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Editorial

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The articles in volume 80 raise issues of whether the best social science methods (randomized trials) are of use in terms of cross-national generalizability; whether donor-sponsored interventions can be sustainable; the degree to which results are determined by factors over which school systems have no control; and the opposite: the degree to which individual schools and individual students have the organizational power to determine their fate; and whether the effects of corruption within education can be overcome. Lastly, the theme of education problems in Sub Saharan Africa continues.

The Limits to elite Methodologies: Considerable progress has been made in terms of advancing methods of evaluation which can establish causation. The question is whether these expensive methods have applicability outside of the school system where data are collected. This is the theme of the article titled: “Addressing Cross-National Generalizability in Educational Impact Evaluation,” by Eric Hanushek. He points to the many differences which exist across settings and suggests using caution because student results are likely to vary systematically with a number of fundamental country-level institutional characteristics that are not explicitly considered in within-country evaluation analyses. He concludes by saying that ‘unfortunately, there is currently too little replication of basic research studies to provide explicit guidance on when and where cross-national generalizations are possible’. As a conclusion, this is sobering but needed.

Funding agencies are responsible for an imbalanced portion of educational innovation. This is the case in many OECD as well as developing countries. The question is the degree to which the imported rationales are autonomously adopted by local administrators and teachers. One example of the difficulties achieving local adoption is illustrated by the article titled: “‘I think it was a trick to fail Eastern’: A Multilevel Analysis of Teachers’ Views on the Implementation of the School Health and Reading Program (SHRP) in Uganda,” by Ruth Wenske and Medadi Erisa Ssentanda. The SHRP program was an attempt to scale up a ‘Thematic Curriculum (TC)’ reform, which included the first attempt to standardize the use of mother tongues in lower primary schools through child-centered pedagogical practices. SHRP has expanded the TC to additional local languages and districts, providing new learning materials – including specific teaching techniques – and teacher training to support it. However, by carefully interviewing the teachers involved, the authors discovered that the implementation of SHRP was marked by the fact that it is a donor-led reform perceived as an external intervention not well suited for Ugandan classrooms’. This article is a reminder that no matter how rational the implementation strategy may appear from the external point of view, it is quite different from how it may be perceived by the very authorities needed for its success.

School systems are heavily affected by the external environment over which they have little control. Five articles in Volume 80 speak to this issue. In their historical article titled: “Immigrant Nationality and Human Capital Formation in Brazil,” authors Anna Faria and J. Dean Craig quantify the immigration to Brazil between 1888 and 1920 and attempt to calculate the effect which different categories of immigrants had on the development of human capital through the education system. They conclude that the presence of immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century had a positive impact on current measures of human capital but that the effect depends on an immigrants’ experiences with public education, religious background, migration objectives and demographics, but that these effects continue over time and remain localized. The authors find a ‘positive relationship between German, Japanese and Italian presence in 1920 and current human capital, while Portuguese and Spanish presence were not associated with increases in human capital’.

In the article titled: “Youth Out of School and Out of Work,” Miguel Szekely and Jonathan Karver pull together information from 234 different surveys across 18 countries in Latin America and conclude that the persistently high rates of being out of school and out of work among males are strongly associated with greater labor force participation by women. The increased labor force participation of women may have an effect of ‘crowding out’ against men, given the slow job creation rates across the region. Their analysis also explores the possibility of ‘scarring effects’, and finds that higher shares of out of school and out of work youth at ages 15–20 years are associated with lower wages for the same cohorts later in life, at ages 35–40 years, for both males and females.

School systems continue to balance the societal demands of heterogeneity with the need for generating a trusting citizenry. This issue is discussed by the article titled: “Diversity as an Opportunity or a Challenge? A Cross-National Study of Ethnic Diversity and Students’ Generalized Trust,” by Soobin Choi and Moosung Lee. They find a positive relationship between ethnic diversity and generalized trust but it is not linear but rather inverted U-shaped curvilinear. This suggests that the positive relationship levels off and turns negative. The authors also find that students’ educational experiences such as social relations at school are positively associated with generalized trust, ethnic diversity at the macro-level is still the most powerful factor in our analysis predicting students’ generalized trust.

