



Takyi-Amoako, E. (Ed.) (2016). *Education in West Africa*. London: Bloomsbury.

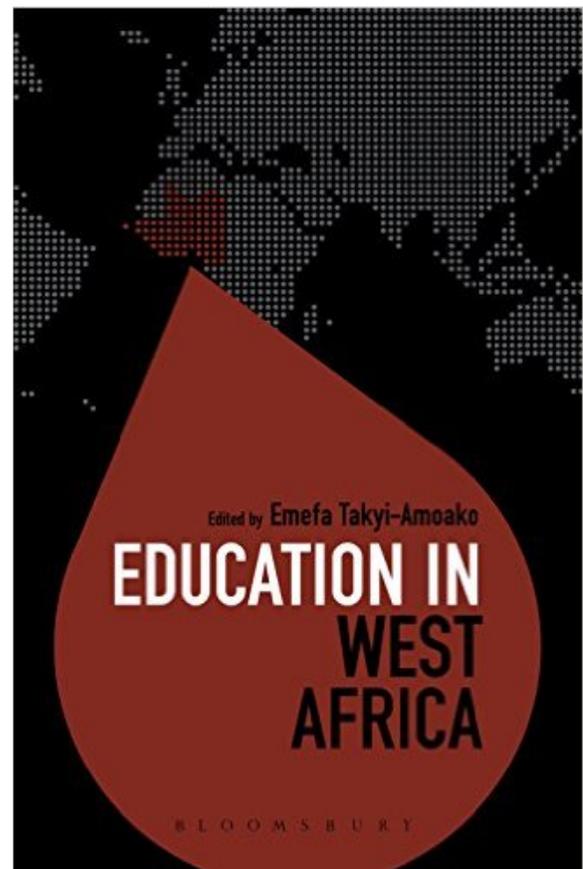
Pp. 448

ISBN: 9781441199485

**Reviewed by Aryn R. Baxter**  
**Arizona State University**  
**United States**

In recent years, regional integration has emerged as a prominent strategy for addressing human development challenges in African contexts (Elhiraika et al., 2015). This includes economic integration as well as broader efforts to advance human development, such as harmonizing regulations and standards, facilitating labor mobility, investing in regional infrastructure, and managing shared natural resources (UNDP, 2011; UNECA, 2013). The acceleration of regional integration in West Africa, which has been particularly strong in the education sector, represents an important moment to critically examine and learn from past education reform efforts that have been shaped by an interplay of local and global influences. By exploring the history and state of education in 18 countries, *Education in West Africa* illuminates the complex challenges that characterize education in the region and lays the groundwork for considering how African nations might chart a more effective and sustainable path toward education development.

In the introductory chapter, Editor Emefa J. Takyi-Amoako situates an overview of



education trends in the region within historical and global context. She critiques the ways in which the shifting priorities of external development partners have undermined educational development in the region and points to the repositioning of African leaders as policy drivers and primary funders of their own education systems as a missing link and promising approach to addressing ongoing quality and equity challenges. At the same time, she acknowledges the complex ways in which national and local forces interact and at times converge with external influences to shape education policies and proposes that detailed study at the local level is needed to better understand this “confluence,” where the global and the national meet. The chapters that follow contribute to this effort and constitute a crucial first step in re-evaluating priorities and identifying innovative approaches that are compatible with the development needs of African nations.

Thirty subsequent chapters elaborate on the education systems of all 15 Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) member countries as well as Cameroon, Chad and Mauritania. A combination of prominent and emerging scholars—each with deep ties and expertise in the region—employ a variety of methodological approaches to explore the history, current trends, and future prospects of each national education system. These African education experts do a formidable job of providing succinct summaries and examining a range of themes that reflect the diverse histories and priorities of West African nations, yet the analysis of each national education system remains uneven. Some countries such as Ghana and Nigeria are allotted three chapters whereas other countries are confined to one or two. Moreover, inconsistent attention is given to the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of the education system. For some countries, all three levels are addressed whereas for others, the focus is exclusively on basic education or a particular theme such as language policy or citizenship education in the wake of conflict. Even within chapters that address particular

themes in greater depth, the review of related research is not exhaustive. The volume would benefit from a discussion of the overarching methodology for determining what to include and exclude for each national context as well as a more thorough analysis of similarities and differences across the region. For those in search of additional information that may be excluded for a particular country, the introductory chapter includes a helpful list of relevant databases that are regularly updated to provide information about West Africa’s dynamic education systems.

