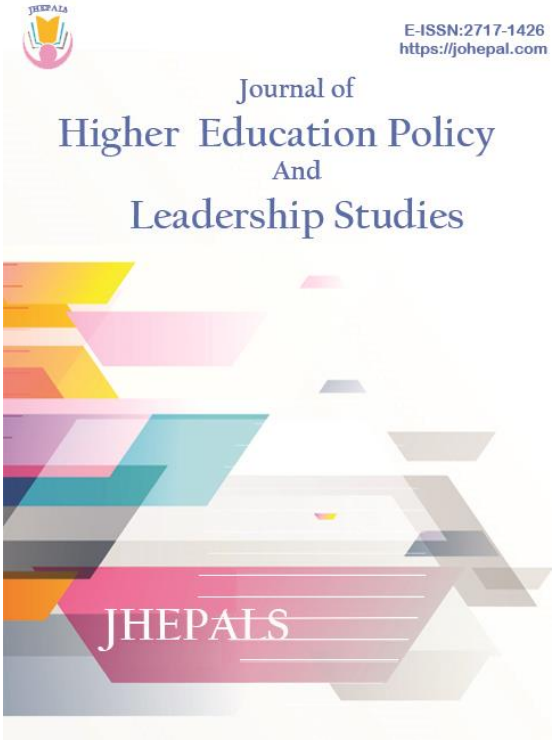
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Book Review: **Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts: A Case Study Approach**

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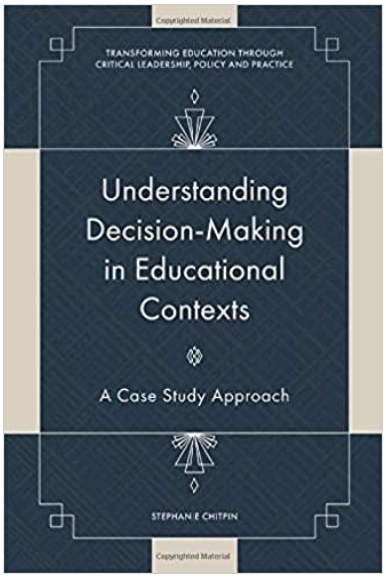
Book Review

Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts: A Case Study Approach

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There are very few books on educational decision-making like this book, perhaps for the simple reason that it is unlike most other books on the topic because it deals with the subject matter from a case study perspective. This latest book from Professor Stephanie Chitpin offers a series of case studies, each dealing with a different aspect of the complexity of real time decision-making. The book is divided into two parts, the first section dealing primarily with macro-issues that abound in the world of education. The second part of this unique volume delves into more specific micro-issues that may, on the surface, appear to require simple fixes but which have tension lines that reverberate through the issue at hand and result in having a distinct impact upon the students and their families.

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As one moves through the first pages of the book, there is much experiential wisdom that is available. For example, the very first sentence acknowledges that educational leaders constantly revisit the educational decisions that are made. This may be true simply because so many of the objects of these decisions are like moving targets. The decision-maker frequently must make decisions on the fly. He or she must make impromptu decisions or decisions that require them to think on their feet. Thus, there is always room for questions about the validity of the decision, once made. Was it a sound decision? Was the decision-maker in possession of all the facts? Were the consequences of the decision predictable? Did the decision resolve the issue or was there fallout in terms of unintended consequences?

The first chapter of this volume represents a map of the terrain. It walks the reader through the various elements of the book, noting that the "problem cases" presented between the covers of the volume are real cases that have been employed to provide authentic and often flawed decision-making. This is an interesting feature of the book because the rank and file of educational books that use a case study format tend to validate "good" decisions or "appropriate" choices that happily terminate any issues and grievances that have been encountered. The fact that a number of the cases presented here are not successful adds to the reality of the difficulty of making decisions in an educational context. This is important because it underscores the complexity and the messiness of real-time decisions. It also points to the consideration that decision-making is not often finalizable. Like old ghosts, poor decisions never seem to go away; they just get recycled. One of the strongest features of the book is the exploration of a Popperian method for making decisions. Sir Karl Popper became renowned for his theory of critical rationalism that claims that a theory can never truly be proven, only disproven. Whenever a theory fails to answer any of the questions that are taken to be a part of the theory, that theory must be discarded and replaced by a newer, better theory that does attend to the problems that the old theory could not answer or the old theory needs to be revitalized so that it can continue to serve, providing that the old concerns have been rectified. While this is not a book about Popper, one of the more remarkable points of this volume is that it takes Popper's theory that has pertained to the natural sciences and refashions it to serve the social sciences, as well. In addition to the recasting of Popper's work, a conceptual approach to decision-making is employed that focuses on the use of lenses, domains, or frames to understand the ways in which educational problems are structured. As a result, with respect to the key issues identified in successive chapters, this book supports a critical-rationalist perspective through a variety of paradigms, including critical and social approaches to understanding and tackling educational problems. Thus, the approach to decision-making in educational contexts is multi-modal, interdisciplinary and attuned to the multiple voices of a variety of actors and stakeholders in contemporary schooling.

