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BOOK REVIEW

The global testing culture: Shaping education policy, perceptions and practice, edited by William C. Smith, Symposium Books, 2016, 302 pp., £42(paperback), ISBN 978-1-873927-72-4

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BOOK REVIEW

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Although much has been written in recent years about rapid increases in testing practices, in particular large-scale census style testing, less attention has been paid to the cultural shifts that have enabled growth in these practices. William C. Smith's edited collection offers new insights into the operation of what the authors describe as a "global testing culture" (GTC). Although sometimes conceptualised as a testing "movement" (e.g., Sahlberg, 2010), Smith (p.12) contends that an analysis of the testing culture that has pervaded so much of education – from national education policy to global financing to classroom practice – requires further attention. In the introductory chapter Smith clearly defines the most salient features of the culture, which include increases in test-taking practices, and changes to the aims and essential characteristics of testing. Drawing on World Culture theoretical perspectives (e.g., Boli, 2005; Ramirez, 2003), Smith explains the assumptions and values that underlie the GTC, for example that testing is a means of ensuring the basic human right of education.

To explore the operation and impacts of the GTC, the book is presented in three sections, beginning with an examination of the international education agenda. Section two examines the impacts of testing and accountability on formative assessment practices. The final section provides case studies that demonstrate how nations have adopted testing systems, and with what consequences. Readers of this journal will no doubt already be familiar with the explosion of testing practices, yet this collection

delivers new perspectives that provide an opportunity to question the seemingly common-sense, and pervasive logics that legitimate and perpetuate testing practices and behaviour.

The first section brings together six essays that unravel how national and international testing practices have shaped the GTC. The chapters draw on the histories of testing and accountability in countries as diverse as El Salvador (Edwards), Chile (Kijima and Leer), Finland (Aurén and Joshi) and Denmark (by Andreasen and Ydesen). The chapters by Liu and Barrett consider global testing policies, in particular the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Liu) and the Sustainable Development Goals (Barrett). Together this collection is an important contribution in making visible the interconnectivity between national and global policy; and the global testing culture. The diversity of perspectives in this section (for example provided in the contrast between Chile and Finland, who have both found legitimacy in global testing, although for vastly different reasons) provides a means of challenging the logics that drive global testing cultures. Andreasen and Ydesen's conclusion that "the basic differences that have existed between countries, and that have characterised individual countries' educational systems over time... may become differences in degree rather than differences of nature" (p.127) is an apt way to conclude this section.

Having established a picture of the testing culture, section two takes a different approach, examining accountability and the impact of the GTC on formative assessment. This section explicates the effect of the positivist underpinnings of the GTC (such as the purported objectivity of standardised tests and need for accountability) with a focus on how it has crowded out formative testing practices.

Although some of the material presented in this section is not new, it is presented in ways that clarify and demystify misconceptions around the purposes of summative and formative assessment highlighting the importance of formative assessment for student learning. Other important contributions in this section include the evidence of how and where formative testing has been displaced by low quality testing practices. For example, Somerset's chapter draws attention to the lack of formative testing practices in low-income countries in South East Asia and Africa, and the subsequent perverse effects on pedagogy that include a produce a dominance of didactic pedagogies such as student chanting. This section also includes a chapter by Mulvenon and Bowman that explicates issues of test design and analysis by drawing attention to the consequences of a lack of test face validity. Finally, Orkodashivili analyses the connection between performance on large scale tests and the uptake of outside-of-school, private tutoring.

The final section assembles four case studies that illustrate how testing is understood and operates in national systems. These include Denmark (Kousholt and Hamre), South Korea (Chung and Chea), South Africa (Balwanz) and Sweden (Burns, Blanchenay and Koester). This is an interesting collection, with some fascinating insights, for example Chung and Chea's chapter illuminates South Korea's high-pressure, competitive system of testing and accountabilities. What is especially important in this chapter is that it explicates the severity of effects on both teachers (for example, the accountability policies which saw teachers who resisted early stages of test implementation fired) and students. The fact that 2014 PISA data indicates that South Korea has the lowest student happiness in the OECD (p.256) is extremely troubling given the analysis provided in the earlier chapter by Liu around the growth in private tutoring for increasingly young students.

This work provides a breadth and depth of analysis that builds a comprehensive picture of the operation of global testing culture, and provides important insights into how policy makers and teachers might resist and challenge the GTC. The chapters draw on a national and global data using a broad range of qualitative and quantitative methodical and theoretical approaches. At times, the reader might be struck by the similarity of data presented from across the wide range of countries. Part of the strength of this collection is that it so clearly demonstrates the obsession with testing in countries as diverse as Chile, the Philippines, Denmark and South Korea. Yet, the collection also provides a sense of hopefulness with many of the chapters offering recommendations for the future.

By focusing on the shared values and cultural norms of the testing culture, this is an extremely useful book. First, the book clearly unpacks the key features of a culture that has redefined not only assessment, but also the way in which we (educators, parents and policy makers) have come to know and value education. Second, it provides clear and useful definitions for beginning teachers (such as the distinction between types and purposes of assessment) as well as for experienced scholars. Finally, it provides an excellent and multi-layered range of accounts in each of the chapters that together establish a picture of the dominance of testing cultures in contemporary times. While each chapter is unique – drawing on different methodologies, theoretical lenses and data sources – together they provide a scholarly and cohesive picture of the GTC. This is a timely and important work that provides a new way of conceptualising and understanding the dominance of high-stakes testing in contemporary times. The

collected works have been carefully assembled by Smith to bring together a book that deserves to be read widely.

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