In addition to providing a brief overview of education systems and highlighting both the great strides and ongoing challenges that characterize education in the West Africa region, the volume sets the stage for engaging with a key question in the field of comparative education: How do external, internal, and internalized factors converge to shape education policy choices, processes and practices, and what are the implications of this confluence? The book responds to the call of comparative education scholars for detailed study at the local level to explore this convergence of influences on national education systems (Lingard & Ozga, 2007; Samoff & Carrol, 2004). The chapters included in the volume document similarities as well as differences in colonial and post-colonial experiences and approaches to education reform. While attention to the role of local social traditions and values is limited, several chapters highlight participatory processes at the local level that have shaped education reforms and offer promising approaches for emulation. Examples include Benin’s National Conference, a policy dialogue forum that took place in 1990 following the country’s transition to democracy, and The Gambia’s participatory education policy dialogues that engaged children, illiterate and literate adults, government departments, private sector representatives, and civil society in both rural and urban areas to guide the development of the 2004-2015 Education Policy. In contrast, the detrimental impact of practices that superficially engage stakeholders in the process of policy formation, such as

Burkina Faso's symbolically inclusive process of developing a national version of Education for All, are critiqued.

The importance of developing local solutions to specific national and regional challenges is a related theme that runs throughout the book. Liberia's implementation of citizenship education curriculum and Cameroon's efforts to create an integrated bilingual education system are just two examples of responsiveness to distinct basic learning needs in particular countries and cultural contexts (King, 2011). The editor's commentary is largely pan-African in focus, giving little attention to distinct national strategies and local innovations and focusing instead on the shared challenge of managing a growing youth population and the opportunity for regional efforts such as ECOWAS, the African Union Commission, and the ADEA forum for policy dialogue to address common regional concerns. These shared priorities include strengthening higher education through the creation of regional centers of excellence and employing technology to effectively expand education access and quality.

In summary, *Education in West Africa* fills an important gap in the research literature by

illuminating the state of education in one of the poorest and most diverse regions of the world. In doing so, it provides a useful reference guide for scholars, policy makers, and the general public. At the same time, it highlights critical tensions between global and local solutions, documents how African leaders have been positioned at the confluence of the national and the international, and raises important questions that will shape the future of education in the region: What might it look like to revolutionize Africa's education systems for the better? How might African nations innovate and think outside the box to address the needs of their rising youth populations? How might regional, continental and global networks be leveraged to empower African nations to negotiate globalization on their own terms so they are not only beneficiaries but also contributors to its advancement (Obanya, 2011)? These are the questions that *Education in West Africa* poses yet leaves unanswered. These outstanding questions may be viewed both as a limitation as well as an invitation for readers to deepen their familiarity with the region and reflect on these critical issues as they work toward education change in West Africa and elsewhere.

---

## References

- Elhiraika, A., Mukungu, A., & Nyoike, W. (Eds.). (2016). *Regional Integration and Policy Challenges in Africa*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- King, E. (2011). *Jomtien, 20 years later: Global education for all partners must renew commitment to learning*. Available from <http://blogs.worldbank.org/education/what-s-new-Jomtien-20-years-later>
- Lingard, R., & Ozga, J. (2007). Reading education policy and politics. In R. Lingard & J. Ozga (Eds), *The RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Education Policy and Politics*, (pp. 1-8). London: Routledge.
- Obanya, P. (2011). Foreward. In B. A. Nsamenang & T. M. S. Tchombe, *Handbook on African educational theories and practices: A generative teacher education curriculum* (pp. xxv-xxvi). Cameroon: Human Development Resource Centre.
- Samoff, J., & Carrol, B. (2004). *Conditions, coalitions and influence: The World Bank and higher education in Africa*. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.
- United Nations Development Program. (2011). *Regional integration and human development: A pathway for Africa*. New York: UNDP.
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. (2013). *Regional integration in West Africa*. New York: UNECA.

## About the Reviewer

**Aryn R. Baxter** is an Assistant Research Professor and Director of the MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program at Arizona State University. As an international educator and scholarship program director, Dr. Baxter's research examines the learning experiences and trajectories of internationally mobile students. By examining the impact of international scholarship programs on students and institutions, her work seeks to inform how scholarship programs are designed to effectively expand higher education access and contribute to social transformation.



 *Education Review/ Reseñas Educativas/ Resenbas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Please contribute reviews at <http://www.edrev.info/contribute.html>.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview