



Schweisfurth, M. and Elliott, J. (2019) When 'best practice' meets the pedagogical nexus: recontextualisation, reframing and resilience. *Comparative Education*, 55(1), pp. 1-8. (doi: [10.1080/03050068.2018.1544801](https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2018.1544801))

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Deposited on 13 March 2019

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## When 'Best Practice' meets the pedagogical nexus:

### recontextualisation, reframing and resilience

Michele Schweisfurth and Julian Elliott

Notions of 'best practice' have long dominated studies of pedagogy. It is therefore not surprising that international comparison has historically led researchers and policymakers to cast envious eyes abroad in the quest for improved teaching and learning. As a field, one of comparative education's key roles has been to question the uncritical labelling and transfer of 'best practice', by drawing attention to the ways in which indigenous day-to-day practice is embedded in its context, underpinned by societal expectations and norms which reflect the complex workings of culture. It is bordering on cliché to cite Sadler in this regard, but his organic metaphor still resonates:

We cannot wander at pleasure among the educational systems of the world, like a child strolling through a garden and pick off a flower from one bush and some leaves from another, and then expect that if we stick what we have gathered into the soil at home, we shall have a living plant (Sadler, [1900] 1964).

This special issue offers examples of the phenomenon invoked by Sadler, in relation to the transfer of perceived 'best practice' as policy and as idea. It also takes a close look at the leaves, flowers and soil and the deep systemic connections between them. In this introductory paper we conceptualise these connections as a 'pedagogical nexus' (Hufton and Elliott 2000) within which any new practice will be recontextualised and/or reframed, and which is likely to be resilient over time to any attempts to change part of it. We consider the vectors along which 'best practice' travels, and how these shape its nature. What or who are the agents promoting their versions of 'best practice', and what are the issues in its adoption by those who are meant to take it up?

#### *The pedagogical nexus*

Early comparativists (eg Hans 1949, 2011 and Kandel 1959) conceptualised contexts shaping education as a broad set of 'factors and forces'. Comparative analysis of education across contexts used these *a priori* categories to understand how they created differences and similarities between systems. One of the more controversial and dated (if still intriguing) of these was 'national character': a collective national disposition borne out of the unique historical and political conditions under which nations and their education systems evolve. Some of these categories inevitably shape the 'pedagogical nexus' but its interconnectedness likens it more to King's conception of context as 'ecological' (1965) than to a collection of discrete variables. If we apply this nexus to Alexander's (2001) definition of pedagogy as encompassing both the act of teaching and the theories and debates which underpin it, we begin to understand how challenging it might be to change existing practice to some ideal of 'best practice', even if that perceived 'best practice' could be empirically defined. The ways in which teachers' observable practice is shaped are complex and self-reinforcing.

The term 'pedagogical nexus' emerged from study of the success and long-term resilience of patterns of practice in Russian schools. Rather than starting with a pre-determined set of variables and seeing how these ingredients interact, longer term immersion in the Russian context (and

implied comparison with their own national setting of England) led Hufton and Elliott inductively to set out a description of 'a set of linked, interactive and mutually reinforcing influences on pupils' motivation to learn with and because of the schooling process' (Hufton and Elliott 2000: 115). They noted how neighbourhood comprehensive schools in Russia provided to local students an undifferentiated entitlement, and how engaged and motivated their students apparently were. They, along with Alexander (2001) were also struck by the continuity and stability of this provision over time and space, with remarkable consistency stretching back through the communist to pre-communist eras. The inter-related components of this nexus included, for example: continuity of school and class teacher; intergenerational continuity; home-school relations which were close and mutually-reinforcing; school readiness of young children; tight articulation of the national curriculum with textbooks and pedagogy; and the structure and nature of lessons, textbooks, homework and assessment. They also acknowledged wider cultural influences which resonated with these and provided fruitful 'soil' in which they flourish. It was evident that all of these (and probably others) worked together coherently so that any attempted change – if not outright futile – would need to address all of them as a whole. Hufton and Elliott focused particularly on how this nexus framed student motivation, a major driving force for student learning. Here we extend this conception to consider how all aspects of learning, including teacher beliefs and practice, are caught in this web.

