BOOK REVIEW

How the New Education Establishment Betrayed the World's Poorest Children: Broken Promises, Broken Schools. By Joanna Härmä (2025). 241 pages. ISBN: 978-1-3504-6923-5 (eBook). London: Bloomsbury Academic. 22.49 (Euros) (eBook).

In *How the New Establishment Betrayed the World's Poorest Children*, Joanna Härmä examines global education governance and the political economy of education, highlighting inequalities between the Global North and the Global South in teacher quality, school facilities, and learning resources. Central to her critique is the rise of low-cost private schools in response to governments' failure to provide quality public education. Drawing particularly on experiences in Sub-Saharan Africa and India, Härmä explores how these schools have developed amid broader educational and development challenges. This review examines her arguments through a multilevel framework, considering how educational inequalities emerge and interact at the micro (household), meso (school), and macro (government and international policy) levels.

At the micro level, Härmä highlights how household conditions shape children's cognitive development and learning opportunities. Inadequate nutrition, domestic responsibilities, and limited parental support can undermine children's educational performance. These challenges are particularly pronounced among families in rural and underserved areas, where access to quality education is often limited. As a result, children from disadvantaged households face barriers that can perpetuate poverty across generations.

At the meso level, Härmä examines the challenges facing schools, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa. Poor classroom conditions, inadequately trained teachers, and limited educational resources undermine the quality of teaching and learning in government schools. These shortcomings have contributed to the growth of low-cost private schools, which many parents perceive as offering better educational opportunities for their children. However, Härmä observes that the quality of learning in the public and private schools she encountered differs little, with both relying heavily on rote memorization rather than deeper conceptual understanding. She attributes this partly to teachers' limited subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional training. Overcrowded classrooms further constrain effective teaching, as teachers must devote considerable attention to classroom management rather than to facilitating learning. These challenges are compounded by a shortage of qualified teacher trainers and weak regulatory oversight, which have allowed poorly regulated teacher training institutions to emerge.

At the macro level, Härmä examines how governments in the Global North and multilateral organizations have sought to address educational challenges in the Global South through development assistance and policy recommendations. Although such interventions may be intended to improve educational access and quality, they often introduce externally determined priorities that do not necessarily reflect local needs and realities. Recipient governments may consequently adjust their educational and fiscal policies to align with donor frameworks and to comply with associated monitoring and evaluation requirements. Härmä illustrates these dynamics through the Punjab Education Foundation in Pakistan, a public-private partnership supported by international development approaches. Its initiatives include education vouchers, financial support for small private schools in underserved areas, and the transfer of underperforming government schools to private management.

While Härmä identifies teacher quality as a major constraint on learning, the issue extends beyond the availability of adequately trained teachers. Equally important are the institutional conditions that enable teachers and school managers to apply their knowledge and skills effectively. Teacher training, therefore, should not be understood merely as the transfer of knowledge and pedagogical techniques, but also as a means of developing teachers' capacity to respond to local conditions and diverse learner needs. In this regard, uniform approaches to teacher training may be insufficient if they do not allow for contextual adaptation. This suggests that improving educational quality requires attention not only to teacher qualifications but also to the institutional support, professional autonomy, and policy conditions that shape classroom practice. These conditions, in turn, are influenced by broader educational policies and governance structures.

Härmä's discussion of international development assistance also raises important questions about the relationship between financial resources and policy influence. From a political economy perspective, development grants are not merely sources of educational funding; they may also shape policy priorities and the direction of educational reform in recipient countries. This complicates the assumption that increased financial assistance necessarily leads to improved educational outcomes. The effectiveness of such assistance depends partly on the capacity of governments and educational institutions to translate resources and policy recommendations into meaningful improvements in teaching and learning. It also depends on how these interventions interact with existing political, economic, and institutional conditions. Thus, the issue is not merely whether external assistance is provided, but how its priorities are determined, implemented, and sustained within local education systems.

Ultimately, Härmä's book critiques development approaches that prioritize educational access without adequately addressing the conditions for meaningful learning. It also highlights the tensions between externally driven reforms and the realities of education systems in the Global South. However, these tensions, in themselves, do not establish that external interventions are the direct cause of systemic educational failures. Rather, they point to the need for a more careful examination of how international policies interact with domestic institutions, resources, and political priorities. Moving beyond one-way policy transfers and uniform educational solutions requires greater recognition of the role of local actors, including governments, school managers, and teachers, in shaping educational reform. Strengthening their agency and institutional capacity is essential to developing policies and pedagogical practices that respond to local needs while addressing the structural inequalities that continue to constrain educational opportunities.

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