How can a school system operate successfully if there is not enough for children to eat? This is the subject of the article titled: “To Attend or Not to Attend: Examining the Relationship Between Food Hardship, School Attendance and Education Expenditure,” by Edward Martey, Prince Maxwell Etwire and David Alinga. Their study used nationally-representative data from a survey of 14,009 households in Ghana and

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found a negative relationship between food hardship, the number of children attending school and education expenditure. They also found that the greater the food hardship the more likely the gender gap in school attendance and the greater the propensity for higher income family to send their children to private schools.

Lastly, how can a school system operate successfully if economic circumstances force children to work? This is the question approached in the article titled: “No Harmless Child Labor: The Effect of Child Labor on Academic Achievement in Francophone Western and Central Africa,” by Jieun Lee, Hyoungjong Kim and Dong-Eun Rhee. Their work examines the effect of child labor on academic achievement in 10 francophone Western and Central African countries employing data from 25,288 grade six students in 1803 schools. They conclude that child labor undermines academic achievement regardless of subject, gender, and age. Child labor lowers reading and mathematics scores for both genders and for children under 12 and over 13 years. They conclude that child labor therefore ‘hinders human capital accumulation in African countries, and it takes place at the cost of future prosperity’.

Is it the case that the effectiveness of a school system is at the mercy of external factors? Are school systems, and pupils as individuals, analogous to a cork bobbing on an ocean current? Five articles in Volume 80 would suggest the opposite; that both school system and individual pupils are able to overcome the challenges from external forces. In the article titled: “School Efficiency in Low and Middle-Income Countries: An Analysis Based on the PISA for Development Learning Survey,” Marcos Delprato and German Antequera use data for seven countries to find the ability to increase school efficiency for both cognitive and non-cognitive outputs by over 20 % and reducing within-country school efficiency disparity by lessening the impact of traditional student disadvantages.

Is it possible that students perform better if they feel ‘comfortable’ in their school? In the article titled: “School Belonging and Math Attitudes Among High School Students in Advanced Math”, authors Thomas Smith, David Walker, Hsiang-Ting Chen, Zuway R. Hong, and Huann Shyung Lin use information from nine countries to examine the relationship between students’ sense of school belonging and their attitudes towards mathematics, and the extent to which student gender moderated these relationships. Their results show that students’ sense of school belonging emerged as a significant, positive predictor of students’ liking and valuing of mathematics and in most countries, with no significant moderating effect of student gender.

To what extent does the implementation of school reform depend on the organizational force of the individual school? In the article titled: “Implementing Education System Reform: Local Adaptation in School Reform in Teaching and Learning,” Clive Dimmock, Cheng Yong Tan, Dong Nguyen, Tu Anh Tran and Thang Truong discover that the local adaptation process, school culture and professional development were pre-eminent in determining the degree to which reforms originating from the external forces successfully adapt to the local environment.

To what extent can an individual overcome hardships and handicaps? This is the question raised in the article titled: “IQ, Grit, and Academic Achievement: Evidence from Rural China. Authors, Xinyue He, Huan Wang, Fang Chang, Sarah-Eve Dill, Han Liu, Bin Tang and Yaojiang Shi examine how general cognitive abilities (IQ) and grit contribute to academic achievement gains in poor areas of rural China. They discover that IQ and grit each predict achievement gains for the average student, but that grit is not positively associated with achievement gains among low IQ students, nor does grit affect academic achievement gains among students with delays in general cognitive ability.

To what extent does a boot camp study culture accomplish what it aspires? In the article titled: “Does All Work and No Play Make Elite Students? Evidence from the China Education Panel Survey,” Juan Yang and Xinhui Zhao try to answer this question by examining the role played by after-class learning time. They observe that students in China spend more time studying outside of school than in any other OECD

country but rank only 10th in math, reading and science. It is doubtful that the longer students study after school, the better their academic performance will be. The authors find that the relationship between the amount of out-of-school time studying and academic achievement is shaped like an inverted U. They conclude that the best academic performance can be achieved when after-class learning time is kept at 3 h on weekdays and 8 h on weekends and that more than these optimal times will hinder academic performance.

