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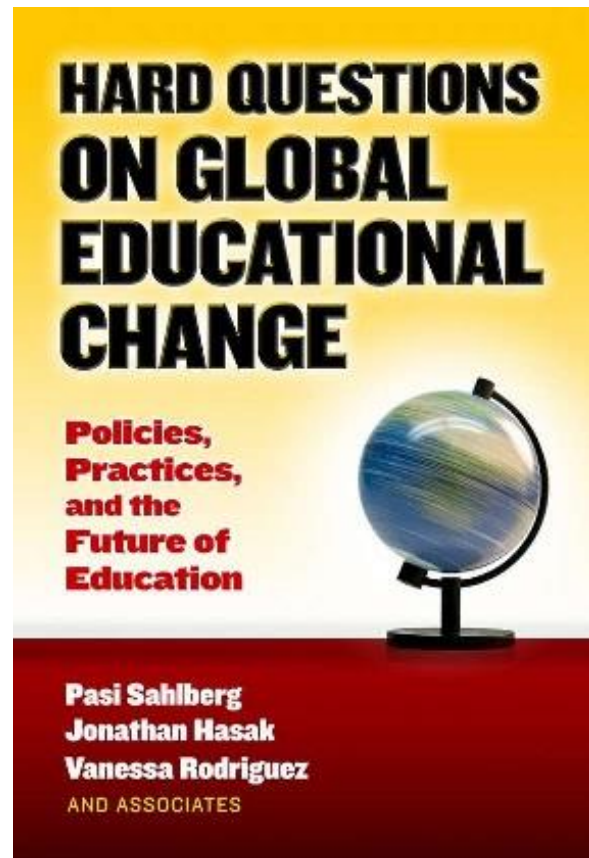
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Shortly before her death, Gertrude Stein is rumored to have followed her question, “What is the answer?” with a second question, “Then what is the question?” In *Hard Questions on Global Educational Change*, Pasi Sahlberg and his colleagues and students take the importance of asking well-formulated questions about education seriously. Increasingly, they argue, it is necessary to raise such hard questions within an international and global perspective. Seven of the most pressing of these questions are addressed in the book, and readers are encouraged to raise additional questions.

The force behind this project is Pasi Sahlberg. Dr. Sahlberg has had extensive experience as an educational consultant to a number of international organizations. He has written on Finnish education, and served as the director general of the Centre for International Mobility at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. His Finnish experience probably explains why a number



of the chapters include Finland as an example. *Hard Questions* grew out of his time as a visiting professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education where he taught a course with the title of this book. He invited then-doctoral student Vanessa Rodriguez and Jonathan Hasak, a teaching fellow who had graduated two years earlier, to work with him. Groups containing three students each were assigned to write an academic essay (not an opinion piece) on one of the seven questions selected. These seven essays plus an introduction and concluding chapter form this brief book of 136 pages.

The seven questions are:

1. Can Parental Choice Improve Education for All?
2. What Is the Right Answer to the Standardized Testing Question?
3. Can Anyone Teach?
4. Do We Still Need Teacher Unions?
5. Will Technology Make Schools Smarter?
6. Can Schools Prepare Kids for Work?
7. Can Higher Education Be Transactional?

Striving to “include seven globally discussed controversial questions about educational change” (p. vii). These seven meet the criteria set by Sahlberg et al for hard questions.

In their brief but excellent introductory essay the editors convincingly argue that “Globalization has... led to synchronization of education systems from an international perspective. This means that similar, if not the same, educational issues are debated and argued from one country to another” (p. 2). The underlying forces include increased mobility of students, labor, and businesses; the growing cost of education; the growing enrollment in the number of students. These forces have brought about calls for the standardization of curricula, examinations, and qualifications, and for an

emphasis on efficiency, performance, and accountability.

To become changemakers, education students need to possess three essential skill sets that are not systematically required in their programs at present: the importance of understanding hard questions, the importance of understanding worldwide educational trends, and the importance of writing about their opinion. The rest of the review touches on the first two of these skills. Here I will comment on the third, communicating opinions to influence others. Sahlberg, Hasak, and Rodriguez propose rightly that traditional academic outlets (e.g., journal articles) for educational reform are too slow and too weak to make an impact. Rather, op-eds, blogs, and social media are much more effective and efficient in reaching an audience with a short attention span. In his courses, Sahlberg works with students to write opinion pieces in addition to academic essays. These are positive, innovative suggestions. Therefore, I believe that the editors missed an opportunity when they choose to publish chapters that are “not opinions of the authors; rather they are academic essays” (p. 10). I don’t understand why each of the essays could not have been followed by one or two (pro and con) op-eds.

A scan of the seven questions addressed in the essays indicates that questions 1 through 6 focus primarily on K – 12 and that the seventh question addresses higher education. With the exception of details about nations selected in each essay, policymakers are likely to find little that is new in most of these essays. For example, in reference to standardized testing, we are informed that while testing may have tremendous benefits (e.g., as diagnostic and improvement tools), it can have tremendous negative effects (e.g., teaching to the test, loss of instructional time, and frequency of testing). At the same time, a number of details and insights throughout the essays will be of value to education students.

