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# Book Review: Zhao, Y., Liu, J. (Eds.). (2024) Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries. Springer Nature.

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## Abstract

*Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries* edited by Yuchi Zhao and Jing Liu, examines rural school improvement programs implemented in four developing countries, including China, Myanmar, Uganda, and Kenya (noting that while China is not a developing country, it has rural regions that could be comparable to the other regions discussed). The book analyses research questions related to problems faced by rural schools in these countries, approaches or models adopted to improve these rural schools, specific interventions to address the problems and their effectiveness, and lessons learnt from these programs. The book is 'open access', which makes it an accessible reference for anyone wanting background information about international rural education policies and strategies.

**Keywords:** *rural school improvement, developing countries, educational policy, educational strategies, educational systems, educational structures, teacher training.*

## Introduction

*Rural School Improvement in Developing Countries* comprises four case studies drawn from China, Myanmar, Uganda and Kenya together with an insightful globally based introduction and recommendations for ongoing policy and practice.

Before proceeding further with the review, it is important to draw attention to an anomaly in the title of the book and the countries under consideration. China is a huge economic, political and cultural powerhouse with world leading development achievements and aspirations compared to Myanmar, Uganda and Kenya. China is not a developing country especially when compared to the other case studies. The editors (and authors) do specify, however, that the China case study focuses on "*27 rural and remote counties which are considered some of the poorest [in the country]*" (p. 39). A critical factor then that readers need to bear in mind when comparing and contrasting each of the case studies, is the potential quantum, quality and diversity of resources of both hard and soft kinds for the China case study to draw upon.

The publication is a SpringersBriefs in Education edited by Yuchi Zhao and Jing Liu, both of Beijing Normal University. Each of the case studies uses a similar structure. There is a comprehensive list of abbreviations to aid reading and understanding. As well, extensive use of tables, diagrams and dimensional data is used throughout which adds to the utility and impact of the publication. This, notwithstanding that in some instances, authors have had to use best estimates in relation to student populations, compositions and achievements.

The publication is an output from the World Education Forum held in May 2015 in Korea under the leadership of UNESCO and priorities for a common education agenda, and the Sustainable Development Goals out to 2030.

The question, why rural education is right up front, leaving readers in no doubt as to the seminal—indeed dire—importance of "*ensur(ing) equitable and inclusive quality education for lifelong learning for all by 2030*" (p. v). When the 2015 World Education Forum was held, more than 50% of the world's population lived in rural areas and a large percentage of children and youth were educated in rural schools. Also, "*rural populations represented 70% of the world's poor and 72% of the population of the least developed countries*" (p. 2). Salient characteristics and constraints of rural contexts which impact on schools and the education they can provide, help frame the studies such as geographical isolation, often limited and tenuous economic opportunities, and population outflow and residualisation. Added to these in some instances, is the complex role of rural schools during and following periods of armed conflict and insurgency activity.

Chapter one presents a review of school improvement in rural settings with an emphasis on research and practice. A key feature of the chapter is the discussion of the history and consequences of school effectiveness and school improvement, namely "*While school effectiveness was focused on finding what schools needed change in order to become more effective, school improvement was focused on finding out how schools could change in order to improve*" (p.5, emphasis added). In my experience, often the distinctiveness of the 'whats' and 'how's of education become blurred leading to a diminution of their utility. Definitions by Fontana and Frey (2005, p.698) are very helpful here: "*[how is] the constructive work involved in producing order in everyday life*" and "*the traditional whats… [are] the activities of everyday life*". Two dot point boxes for school effectiveness summarise key points including "*best bets, worst bets, and promising bets*", a pithy way of driving messages home.

Chapter two focuses on a joint China-UK project aimed at improving the achievements of students in basic education in some of China's poorest rural and remote counties. The aim of the project was to change the dominant pedagogical practices from transmission of knowledge and rote learning to one which placed greater emphasis on student centred approaches aimed at fostering creativity, learning by doing and collaboration. The case study foregrounds the many 'root and branch' changes and consequences for teachers, educational leaders, systems officers such as school inspectors and communities more broadly, that flowed from embracing this fundamental shift to teaching and learning.

The authors conclude the evaluation of the project an overall success with several key provisos for any scaling up, which readers will likely be familiar with from other similar studies and/or their own experiences. They include the need for

> *genuine ownership and leadership at all levels and the sustainability of the reform. It was recognised in the roll out of the project that the human process of developing ownership, strengthening new behaviours, and changing systems needed to be done at county-by-county, township-by-township, and school-by-school levels. Sustainable education outcomes will not be achieved merely by reproducing successful, but individual, projects like SBEP [southwest basic education project], but by aligning them with the broader context of educational reform. (p. 58)*

Myanmar is the next case study in the publication, a country of great ethnic diversity, a long history of military and disputed rule, very low average incomes, and chronic student underachievement. Reforming pedagogy sits at the heart of the efforts to drive change and achieve better learning outcomes. The rationale for 'making things better' include ensuring that the future workers of Myanmar are comparably well educated and trained so that development opportunities will not be lost to other countries, thereby exacerbating entrenched poverty.