Over the last decade, much attention has been devoted to the possibility that some functions of the education system can be corrupted and cause damage to individual pupils, teachers, administrators, and to the system at large (Heyneman, 2004; Heyneman et al., 2008). But some gifts from parents may be a way to say thank you not a way to say I want something special for my child. Where and how does one draw the line between corruption and a cultural norm (Heyneman, 2010). The article titled: “The Association between ‘grease the wheel’, ‘sand the wheel’ and cultural norm’: Motivations for Making Informal Payments with Satisfaction in Public Primary Schools” goes a step further. In their survey of 27 countries in the Europe and Central Asia region Nazim Habibou, Alena Auchynnika and Yunhong Lyu find that 12 % of the families with children in public schools make information payments either because they were asked to do so by school personnel or because they felt such payments were required. However, they attempt to distinguish between different motivations to assess the degree to which an informal payment reflects or leads to dissatisfaction with the school system. They theorize that informal payments can be classified into three different groups based on the motivations of the people making payments. They find that ‘sand-the-wheels’ motivation is associated with lower satisfaction, but ‘cultural norm’ motivation is associated with higher satisfaction. ‘Grease-the-wheels’ motivation has no significant association.

Can higher education institutions, quite separate from the law courts, fashion a culture in which corruption is minimized or even eliminated? In the article titled: “The Effect of Lean Culture on the Reduction of Academic Corruption by the Mediating Role of Positive Organizational Policies in Higher Education,” Rouhollah Bagherimajid and Fahimeh Mahmoudi examine in two Iranian universities the effect of ‘lean culture’ (professional social consensus) and positive organizational policies on academic corruption. The results showed that ‘lean culture’ directly and indirectly is effective. They conclude that lean values, principles, leadership, teamwork, and communication, and sound policies have a constructive role. The acceptance of colleagues, students, licenses, salaries and inclinations is affected by the cultural and political values of higher education.

In Volume 79, we published an essay which argued that the international objectives for education in Sub Saharan Africa were unobtainable through donor financing and only obtainable through judicious use of local tax resources (Lewin, 2020). In Volume 80 the dilemma of education in Sub Saharan Africa continues with two articles. The first is titled: “The Political Economy of Primary Education Reform in Sub Saharan Africa,” the second is titled: “The Political Economy of Primary Education Reform in Sub Saharan Africa: A Political Settlement Analysis,” both authored by Paul Bennell. The first explores three factors which help determine the degree to which universal primary education is likely to be attained. These include (i) the rapid emergence of new social class relations which (ii) is determined by the rapid growth of higher education and private schooling provision and (iii) the overall demand for primary education and especially the intensifying competition for jobs in the formal sector. The second paper explores the politics of UPE implementation and in particular the level of elite political commitment to the attainment of UPE.

The articles in volume 79 and 80 on education in Sub Saharan Africa have a common set of conclusions. They acknowledge that international education goals are unobtainable under current circumstances. They lay the responsibility on the shoulders of local authorities rather than the international donor community. And they allude to why local authorities may not have sufficient consensus or political will to adequately

support the investment in public primary and secondary education.

Taken together the articles in volume 80 present the reader with a set of important inconsistencies. On the one hand it is demonstrated that school systems are deeply affected by societal changes over which they have no control – the inflow of immigrants, the seemingly unsolvable effect of unemployment among males, inadequate food available to children, the demand of family survival pressuring children to work and the, often underappreciated, cost to accomplish diversity objectives. Volume 80 present abundant illustrations of the circumstances in which school systems are inadequately prepared.

But then there is evidence in volume 80 of the opposite, illustrations in which school systems can protect themselves and overcome adversity. There is hope for achieving significant gains in efficiency. There are cases where grit coupled with IQ can overcome barriers to personal advancement. There is evidence, particularly in East Asia, that system-imposed pressures to over-study in a ‘boot camp culture’ can have counter-productive effects. There is evidence that a school culture in which children feel ‘comfortable’ can maximize academic performance as well as good behavior. And lastly, there is good evidence that professional consensus in particular higher educational institutions can effectively neutralize societal pressures of corruption. These illustrations of positive effects born out of educational institutions themselves are not insignificant.

Volume 80 also sounds a warning about the elite statistical methods to establish causation. While randomized trials may be close to achieving parallel strength to the medical world, the barriers to cross-national generalization remain daunting, and should give pause to policy makers who may forget or ignore those barriers. Lastly, the discussion of education in Sub Saharan Africa suggests that a ‘corner may have been turned’ with respect to the (no longer new) nations themselves as being responsible for prioritizing education in the allocation of public expenditure.

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