BOOK REVIEW

M. Ben-Peretz (Ed.) (2009). Policy-Making in Education: A Holistic Approach in Response to Global Changes, New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 171 pp, (paperback).

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Miriam Ben-Peretz, Professor Emerita of Education at the University of Haifa, who has gained a worldwide reputation for her thoughtful research and opinions on issues such as curricula, teacher education, teaching, and learning, now presents us with her new book, Policy-Making in Education: A Holistic Approach in Response to Global Changes.

This time, Ben-Peretz offers us her deep wisdom on how to respond to global changes via policymaking in education. Her clear and witty way of analyzing problems of globalization and educational policymaking via interrelated cycles of personal, national, and the international dimensions are all gathered together toward the end of the book into a holistic policymaking model that includes conceptual and practical features. The capacity to embrace the abstract and yet remain practical characterizes Miriam Ben-Peretz’s thinking in all her writings.

This book is based on the understanding that a holistic approach is necessary to meet the challenges in policymaking in education, which is facing global changes in crucial aspects of our lives. These include the economy, technology, immigration, and the environment.

Let us begin with the end of the book. One can gain insight into the proposed systemic model based on an integration of the globalization characteristics mentioned. Ben-Peretz identifies four questions that must be addressed in any policymaking situation:

1. Who will be the participants in the process as representatives of the “commonplaces” of policymaking?
2. Which factors will influence or control policymaking?
3. What process of policymaking, its phases, and sequences will transpire?
4. What will be the nature of the final product? (p. 134)

All deep thinking begins with good questions. Ben-Peretz’s four leading questions can stand in the same class as Tyler’s four famous questions that have illumined the curriculum field until now.
(Tyler, 1949). Not only are the answers to each of these four questions provided by her proposed systemic model, but the questions themselves can serve as basic principles of policymaking in education.

The unique lesson offered by Ben-Peretz lies in her presenting a model that helps to explore policymaking theory and practice and its relation to education in the complex heterogeneous societies we live in. She proposes five “commonplaces” inspired by the four commonplaces suggested for curriculum development by Schwab in 1964. However, she clearly differentiates between curriculum development and policymaking, and declares that a scientific background, agents, learners, the milieu, and the media are the five commonplaces of policymaking in education. They are all critical elements and needed to respond to today’s global changes. The reader can find a thorough analysis of these elements and the way in which they are congruent with some of the empirical evidence presented in the book in several cases of policymaking.

The reader can enjoy the dialectical play between the simplicity and the complexity of the model, and become acquainted with its power via adopting her basic metaphorical viewpoint, which says that, “Policies of reforms have a life-cycle that determines their development and decline. The metaphor of a life-cycle views the history of reform through the biological lens of birth, growth, and decline” (p. 141). Several phases of the policymaking process are proposed, reflecting the layered and modular nature of this model, which is a genuine guide offering general recommendations to be adapted to their specific contexts.

The model, a holistic framework for policymaking in education in response to global changes (pp. 133–149), is the peak of the journey undertaken in this book. However, as in a well-planned journey, the way to the peak, the stations along the way, and personal experiences, as well as the scholarly wisdom, are no less important.

Ben-Peretz shares with her reader several cases of policymaking that illuminate her power to transfer her own experience into general understanding to be guidelines for the holistic policymaking model that she proposes. In part 3 of the book, she describes and analyzes her concrete experiences of policymaking in education. Hers is one of the strong and clear voices in Israel that has been much appreciated by the Israeli Ministers of Education over the years; and not only by them, but by the entire educational community in Israel, which includes academic scholars, as well as school principals and teachers in the field. For this reason, she was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize for education.

A fascinating part of the book can be seen in part 3 (pp. 75–108 ) when she shares three cases of naturalistic policymaking in Israel in which she was involved and left a crucial mark on the field of education in the country. The case of reforming the Israeli matriculation examinations illustrates what she calls the naturalistic process of policymaking in education and its implementation. Through her delineation of the reasons for the formation of the committee that she chaired, and her vivid descriptions of the committee members, the dilemmas and conflicts that arose during the committee’s deliberations, as well as the influential factors in the dynamics of the committee’s deliberations, the reader gets a clear impression that she or he is sitting there in the meetings facing the pressures and demands of all the committee members to reach operational conclusions. Ben-Peretz takes the reader through the recommendations of the matriculation committee, through the post-committee policy implementation strategies, and the decline of the new matriculation policy; and she bravely admits that after several years of implementation, the
new matriculation policy was abandoned. She carefully and impressively analyzes the nature of reform in education “from circumstances of birth to stages of decline” (p. 84). Here, she illuminates a great understanding when she states that, “Yet, sometimes, a reform reappears. When a policy of reform fails to be executed, a new reform is suggested, in a cyclic form of policy development” (pp. 84–85). Then, she goes beyond her personal local experience and moves on to broader insights, referring to general principles of policymaking in education.

The case of reforms in teacher education (presented in chap. 9, part 3, pp. 89–102) and the Scholl Structure reform in Israeli schools, an instance of synergy in education (presented in chap. 10, part 3, pp. 103–108), are only two more examples which point out that, “Policy-making in response to global changes must not fail, nor should the implementation of these policies be at the mercy of political upheavals” (p. 108).

Part 2 of the book deals with coordinating three domains of education in response to globalization. Here, the author links teacher education to changes in teaching and to social and cultural contexts. Navigating conflicting pressures “is for parts of the education policy to be locally constructed by professional educators while bearing in mind the effects of socio-cultural contexts on education” (p. 74). The concept she develops here is “policy potential,” which is based on her well-known notion of “curriculum potential.” which she recommends be generalized here to “policy potential.” By so doing, she indicates “how feasibly the components of a central policy can be adapted to local contexts” (p. 74).

The book opens with a provocative major question: “Global changes: for better or worse?” In this, the first part, Professor Ben-Peretz provides the background for the proposed model of policymaking in education, presented in the last part of the book. She skillfully describes questions of demographic changes, focusing on migration processes with ramifications for education. Then, she elaborates on the impact of the new socioeconomic gaps created by economic globalization, and declares that the moral voice of education has been muted and teaching has become standardized. She stresses the need for a technological education to integrate skills, problem solving, intellectual curiosity, and a set of interpersonal and moral values, all of which she sees as a form of power that can play a role in systemic education policy. Environmental issues that threaten the present and the future are at the core of her concern for a better quality of life. Being realistic, she knows that “education alone cannot be held responsible for responding to environmental problems, but it can play a role in raising the consciousness of present and future citizens, motivating them to act and react to these problems” (p. 35).

With this outstanding book, one can set out on an exceptional and provocative journey that offers universal, national, and personal views. All of them reveal ideas and wisdom as they focus on policymaking in education; they also aim to raise the consciousness of educators to “navigate valid, effective, and comprehensive responses in coping with the difficult and complex issues elicited by present and global changes” (p. 152).

The review of this book has been presented here “backward,” or in reverse: I started with the last part, part 4, “Policy-Making in Education in the Twenty-First Century,” which introduces the holistic model for policymaking in education, which indicates the author’s vision. I then continued by moving along with the logic of the book as developed in Parts 3, 2, and 1. Now I suggest that one reads the book by going “forward” (i.e., from the beginning) so as to be able to dwell on the issues under discussion, to linger over an idea that strikes him or her or points out a
different view of it. Reading this book—whether you do so by going forward or in reverse—will reveal much wisdom together with its aims to stimulate the reader.

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