Quoting the authors:

> *Reforms in the education sector at the outset of QBEP [Quality Basic Education Program] were being driven by a combination of factors, including a desire on the part of the government and donor partners to demonstrate the transformation of the education system, build credibility in the international community and amongst Myanmar's population with growing popular demand for improved education quality and its fears that other ASEAN nations were producing an educated workforce that would compete more favourably for work within Myanmar. (p. 69)*

One contribution of the case study, perhaps unintended, is rendering visible the number of organisations and their respective modes of operation, resourcing, accountability expectations, apparently required to drive improvement in basic education. The immense amount of detail provided tends to create an information fog that blankets out the essential messages and processes for driving change.

The Kenya case study commences with key characteristics and population data confronting driving improvements in access to quality basic education for all. Pressures of poverty, food insecurity, the ever-present prospect of malnourishment and starvation, and entrenched cultural practices which severely limit fulsome opportunities for all, make for very complex contexts and dynamics. At the time of writing the case study, 75% of Kenya's population lived in rural areas where built and utilities infrastructure are both often very problematic and official teacher- pupil ratios are aspirations rather than a day-to-day reality.

In 1980, the International Monetary Fund and World Bank encouraged—(forced?)—the Kenyan government to undergo structural adjustments to better control the economy and manage rising debt. Conceding best intentions, the effect of the changes according to the authors of the case study had severe implications for parents and families. In short, extra costs to have their children educated were transferred to them—a somewhat familiar story even in developed countries.

Notwithstanding the major "*impressive range of systemic reforms*" (p. 89) made by government, the provision of fundamental requirements for a basic education continued to be elusive. They included sufficient textbooks, classrooms with modest furniture and equipment, safe latrines and personal hygiene, and security.

Education for Marginalised Children in Kenya (EMACK) was "*designed to increase access to quality education opportunities for primary school children marginalized by cultural practices, conflict and poverty*" (p. 90). A later iteration, EMACK2, placed greater emphasis on rural and marginalised communities including (re) engaging parents in the education of their children. A consequence- likely unintended- of introducing Free Primary Education in 2003 was "*the belief that since the government had taken over the financing of education, parents had minimal or no role to play in education of their children*" (p. 90).

The authors report that the most effective reforms of EMACK2 occurred at school by school, teacher by teacher, community levels. In other words, school and community-based training and development. Financial sustainability loomed large (and continues to loom large in virtually every developing country) and challenged project leaders throughout their time with the initiative.

*Improving the Quality of Rural Education Through Standard-Based Teacher Development and Management Reforms in Uganda* is the fourth case study in this SpringersBriefs in Education publication. Key dimensional data in the opening section of the study—population size and growth rate, the huge proportion of youth (under 18) in the country which is 56% coupled with the long history of conflict and Uganda's landlocked location—help set the context for the programs as outlined. So too do the ongoing impacts of the health, economic, and social upheaval caused by AIDS. Engaging communities and community leaders, enhancing

coordination between government, donors and local schools and districts plus upskilling teachers and leaders are included in the case study.

Sustaining initiatives and programs beyond the first tranches of funding and support and imbedding them into ongoing governmental policy and practice is, as for other case studies, a major challenge. This challenge also resonates with what often prevails in developing countries once the first phase of resourcing and excitement about a 'new way to improve things', passes. As the authors argue,

> *there needs to be a good understanding of the political, social, economic and cultural context in which the programme will operate, as 'best practices' cannot merely be transferred from one country to another. If programmes … are to be sustained in the education system once donor funding and international support is withdrawn they must also have a systemic impact. This suggests they need to impact on national policy and building capacity and be owned by the state institutions with clear role and responsibilities mapped out (p.107).*

The heart of the final chapter is a call to shift the focus from improving access to education to improving the quality of education provision, of what happens inside the school fence, and that teachers are key to achieving this. Six fields of policy and practice reform are recommended, namely:

- Placing teachers at the centre of the quality debate
- Capacity building
- Community engagement
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Systemic approaches to teacher development
- Sustainability

While the recommendations are reported in themes, in practice "*it should be recognised that they are inter-related requiring a systems wide approach to reform*" (p. 115). Absolutely!

However, there is at least one major policy and practice field that is also crucial to bringing about the improvements the authors argue for in each of the countries and through the supporting chapters. Given how central teachers and educational leaders are to driving and sustaining the desired changes, attracting and then retaining the best educators to the most demanding and challenging locations must be a top priority The challenge continues to be pertinent for education in rural, regional and remote locations, not just in the nominated case studies, but universally.

## References

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