Similarly, in relation to teacher learning, Rapplee and Komatsu (2017) note how deeply-rooted divergent cultural ontologies thwart the direct transfer of 'lesson study' from Japan to the United States as a form of best practice in teacher professional development. They demonstrated how teachers' practices inside and outside the classroom reinforced cultural norms which underpinned lesson study as a teacher professional development practice. Lesson study involves a group of teachers observing each other's lessons, and then having a discussion on what was observed and how it might be improved. As practised in Japan, lesson study demands a collective, non-hierarchical, listening approach based on mutual learning and respect. It has echoes – and probably antecedents - in the ways children learn relevant social norms through explicit instruction, routine activities, teachers' low levels of intervention, frequent and extended extra-curricular group activities, and structures of provision (such as large, mixed-ability classes). Through these they learn to be part of the group, respect each other as equals and as a collective, and feel empathy for each other – dispositions that create the conditions for effective teacher lesson study. Thus, the onto-cultural context is pedagogically remade in each generation, with the potential for change but the likelihood of resilience. Significantly, lesson study is also based on a premise of continuous self-improvement, rather than a conviction that there is a 'best practice' that can be learned or imitated. The authors argue that both the onto-cultural context and the assumption that there is no 'best practice' diverge from American understandings, thus making imitation challenging.

We see in the papers in this volume a range of ingredients shaping the pedagogical nexus and onto-pedagogy in a variety of different contexts. In Brinkmann's study of India, for example, teacher beliefs about learners and about their roles as pedagogues are shaped by philosophical and religious understandings of a hierarchical social world in which teachers and learners have a fixed place. This Brahmanical world view is not consistently dominant across India, and teachers' expressed beliefs differ accordingly. There are, then, observable differences in the extent to which patterns of classroom interaction are 'learner-centred' and therefore in alignment with recent pedagogical reforms. In Scotland (Britton, Schweisfurth and Slade) we see the politics of small statehood, and a preference for consensus deep 'in Scotland's DNA' (OECD 2015) shaping policy discourses which

then may (or may not) affect practice in both school and adult education. In China, the influence of Confucian heritage culture (CHC) and its manifestation in classroom practice and testing regimes have been a subject of inquiry for some time (eg Watkins and Biggs 1996). Here, Yun You looks at the contemporary context of a 'dynamic and hybrid CHC' in conjunction with a national focus on economic development, both of which have reinforced the place of high-stakes standardised testing and its washback effects on pedagogy. In Vietnam, another CHC, the cultural importance of 'face' shapes particular classroom dynamics, especially, as Nguyen notes, in relation to co-operative group work as an imported 'best practice'.

*Whose 'best practice', whose transfer agenda, and why? Performing on the new 'global stage'*

The general – but not uncontested – direction of travel in pedagogical reform internationally has been toward learner-centred education (LCE) (eg Chisholm and Leyendecker 2008; Schweisfurth 2011). LCE has been criticised as a 'Western' pedagogy (eg Tabulawa 2013, Guthrie 2011) not fit for cultural contexts where cultural norms of relationships and epistemological beliefs about what should be learned, and how, do not align with its democratic underpinnings and constructivist understandings of the nature of knowledge. However, as we see in this volume, for a range of reasons and in a range of contexts, LCE continues to be widely promoted and adopted, at least at the policy level. Five of seven papers focus on it, while its presence is implicit in the other two.

What are the drivers and vectors for this convergent understanding of 'best practice'? Schweisfurth (2013) identifies three policy narratives that underpin this global phenomenon. The 'emancipatory' narrative flows from the belief that more democratic classroom relationships and active decision-making and expression of learners' own views is a prefigurative precursor to the protection of personal freedoms and the establishment of more democratic societies. The 'cognitive' narrative, based on constructivist understandings of effectiveness, argues that when learners are engaged and have control over what they learn and how, they will learn more effectively. Finally, the 'preparation' narrative focuses on new modes of economic production and the skills required for the so-called 'knowledge economy'. These include independent and creative thinking, research skills, and adaptability, more than rote memorisation. Despite the power of these narratives, and the existence of 'evidence based policy making' as its own narrative, the actual evidence base verifying any of these across cultures is relatively weak (see Schweisfurth 2013). Similarly, in her review of creativity, Grigorenko highlights not only continuing conceptual and pedagogic difficulties, but also the paucity of any consideration as to whether this Western construct, substantially born in the USA, can or should be applied universally.

So, if evidence is not driving travelling policies, what is? Narratives such as those above sustain the mushrooming of common beliefs about what is 'best practice', and these ideas have a currency of their own. They can travel in networked ways globally regardless of whether they are adopted as official policy. However, at the policy level, transfer and adoption agendas are not necessarily based exclusively on a deep conviction about the desirability of practice: political agendas also prevail and some of the policy shifts in these directions are as much about discursive policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi 2014) as they are about a shared desire for pedagogical and social transformation by every key actor. More often than not, the 'best practice' is defined in and imported from Western/Northern contexts; however, in recent years the impact of PISA results have set some Asian

countries as reference points and models (Sellar and Lingard 2013; see also You in this issue). In some of the articles in this special issue, we see evidence of a 'global stage' on which nations and institutions now see themselves placed. Policy choices can be as much about how a country wants to be seen, as they are about how it wants to be. In the Scottish study, for example, the authors argue that part of the agenda is for Scotland to be visibly different from its larger, more powerful neighbour and 'home national comparator', England. In the Chinese case, the celebration of PISA success and the international acclaim that flows both from Shanghai's high PISA rankings and from the promotion of LCE policy are a powerful combination to sustain the policy story of LCE even if classroom practice proves to be resilient. This global stage is also important for agencies keen to extend their influence. The OECD, for example, while not originally in the business of policy advice, has used the impact of PISA to promote policy solutions that are helping to foster policy convergence (Valiente 2014). The UK's Department for International Development, as another example, is explicit in reference to this 'global stage': 'We will drive this ambitious agenda forward through strong leadership on the world stage; using UK influence' (DFID 2018: 4).

While there is diversity in the messages of these various international policy actors, a constellation of related policy prescriptions in the neo-liberal mould has come to form its own global nexus. The consensus of OECD and other actors, especially the World Bank, on the direction of reform has been called 'GERM' (global educational reform movement, with intentional epidemiological implications of the acronym) (see blog by Pasi Sahlberg, who coined the term: <https://pasisahlberg.com/global-educational-reform-movement-is-here/>). The ingredients of this nexus include competition between schools, test-based accountability, undermining of teacher unions, an emphasis on education's economic and labour market functions, and support for diversity in the education sector, to include private schools and public-private partnerships. These intersect oddly with the LCE agenda, which demands a more flexible understanding of teacher professionalism and whose unstandardized approaches do not align with high-stakes common examinations.

The papers in this volume note a range of institutional forces driving the transfer of 'best practice', from PISA results and the policy messages extrapolated from them (Elliott, Stankov, Lee and Beckmann), to both aid and UN agencies (Brinkmann on India), to the export of Imans from Turkey to mosque schools in the Netherlands (Kosar Altinyelken and Sözeri). There are also conditions which foster receptivity, such as national self-image (Britton, Schweisfurth and Slade on Scotland and You on China), and alignment with the existing cultural ontology, such as in Kerala, India (Brinkmann).

#### *When 'best practice' meets the pedagogical nexus*

That the drivers are at work is not in question but their impact is highly contingent on how they interact with the pedagogical nexus. These will set the conditions under which a policy or practice is 'transferred, translated and transformed' (Cowen 2009).

Much of the critical literature on policy transfer highlights the mismatch between global agendas and indigenous norms, with reference to impossible 'paradigm shifts' (Tabulawa 2013) and even 'tissue rejection' (Harley et al 2000). However, across this volume we see nuanced explorations which sometimes highlight real or strategic alignments between local practice and global agendas,

or, at least, parts of them. The ideal-typical policy transfer or borrowing situation, where there is one imported policy idea in action in a coherent and bounded receiving context rarely, if ever, exists. Conflicting understandings of best practice are being imported into one space at any given time, such as the GERM and LCE agendas, and that single space will contain competing imperatives of its own. It is important therefore to look beyond the binaries of acceptance/rejection to recontextualization, reframing and resilience. So, for example, in India we find apparently borrowed notions of 'best practice pedagogy' (LCE) aligning selectively with some aspects of indigenous practice, and intersecting with post-colonial movements to reclaim local and national culture and heritage. In a country as vast and diverse as India, who defines what counts as indigenous cultural or pedagogical practice is a hotly contested debate (see for example Sriprakash 2012). And inhabiting the same global space as LCE as 'best practice' is a set of competing imperatives about standardisation and 'the basics' that works against learners going where their curiosity or local contextual realities take them (see Britton, Schweisfurth and Slade on Scotland).

