BOOK REVIEW

Ora Kwo (ed.) (2010). Teachers as Learners: Critical Discourse on Challenges & Opportunities. Springer & CERC, Hong Kong.

It is important to take a special note of the *context* in which this book was born. As the foreword and the introductory chapter stress it emerged from the 49th World Assembly of the *International Council on Education for Teaching* organised in the city of *Hong Kong* with the theme of "*Teachers as Learners: Building Communities for Professional Development*". Both the supporting organisation and the locality are important. The International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET), founded in 1953, is probably the oldest and most "robust" global organisation involved in teacher education (Dolby-Rahman, 2008), and its yearly conferences have had a significant impact on the development of the area. As for the venue: there were, in the time of the birth of the chapters of the book, two particularly important ingredients in the Hong Kong education policy context that deserve mention as they seem to be directly linked with the key message the of the book: (1) the focus of the education reform on *learning and learners* and (2) the dynamics of *educational innovation*.

In his opening address to the conference the city's "Secretary for Education and Manpower", presenting the main achievements of the educational reform in Hong Kong, stressed that it "*motivated students to learn*", helped them "*learn how to learn*" and learn "*more enjoyably*", while it enhanced the development of schools into "*learning communities*", the reinforcement of "*team spirit*" among teachers and the emergence of "*professional learning groups*" to "*facilitate the sharing of good practices and the knowledge generated through action learning and research*". He also pointed to the dynamic interaction between the three poles of what innovation scientists often call the "*triple helix*" (Etzkowitz, 2008), that is research, practice and government. Universities, schools and government were working together and created an environment which led to the "*co-construction and refinement of knowledge on the education front*" and to "*new meaning and manifestation, where theories and practice mix and reinforce each other*" through "*site-based support to principals or schools in the areas of school development, curriculum planning, learning and teaching, as identified by the schools themselves*".

The ICET conference brought together professionals who shared an interest in the knowledge generation and knowledge utilisation model promoted by the Hong Kong reform. This model is very close to what Donald A. Schön described decades ago in his influential book "*The Reflective Practitioner*" (Schön, 1983). As a researcher with experience in professional education he was

intrigued by "*the relationship between the kinds of knowledge honoured in academia and the kinds of competences valued in professional practice*" and by the fact that universities "*are institutions committed (...) to a particular epistemology that fosters selective inattention to practical competence and professional artistry*". The goals of the reform of the city of Hong Kong and those of ICET were common in valuing the type of knowledge that is the most effective for teaching. And they have also been shared by the authors of the book who were presenting various pieces of research: all connected somehow to managing (that is, understanding, creating, transmitting and using) knowledge within the teaching profession.

The editor of the book, *Ora Kwo* (University of Hong Kong) spent most of her professional life educating teachers. She is one of those academics who see their mission in helping students to become successful and effective practitioners. She is, together with most of the authors of the book, one of those who have found strong intellectual support in Schön's ideas about "*the epistemology of practice*", "*knowing-in-practice*" or "*reflection-in-action*", and who know that the secret of effective innovation and high performance in education lies in the emergence and the working of what we call "*professional learning communities*", "*communities of practices*" or "*learning networks*" (OECD, 2000; van Aalst, 2003; Chapman, 2003; Sliwka, 2003; Resnick et al., 2010).

The authors of the book share a number of common values and ideas. They are strongly convinced of the importance of knowledge for effective teaching, and they know that the nature of knowledge that is needed for making the practice of teaching effective is different from the nature of classical academic knowledge. They have a high-level understanding of the internal world of schools and see well the complexity of this world. They value teacher professionalism and they try to understand the elements that compose this professionalism. They use typically qualitative analytical tools: they see the schools, the classrooms and the work of teachers with ethnographic eyes, noticing the smallest details. And they use a language to present all these details in a way that captivates the reader. For me, who have been focussing most of my research on macro or systemic problems, it was a fascinating journey as I submerged into the micro reality of schools and lives of teachers though the stories of the authors. As I was reading the book I evoked the words of a Japanese educational decision-maker who told his colleagues at a high level OECD meeting that educational leaders should have three eyes nowadays: that of the *bird*, that of the *insect* and that of the *fish* (to see the big picture, to see the small details and to see the flow of things). This book has been written from the insect's eye view but in a way that those who prefer the bird's or the fish's perspective can also recognise what they need to see.

I could see the current trends, determining the global development of our education systems, while reading the book, through lenses focusing on the smallest details of the life of schools. Those offered, for example, by some Chinese teachers telling their stories of their daily teaching experiences as they were implementing a national curriculum reform. The "dialogue journals" of some Korean students describe their learning experiences in their Canadian schools. Or those created by two projects in which English student-teachers

recorded their experiences of professional development. And those provided by the fiction story of a young Singaporean teacher who expressed her thoughts and feelings related with her teaching practice in letters exchanged with her friend. And many others offered in every chapter.

Although I put the stress on the common elements and on what all the authors have been sharing, I agree with the author of the foreword: one of the strengths of this book comes from its diversity, including the variation of the conceptual frameworks adopted. The book resembles an album: it offers many small pictures and lets the reader, as she or he is going through it, to reconstruct the big picture. There is a great variety in the book in terms of *countries or localities* (Australia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Israel, New Zealand, Singapore, United Kingdom, US); in terms of *themes* (e.g. regular school practice, initial teacher education, mentoring, continuous professional development, curriculum reform, introduction of teacher competence standards or teacher assessment); and in terms of *institutional contexts* (primary, secondary, tertiary education and supporting services outside the schools). But all these themes and contexts and all the country cases are about knowledge and managing knowledge in the teaching profession. We come to understand better the current global challenges of linking knowledge with practice as we read the analyses of these various places, themes and institutional contexts.

What the book offers is fully supporting the ideas of the Hong Kong reform evoked above. It confirms that the largest potential to improve the effectiveness of advanced education systems lies in the improvement of managing pedagogical knowledge more effectively so that it could contribute better to the improvement of practice. The best education reforms are about supporting *learning to teach*, including learning together about how to learn to teach. I recommend the reading of this book to all those who are thinking about reforming teaching and learning.

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