

BOOK REVIEW

Rose M. Ylimaki, Lynnette A. Brunderman (2022).

**Evidence-based school development in changing demographic contexts.
Studies in educational leadership, vol. 24**

Springer Cham (pp. 186)

ISBN 978-3-030-76837-9, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76837-9>

The editors and authors of the book *Evidence-Based School Development in Changing Demographic Contexts* are renowned scientists and indeed distinguished figures in the field of school leadership and management. Dr. Rose M. Ylimaki studies leadership in schools and she, alongside with Brunderman and Bennett, developed a school improvement project based on commitment, equity and social justice called *Arizona Initiative for Leadership Development and Research* (AZiLDR). Her work has been instrumental in reshaping our understanding of effective leadership in schools. Likewise, Lynnette A. Brunderman's prominence as a professor of education policy studies at the College of Education, University of Arizona, is a testament to her substantial contributions to the field. Dr. Lynnette A. Brunderman is collaborating with colleagues on research investigating leadership turnaround in high-poverty, low-achieving schools. With that said, some of her recent endeavors focusing on leadership and management development in Arizona schools and her association with the *AZiLDR* underscore her global impact on educational leadership. In alignment with their extensive prior research and scholarly contributions, Dr. Rose M. Ylimaki and Dr. Lynnette A. Brunderman have co-authored and edited a book of profound significance, the contents of which are detailed and critically reviewed in the subsequent sections of this paper.

The book itself, going by the title *Evidence-Based School Development in Changing Demographic Contexts*, emerges from the *Studies project in Educational*

Leadership, responding to the imperative need to delve into the intricate phenomenon of leadership within contemporary educational contexts. It arose from the need to research the phenomenon of leadership, that is, to obtain recent insights into successful and high-quality leadership. The book is based on the persisting challenges posed by lengthy and often ineffective reforms within school progress and development. At the core of the problem are the interactions that shape students' educational experiences, cognitive processes, capacity-building, affinity for learning and overall educational journey in formal education. The book is grounded in a contextual understanding of upbringing and education, firmly rooted with the socio-constructive paradigm. Within the framework, the book explores the interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic determinants, acknowledging their potential to influence the educational experiences of each individual. Starting from the mentioned paradigms, it is crucial to point out that the appearance of inequality is based on different social interactions in differently constructed contexts. Paradoxically, society imposes the need to achieve and adopt equal outcomes for all students, which, we can conclude, is an irrational expectation. Furthermore, through the above-mentioned book, the authors try to face the challenges of improving the quality of educational processes in schools located in contextually intercultural environments and apply traditionally oriented teaching with a great departure from pedocentrism. At the very core of these challenges lies a profound tension between the neoliberal policy designed for wide-population implementation that is not sensitive to contextually appropriate practice, interculturality and interdisciplinarity and, on the other hand, the progressive approach to democratic education based on humanism, a holistic approach and pedocentrism. The book is structured into four parts related to changing the context of school development, based on the example of methods from *Arizona School Development models* and the application of these models in diverse contexts. The first part of the book refers to the analysis of the contemporary situation in school development during the evolution of political needs to improve academic outcomes and equality. The first part consists of two chapters.

The first chapter was written by the authors and editors of the book, Ylimaki and Brunderman, and refers to the presentation of the model of education development throughout history. The authors provide a critical analysis of the current state of school development in the United States of America, setting the stage for the subsequent exploration of evidence-based approaches and strategies to address these challenges. Around the world, we can observe educational policies directed towards evidence-based school management,

instrumentalization, evaluation, scientific research and centralized curriculum. The aforementioned educational policy practices were consequently created in pluralistic schools in the post-digital age in order to adapt to national and global demographic changes. As a result of educational policy pressure on schools to demonstrate the impact and benefits of scientific research, many educational organizations, schools and higher education institutions have established evidence-based school leadership or projects to create and maintain capacity for change. Such evidence-based school management refers to the possibility of evaluating school quality with standardized tests, to ensuring equal application for all schools, and to the possibility of school control by educational policies. However, the authors Ylimaki and Brunderman point out that it is extremely important to design a school leadership program that will be sensitive enough to contextually appropriate practice for its application. In the mentioned chapter, the project of the development of the school system in culturally differential schools in Arizona is presented. The utilization of evidence to substantiate equity in education underscores a logical and crucial approach. It implies the potential to craft education policies and laws that are specifically designed to narrow the disparities in school achievement and progress among diverse student populations. Along with the United States of America, Australia and Germany tend to increase the centralization of curriculum, educational policies and evidence-based political trends. However, taking into account the needs of different school students, along with the growth of globalization trends of centralization of educational policies, tensions also grow. Ultimately, the authors of the chapter point out that in order to ensure the capacity for change and development, it is necessary to introduce school management models based on contextuality and reflexivity, given that evidence-based school management policies are not sufficiently sensitive to humanistic values. The authors believe that it is necessary to strive for a balance between rigidly set evidence-based planning of educational policies and the humanistic paradigm of education.