A practice on the move will look different as it embeds in different contexts and is recontextualised. So, for example, we see mosque pedagogy being adjusted in the context of the Netherlands (Altinyelken and Sözeri) so that it aligns better with the more learner-centred and less punitive interactions that children experience in Dutch schools. This recontextualisation, teachers argue, helps the participants to stay motivated, and indeed motivates them to turn up at all in a situation where attendance is voluntary. This recontextualisation has happened over time as well as space, as reported practice from previous generations at similar schools was much more in line with the original mosque pedagogy. Relatedly Nguyen, in her article on Vietnam, draws upon insights from neuroscience to demonstrate how collaborative learning practice needs to be recontextualised in this context in response to the cultural imperative of face saving.

As noted above, the apparent adoption of models of 'best practice' may be at least in part a legitimacy move by governments conscious of their roles on the global stage. This may result in a 'reframing' of best practice so that the policy narrative is consistent with the desired role. Very similar LCE-based 'best practice' might be framed as indigenous and traditional (as in Scotland) or as an import carefully implemented as part of a modernisation agenda (as in China), depending on national ambitions. The legitimacy move in China is especially clever as it manages to set itself up as a model of both LCE practice and PISA success without the two being particularly related to each other.

'Resilience' is not the same as rejection. Imported 'best practice' rarely leaves absolutely no trace in the receiving context, even if sometimes the overall impact is negative (see, for example, Kosar-Altinyelken 2010). But the wider literature, as well as the articles in this volume, point again and again to the resilience of local practice as the 'sticky materiality' (Tsing 2005) of the pedagogical nexus slows down change or pushes it in unintended directions. In all of the cases presented here, the stability of this nexus over time is at least implied, even in a context of moving ideas and policies.

All of this begs the question of how far some 'universal' best practice might exist. One of the great challenges and opportunities for comparative education as a field is '...teasing out what is universal in pedagogy from what is culturally or geographically specific' (Alexander 2009: 926). A starting question is what the end goals of pedagogical renewal or reform might be; a practice offering

promise for the development of critical thinking may be quite different from what is helpful for cultural preservation. Prescriptions regarding specific techniques are unlikely to sit comfortably within a given pedagogical nexus, but particular principles, with variations in implementation across different contexts, may provide a more helpful basis. Schweisfurth (2013), for example, sets out a set of 'minimum standards' that include respecting learners' fundamental rights, and dialogic approaches to teaching and learning, with the understanding that locally-appropriate classroom interactions between teachers and learners may appear overly harsh or relaxed to outsiders from different pedagogical traditions.

### *The articles*

Ultimately, we argue from the evidence of these articles and beyond, that global movements of 'best practice' are less about transferable certainties and an evidence base than about agencies' desires for influence, and local receptivity based on aspirations that may in some cases be as much political as pedagogical. Adjusting the discourse to talk of 'good practice' or 'promising practice' helps to reduce the spurious sense of confidence, but does not do away with the need to understand practice within its particular pedagogical nexus. This calls into question whether even the most rigorous and wide-ranging evidence gathering would point ultimately to any reliable universal truth about which practices are best; it will always be a question of which practices are appropriate for whom, for what purposes, and under what conditions. Even where there is consensus that change is desirable, it needs to be managed in the context of the existing pedagogical nexus.

The articles approach these issues from a range of perspectives, from neuroscience to political science. Most are case studies of a phenomenon in one context but others offer a cross-national overview. Below we briefly set out how each of the articles in this special issue contributes to these debates. The first five are national case studies (India, Scotland, the Netherlands, Vietnam and China) embedded in the global context and wider debates. Each case study constitutes a particular pedagogical nexus and the authors draw on psychological, sociocultural and institutional perspectives in their analyses. The final two articles explore particular issues from a global perspective: the first considers creativity as a global export and import in education, and the final article sets large-scale assessments in the context of the pedagogical nexus.

