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 a doctoral student (Vanessa Rodriguez) and a teaching fellow who had

graduated two years earlier (Jonathan Hasak) to work with him. Groups of three students

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?

These seven do meet the criteria set by Sahlberg et al., for hard questions. “In our book

we decided to include seven globally discussed controversial questions about educational

change “ (p. vii).

In the introduction, Sahlberg, et al., recognize that these seven are among the

most pressing hard questions, however, they “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 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 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, “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, “we will also demonstrate that

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

outline (8 pages) 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., President Trump; 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 U.S. will become a nation of at least 50

diverse underfunded education systems. In terms of education, geography may become

destiny.

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.