In the second chapter, the authors Ylimaki and Brunderman deal with the comparison of the somewhat paradoxical needs of students and contemporary educational policies. Educational policies require individual evidence of the quality of educational development of individual schools, especially in the context of efficiency, quality and equality in the outcomes of their students. This chapter draws in particular on the tensions that lie in the so-called *Zone of Uncertainty* – the zone between centralized and decentralized leadership. It is precisely in this

zone that the key to school leadership is found, which is characterized by quality leadership, democracy, reflection, mediation, planning and implementation.

The second part of the book consists of five chapters. The authors Ylimaki and Brunderman have provided the key elements of the school development process: (1) *values and culture*, (2) *leadership capacity*, (3) *reflection and feedback*, (4) *curriculum*, (5) *strength-based approaches to diversity*. It is important to recognize the fact that these elements and processes are not isolated. They work together to support the continuous enrichment of the school environment by nurturing the holistic approach.

Intriguingly, the third chapter delves into the intricate interplay between the values, culture, and context of post-digital school development within a multicultural society. Specifically, drawing from the *International Successful School Leadership Project* (ISSPP) with educational theory and empirical studies, the authors define culture as the values, beliefs and norms of behavior. They underline culture of crucial importance embedded in the individual, leadership team, organization and wider community for readiness in school development. Authors discuss schools' readiness with the diffusion process at different paces, underscoring the imperative of cultivating a conducive school culture. Moreover, the authors shed light on the notion of the *Zone of Uncertainty*, suggesting that schools operating in this zone may face challenges in the diffusion process of change and may require a more prolonged period of cultivation to achieve meaningful progress.

Moving forward, the fourth chapter provides a profound exploration of leadership capacity building. Authors explore high leadership capacity schools through both formal and informal leadership skills. Even though the authors insinuate the pivotal role of leaders, they discuss team leadership as essential for building and maintaining leadership capabilities in a common direction for the continuous school development.

Furthermore, the next (fifth) chapter refers to the trend of educational policies – the change towards evidence-based practice in Arizona. This topic is characterized by an increasing need for the support of “empirical” evidence for educational policy-making which rests on two common beliefs about knowledge: (1) the belief that school knowledge is universal, and (2) the belief that empirical evidence, or data, is the primary indicator of knowledge and learning. Recent education policy in the United States of America has emphasized the importance of data or numerical evidence from external evaluations to guide school decisions. However, there are caveats against this particular use of evidence to replace professional judgment and, more broadly, democratic

decision-making about the aims and content of education. The authors point out that their school development project considers evidence-based values alongside humanistic, democratic values, but with tensions between them. School development participants applied a balanced perspective to data with numerical evidence subordinated to educational values, using everything as a source of critical thinking and growth. This chapter therefore defines data as information used by teachers, school teams and other agency members to make professional judgments and have an influence.

The sixth chapter of the book dives deeper into education, leadership, curriculum and pedagogy. The terminology of previously mentioned terms is defined in terms of a particular educational interest. Such an approach is characterized by mediation between state and national standards, and the needs and interests of children. This approach sees the task of educating children as necessarily occurring in the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students in the classroom, between formal principals and teachers in schools, and between district leaders and principals. The authors recognize the value of understanding the foundations of education developed in earlier times of political and cultural uncertainty. They explicitly define key terms for education, curriculum, pedagogy and leadership in school development using fundamental understandings in the midst of the contemporary situation.

With that being said, chapter seven furthermore underscores pedagogical relationships and the importance of leveraging cultural strengths in diverse educational contexts. The authors advocate for a pedagogical approach that is sensitive to cultural diversity and that embraces the diverse ways in which students learn. They analyze leaders as a moral help to teachers in a process of understanding context as a core of teaching and learning.

In the third part of the book, moving away from the horizon of Arizona and expanding to other regions and global contexts, similar models of leadership and management of schools in South Carolina, Sweden, Australia and Germany are presented. Authors Moyi, Hardie and Cunningham, in chapter eight, present two USA school development projects focused on building leadership capacity for continuous school development. In their projects they attempt to use evidence-based leadership but with renewed sensitivity to culturally diverse students in South Carolina schools. These models offer invaluable insights into the adaptation of evidence-based practices to diverse educational contexts and underscore the importance of context-sensitive educational policies.