In the first article, Suzana Brinkmann's study of teacher beliefs in India explores how deep-seated cultural beliefs underpin these beliefs, and how they impact on classroom practice. Teachers from four different regions of India, with different levels of development and, significantly, different dominant religious traditions, are compared. Her data is able to draw a clear line from cultural norms, through teacher beliefs, to practice, all in the context of national pedagogical reform promoting LCE. In 'Teachers' beliefs and educational reform in India: from 'learner-centred' to 'learning-centred' education', she ultimately argues for considering teacher beliefs as part of the nexus in which pedagogy is evolving, and offers alternatives to ready-made prescriptions.

Scotland is an interesting case study of a number of phenomena: (relatively) small statehood; educational and policymaking traditions that support LCE; and early signs of possible infection by GERM. In 'Of myths and monitoring: learner-centred education as a political project in Scotland',

Alan Britton, Michele Schweisfurth and Bonnie Slade analyse the policy context of Scotland in relation to the competing imperatives around LCE and the curriculum in school and adult education.

In 'Importing mosque pedagogy from Turkey: An analysis of contextual factors shaping re-contextualisation processes in the Netherlands', Hülya Kosar Altinyelken and Semiha Sözeri offer a case study of a mosque school in the Netherlands, staffed mainly by imams brought in from Turkey. In this case, there are two versions of 'best practice' at play: traditional mosque pedagogy with its emphasis on memorisation and the inculcation of Muslim religious values, and the pedagogy that students experience at school, which is more learner-centred. What results in this mosque school is something of a hybrid of the two, in order to sustain learner motivation. Another layer of practice in this context is on the fostering of a Turkish identity in the learners, again in reality a Turkish-Dutch hybrid.

Phuong-Mai Nguyen in the fourth article considers what it means to manage co-operative learning effectively in a cultural context where 'face' is central to interpersonal communication. The nature of face can create mismatches between co-operative learning strategies and the motivations of learners, whose face is potentially threatened by the activities. Face is a concern in the collectivist cultures of Asia; co-operative learning is perceived as a 'Western' pedagogy. 'Culturally Appropriate Face strategies in Cooperative Learning with Insight from Cultural Neuroscience' is based on a study using experimental design and constructs from neuroscience to explore these tensions in schools in Vietnam. She, too, calls ultimately for a culturally-appropriate recontextualisation of the imported pedagogy.

In 'The seeming 'round trip' of learner-centred education: A 'best practice' derived from China's New Curriculum Reform?', Yun You describes the circular journey of LCE imported practice and the borrowing that underpins it. The article analyses the tensions and political imperatives in the Chinese context that open gaps between policy and practice, and, perhaps, policy and intention.

In the sixth article, 'Creativity: A challenge for contemporary education', Elena Grigorenko highlights the increasing centrality of creativity in the goals of educational systems across the world. Despite its almost universal appeal and general theoretical consensus, how this construct is operationalised, and how the educational tenets that flow from this are implemented in practice, are both far from clear, even in those Western societies from which most creativity research is spawned. Given this uncertainty, it is perhaps unsurprising that there appears to be little examination as to the universal appropriateness of dominant understandings of creativity, or how this seemingly desirable process can be best fostered pedagogically in non-Western contexts. In particular, there has been little meaningful consideration of how highly traditional education systems can balance their attempts to develop creativity with the threats to formal authority that would inevitably result from its successful implementation.

Finally, 'What did PISA and TIMSS ever do for us?: Situating large scale international assessments within a broader ecosystemic approach' by Julian Elliott, Lazar Stankov, Jihyun Lee, and Jens Beckmann, highlights a growing problem confronted by the field of comparative education. An increasingly dominant discourse is based upon the findings from large international comparative assessments. While many comparative education scholars may be dismissive of large, seemingly number-crunching studies that, in their prescriptions of what constitutes best practice, often seem

to give insufficient attention to the complexities of culture and context, this antipathy is often less true of policymakers, or indeed of opinion formers in social and mass media. Furthermore, rather than dismissing findings from such studies out of hand for their decontextualized weaknesses, it may be wiser to recognise that they may offer valuable data with the potential to enrich more complex ecosystemic analyses. Their paper seeks to demonstrate, through examination of non-cognitive factors, how an integrated analysis drawing upon all levels of the ecosystem can yield richer and more nuanced understandings

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