Given the growing international emphasis on school choice, one of the most valuable insights is that “Traditional economic theory and the rational actor model of choice cannot explain all school choice outcomes” (p. 26). If choice is to be adopted and to bring about change, actual choice situations must be studied, and findings from behavioral economics must be incorporated into education policies. Parents may wish to keep students in schools near home rather than choose on the basis of the rational choice model and opt to send students to the highest achieving school. Students and their instructors will also benefit from the essay concerning teaching (Can anyone teach?). A significant insight here is that the question should be shifted to “How do teachers develop?” This development occurs during teacher preparation programs and throughout teaching careers. The incorporation of teaching theory and development into teacher education programs means that such programs “can better tailor their instruction to supporting long-term teacher growth and set teachers on a path to long-term growth” (p. 45).

Recent union organized teacher strikes in conservative states such as West Virginia and Oklahoma support the view of the authors of the essay on teacher unions that, “it is clear that teacher unions are still needed, both to defend the rights of teachers as employees and to work for the improvement of educational systems” (p. 70). These strikes have the potential to change state budgets and to influence state politics (perhaps a shift from conservative to more liberal candidates). If students learn about the changes that unions can help bring about, they will also find an often-needed cautionary tale about the limitations of technology in the essay, “Will technology make schools smarter?” Although the authors argue that opposition to technology often romanticizes the human aspect of the teaching process, “the alleged revolution of education is often nothing more

than a mild reform....” (p. 75). It is impossible to anticipate all developments in technology; however, students will benefit greatly if they discuss questions raised such as: Can machines teach us some things better than humans? Is there such a thing as a unique, irreplaceable human element in education? If a machine is able to assign smart learning tasks, what is left for the teacher to do? These derived questions are excellent illustrations of what the editors had in mind with their observation that generating new questions from the initial hard question is “sometimes more helpful than being right or winning the debate” (p. 119).

In response to the question, “Can schools prepare kids for work?” the student authors review pathways between school and work in various societies. Many real-world models exist, and the question must be taken seriously. However, “there is no certainty in future plans because things are yet to unfold” (p. 102). The limitations on our ability to anticipate the future is well taken. These authors also remind readers that employment is not the sole goal of education. The seventh and final question shifts attention from primary and secondary levels to higher education. In this case, readers are reminded of the importance of balancing the very real concerns with financial return on investment (ROI), investments in terms of increasing tuition, fees, housing, loans, etc., and the “deeper pedagogical and developmental goals people have for higher education” (p. 114). Once again, the pros and cons of alternatives, particularly in Western Europe, are worth exploring. Readers interested in the financial aspects of higher education will benefit greatly from *Financing American Higher Education in the Era of Globalization* (Zumeta et al., 2012).

In place of the traditional final summary or concluding chapter, the authors briefly outline their thoughts on educational change in the United States and beyond. For them, the incoherence and diversity of top down direction from district, state, and federal

accountability agencies is most concerning. This top-down approach has limited the incentives for teachers to collaborate on hard questions. In contrast, high performing nations, e.g., Finland, Canada, Estonia, and Singapore, “have made deliberate efforts and investments to carve out time for teacher collaboration” (p. 121). For me, the present political situation in the U.S. and the rise of leaders such as President Trump and Secretary of Education DeVos suggests that while there may be a reduction in federal mandates, there will also be a reduction in federal funds for incentives. In addition, it is not at all clear that state funding will increase for education. It is possible that the United States will become a nation of at least 50 diverse underfunded education systems. In terms of education, geography may become destiny.

Although Sahlberg et al.’s volume identified seven of the most pressing hard questions, they also “encourage readers to phrase new hard questions and use them in expanding your own understanding of education” (p. 3). My list includes the following: What Role Do Various Media Play in Informing the Public About School Practices and Policies (e. g., Wubbana et al., 2016; Oromaner, 2018)? Can Schools Bring About Equality in Educational Opportunities and Outcomes for Male and for Female

Students? Can Schools Bring About Equality in Educational Opportunities and Outcomes for Native and for Immigrant Students? It is unfortunate that the editors waited for the closing pages of the volume to raise the issues of minorities in the education system. It is equally unfortunate that hard questions about the presence of new (e.g., LGBT) and old (e.g., racial/ethnic) minorities were not included among the seven questions.

In *Hard Questions on Global Educational Change*, Sahlberg, Hasak, and Rodriguez have provided a needed reminder that 21st Century education systems should be viewed within an international context, and that such systems will face ever changing hard questions. This reminder is particularly important for education students who wish to become changemakers. The challenge for these changemakers is to provide policymakers and politicians with convincing well-thought out and creative scenarios. In order to do this they must ask the right hard questions and must learn to understand forces impacting education systems globally. *Hard Questions* provides an excellent introduction to the preparation and encouragement of both undergraduate and graduate education students to become 21st Century changemakers.

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About the Reviewer

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