In chapter nine, authors Johansson and Ärlestig explore the *theory of action* which is known in the Swedish government's initiative as the *Collaboration*

for Better Schools. In particular, they discuss the assumptions, roles, and responsibilities of key stakeholders, including schools, school districts, and universities. Their analysis is focused on the issue of institutional capacity for sustainable improvement of the education system. The approach relies on perspectives associated with the analysis of contemporary politics, which includes greater attention to qualitative and interpretive methods for understanding the complexity of policy changes in contemporary society. The authors begin with a description of the project structure and methods. After that, they analyze the government's understanding and opinions on why it is important to help schools that are not successful in effective development. This will help other non-efficient schools to improve their perspective on self-sustainability.

Gurr, Acquaro and Drysdale point out that Australia, like many other countries, has a history of colonization and extensive controlled and humanitarian immigration, where this shift from an Anglo-Celtic emphasis has included, successively, an emphasis on migrants from Europe, Asia and Africa. Chapter ten firstly focuses on national school improvement initiatives, such as *Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievements in Schools* (IDEAS), used by professional education communities to improve student outcomes; and *Principals as Literacy Leaders* (PALL) which provides principals with literacy and leadership knowledge to support teachers for improving students reading achievement. Another perspective explores the state level by the *Melbourne Graduate School of Education* in terms of evidence-based teacher training. This level of work goes through the development of a clinical model of teaching and evidence-based school improvement through the *Learning Science Schools Partnership*. The aforementioned project and initiatives offer valuable perceptions of practical application in evidence-based school development to address specific challenges and improve educational outcomes in Australian contexts.

In the eleventh chapter, the authors Skedsmo and Huber report on the research findings of a school development project that took place in a large city in Germany over a period of five years. In 2013, the central education authorities established a public-private partnership with the foundation to start a development project that was inspired by United States of America school turnaround models and included various interventions and efforts to support change in ten schools identified as schools in difficult circumstances. As such, the adapted school turnaround model serves as an example of introducing policies or models into school systems that have proven successful elsewhere. In this chapter, the findings of the analysis of changes occurring in schools are

presented in relation to efforts and interventions to support schools. Moreover, the authors discuss the challenges of measuring success according to the logic of school turnaround and the need for more adaptive approaches to change and development of schools in difficult circumstances - at least in the long-term perspective of school development.

The last chapter, also the last part of the book written by Ylimaki and Brunderman, provides concluding thoughts and implications for future work in the context of school development in the face of global trends towards the implementation of evidence-based practice. This leads attention to the development of evidence-based development policies in schools around the world. Although the authors focused on the importance of contextual characteristics throughout the book - the evidence does not necessarily mean that the experimental design of the school development model is suitable for solving practical problems in all school environments. At the same time, teachers and principals benefit from a dialogue based on the dissemination of knowledge and experience in order to improve and overcome the *Zone of Uncertainty*.

The book itself provides a scientific clarity and professional contribution in the context of guidelines for effective school leadership. To conclude, it is necessary to invest in the connection of theoreticians and practitioners to enable the creation of networking, primarily for the development of competencies for leading educational practitioners, and then academics, scientists and politicians. Indeed, the synergy between all educational levels can serve us as a starting point for guiding the way of leadership between decentralized and centralized conceptions of policy and practice in order to respond to the growing need to revise competencies and ways of leading educational policies in the face of educational changes in the field of education. The book exudes clarity and logic, as well as exceptional structure. The text of the book is comprehensible, coherent and written in a scientific writing style. The topic itself represents a relevant and recent issue of educational policies, given that it represents the basis of quality education in the future. The book is intended for the field of primary, secondary and higher education and related educational experts in the context of the process of school leadership and management. However, the book is written in a scientific writing style that exudes simplicity and interdisciplinarity and can be used by both laypeople and experts from other fields of educational and social sciences. What should be emphasized is that the authors in the presented book strive to promote a socio-constructivist approach that builds its foundations on the joint construction of the curriculum

by all educational stakeholders, which is why we can conclude that it is indeed intended for parents, educators, teachers, professors, educators and all other educational stakeholders.

Monika Terlević, teaching assistant
Faculty of Educational Sciences
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula
Republic of Croatia
monika.terlevic.1@unipu.hr