and school expansion) and inequality in educational attainment, followed by studies focussed on the link between systems and inequality in returns to education. These are strong empirical studies in their own right and readers interested in a particular topic can still get a lot out of reading these chapters in isolation as if they are journal articles. Particularly highlights for me included the chapters by Japp Dronkers and Roxanne Korthals on the relationship between tracking and migrant student performance, and the Andreas Hadjar and Rolf Becker's chapter on the association between types of education systems and meritocratic education and later outcomes, although this will inevitably reflect, at least in part, my own particular interests.

As is highlighted by the editors from the outset, the work presented in the book is excellent in engaging not just with three key aspects of inequality (social background, gender and immigrant status) but also the importance of intersectionality between these. This approach highlights the complexity of educational inequality and how there are quite different patterns between different countries in intersectional inequality, an increasingly important consideration for work on educational inequality. This is presented most particularly in the chapter from Christiane Gross, Anja Gottburgsen and Ann Phoenix, but recurs throughout the book, rather than just being engaged with in this specific chapter.

There is something in here for researchers from many different traditions and I hope that they have been presented here together will encourage increased cross-fertilisation between these within and across research projects. Books that engage with both qualitative and quantitative approaches to addressing research questions are rare enough, but this book does so in a way that meaningfully highlights the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Despite this, the empirical studies that are presented all tend to take a single approach. It would have been even more welcome also to see integration of mixed methods at this point in the volume.

As is well recognised by researchers, but not always research users, cross-national comparisons are challenging to do well because of the importance of cultural and institutional context (Alexander, 2001). However, this book carefully engages with the issues this raises. It achieves this through discussion of theoretical models and carefully chosen examples to illustrate these. As such, it is the book's engagement with these issues, not just its focus on inequalities rather than on performance, that highlights that research on international comparisons need not only be only about league tables of countries but rather a deeper engagement with features of those institutions that underlying differences in the extent of educational inequalities.

The book helpfully presents a guide to using hierarchical (multi-level) modelling for this kind of research. This includes some excellent advice on the specification and interpretation of such models, which is to be applauded as this is often not well understood. However, some will disagree that this approach is preferable to alternative statistical modelling strategies for such analyses because of the additional assumptions embedded within it. There are arguments on both sides and, in my view, it would have been preferable for these disagreements and the differing beliefs underpinning them to be explained, rather than presenting a single viewpoint as the correct one. However, in saying this I recognise that space in a volume such as this is finite and choices must be made as to what to include.

There are inevitable points of comparison with the volume on *Models of Secondary Education and Social Inequality* (Blossfeld et al., 2016) published in the same year, indeed there is some overlap in authorship, and both contain empirical work that is well worth reading. Hadjar and Gross' volume is broader in scope (although both largely focus on the differences in the organisation of secondary education, despite the wider ambitions of the title "education systems", probably unavoidably given the wider range of internationally comparative data available for this phase than primary or early years) and probably better suited to those interested in being introduced to the subject. All in all, I certainly recommend this book to researchers interested in what we can learn about the link between schooling systems and educational outcomes, not just educational inequalities given the important discussion of measurement and methods.

Bibliography

Alexander, R. (2001). *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Blossfeld H., Buchholz S., Skopek J. & Triventi M. (2016). *Models of Secondary Education and Social Inequality: An International Comparison*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.