



Book review

Space, Place and Educational Settings, Freytag Tim, Lauen L. Douglas, Robertson L. Susan (Editors), Springer, 2022. ISBN 978-3-030-78596-3 (print), ISBN 978-3-030-78597-0 (eBook)

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The present book addresses educational inequalities in urban areas, by adopting a preponderantly social justice perspective with a strong territorial focus. All contributions illustrate the complex interplay between individual/family and neighbourhood factors that shape education attainment and/or performance as well as a series of place-based policies aimed at improving local educational settings.

The book includes 10 individual chapters, which can be read consecutively or independently. Chapter 1 introduces the topic of educational inequality between territories and summarizes the following nine chapters. The subsequent chapters share a similar structure, although they approach different issues, actors and educational policies: a solid theoretical foundation, based on relevant scientific literature, followed by the empirical illustration, based on 1-2 case studies.

Chapter 2 adopts a critical view on the impact of the knowledge economy on intra-urban inequalities caused by the gentrification process driven by neoliberal urban policies; the authors use the illustrative case of the university city of Heidelberg.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the mixed impact of policies aimed at reducing educational inequalities, revealing some side effects on the education performance as well as the unequal spatial distribution of their outcomes: chapter 3 discusses the implementation of educational landscapes in Bremen-Gröpelingen and Berlin-Reuterkiez, while chapter 4 presents a review of the effectiveness of charter schools in the US as a public-school alternative to the regular schools constrained by their spatial circumscription, through an extensive literature review. Both chapters conclude that the impact of such instruments is rather limited or inconclusive.

Chapters 5, 7 and 9 highlight the effects of neighbourhood and of individual socio-demographic characteristics on educational performance. Chapter 5 introduces a novel approach in this regard, by assessing the evolution of these effects during the life course of an individual. Chapter 7 illustrates the limits of the implementation of educational landscapes in Freiburg, Germany, in the context of pre-existing inter-personal and inter-territorial inequalities. Chapter 9 presents the impact of

neighbourhood and family belonging on the functioning of schools, through 2 case studies from Berlin. All three chapters suggest that neighbourhood and individual socio-demographic characteristics are major drivers of educational inequalities (still difficult to attenuate by education policies).

Chapters 6 and 8 focus on very specific, problematic territories. Chapter 6 uses the example of Quartieri Spagnoli, Naples to highlight the characteristics of liminal spaces, facing antagonistic elements of inclusion and exclusion and frequently ignored by public policies, as well as the controversial pedagogical practices applied in such areas. Chapter 8 portrays the dialectical space of Perpignan, France, where Gypsy families fall into different categories regarding their attitude towards education and where public policies make a tacit exception to the application of the national educational policies.

Chapter 10 provides both an empirical contribution and a conclusion to the rest of the chapters, highlighting the limitations of international educational policies, which partially neglect the territorial specificity, adopting rather a “one size fits all perspective”.

As it emerges from this brief presentation of the chapters, the focal point of all contributions is given by the conceptualization of the territory as an active component in the educational process. This takes various forms, including the relationship between the type of territory and educational inequalities (e.g. liminal spaces from chapter 6), the idiosyncratic character of some territories (chapter 8), the change in the effects of the territory on education over time (during the individual's life course – chapter 5) etc.

An important strength of the book resides in the critical perspective on various issues, ranging from the understanding of the territory-education relationship itself, to the assessment of some policy interventions' effects. Without necessarily offering alternatives or ready-to-implement solutions, all the contributions in this book have the merit of broadening the perspective on the territory-education relationship, raising questions and inviting debate, without searching for definitive answers.

On the other hand, the case studies mainly focus on pilot projects or other experimental interventions displaying interesting, but limited evidence. Matters related to how these local initiatives or specific solutions relate to the context of national and international educational policies or to what extent are they able to ensure the future insertion of students in tertiary education or in the labour market remain outside the interest of this book. At the same time, the case studies are limited to cities

from Europe and the USA, ignoring educational issues faced by developing countries. However, this spatially limited approach does not make the work less relevant and complex, considering the variety of issues and perspectives that even territories in developed states host and integrate, despite their perceived homogeneity on a global scale.

In conclusion, the book represents a useful tool for both researchers and policy makers, offering critical perspectives that open further debates and inspiration regarding concrete tools for political action. Such perspectives host incontestable relevance, taking into consideration the ambitious targets of the fourth objective of sustainable development, which aims to ensure quality education, starting with primary and secondary education (which make the subject of this book).

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