The second chapter invites one to overcome irrationality through a Popperian approach, similar to conditioning theories of learning such as stimulus/response theories. This chapter illustrates how associationism, a result of stimulus/response, mistakenly assumes that there is a possibility of expectation-free observation and association without prior expectation. Thus, associationism assumes that learning involves absorption of information from the environment itself. Contrary arguments suggest that the individual must first have an expectation before a connection, repeated or not, can be made. However, there can be no exact repetition of a previous experience. The case study in this chapter relates to a fire that broke out in a neighbouring household, which leads to a discussion of how problem-solving and learning involve elements of free will and, thus, how problem-solving is essentially a creative process. The author makes the point that

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humankind is predictably irrational in making the same mistakes repeatedly. Such repetitions become important when large numbers of people are affected by the decisions made. The examples used in this chapter are robust and applicable in a variety of contexts and are not limited to educational organizations. Moving more deeply into this volume, the third chapter takes us to the United Kingdom, the birthplace of all things standardized. This chapter represents an exposé with respect to the contradictions, inconsistencies and anomalies that plague school administrators who are simply trying to do their best for their students while, at the same time, are forced to navigate a system that is frankly antagonistic and not entirely subconsciously hostile towards innovative, creative and imaginative problem solving. The case study that is explored in this chapter recognizes how disadvantaged and minoritized students tend to score lower on standardized examinations, which may themselves be an inequitable measure of student achievement. And herein lies the Catch-22, school leaders recognize that they must address competitive and competing aspects of the educational environment; however, they also must rely on standardized assessments even while they recognize it may not only be harmful but that it does little to improve education.

It is the fourth chapter that begins to analyze some to the things that school leaders can do to help their students become the citizens of tomorrow that the society desperately needs. It is at this point that the careful craftsmanship of this book becomes evident. As the case study is presented, which is a continuation of the British system of education, a construct entitled the Objective Knowledge Growth Framework is introduced alongside of the discussion of high-stakes testing. This chapter evaluates the tension between the government's reliance on standardized testing and the challenges faced by school leaders in walking the tightrope between satisfying the requirements of the educational regimen while striving to do the best for their students. The key question that is asked refers to how these school leaders rationalize the decisions they make with respect to equitable outcomes. While the answers to these questions vary from individual to individual, it is clear that there is a tension in trying to not only understand who it is that the school leaders serve, it is also about serving equitably or, at least, as equitably as possible. Consequently, the fifth and final chapter of Part I is aptly called "Great Expectations: The Achievement Gap in English Schools. This chapter continues the juxtaposition of neoliberalism and schooling in Britain, which is an important understanding because the standardizing of achievement has resulted in great inequities.

At the crux of the matter is the notion that human beings, especially children, can be "standardized" in terms of the knowledge that may be imparted upon them. The chapter begins with a lesson in history relating to how England has moved from a democratically managed system to an increasingly bureaucratic educational system. The case study draws upon the interpretations that heads of schools give to externally developed policies and how these policies become enacted, in this case, how heads of schools make decisions regarding attempts to meet or exceed government standards for education, as well as how they strive to reduce the ever-present and deepening achievement gaps among their school populations. The beauty of this chapter is that it is a continuation of the third chapter and lays out the issues and allows those leaders who form the case study to work as best they can to ensure that their students enjoy success.

A lovely aspect of this book is that it is not preachy. It is this sense of human kindness that permeates this volume. It seems to reveal in myriad subtle ways that no matter what, teachers understand and try to do their best to help the children that they are responsible for. The teachers know what it is that they are about. It seems a shame that the government has failed to understand this.

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As we leave the first part of this volume behind, we also leave the United Kingdom to its own devices and take up the issues and knowledge gained back to North American soil. One of the captivating facets of the book is the fact that each chapter identifies a new case study. However, in at least two of the chapters, the case is reviewed from a different perspective. For example, both chapter Six and Chapter Seven use the same case but deal with it in different ways. The first chapter in this dyad presents the case of emotional and verbal abuse of a student by a teacher. A three-part decision-making framework is proposed for resolving the issue at hand. An example of the framework is also provided to guide the readers in solving the problem. In the chapter following this, the case focuses, not on the teacher, but on the principal's reaction to the situation. A discussion of his decision-making process is included, along with the Objective Knowledge Growth Framework, which is employed to reveal key problems and to allow for identification of different problem-solving options. Readers of this chapter are asked to apply the framework to solve the principal's dilemma and to discuss ways to test different options, leading to a ladder-like effect in which each option is followed by a successive option that is epistemically more progressive than its predecessor.

As mentioned, previously, the second part of this volume deals with those micro-issues in education – those problems that are created from within the school, rather than the macro-issues that have been thrust upon the school by outside agents. Hearing about individual struggles in a book about educational leadership is a delightful departure from the usual theory-laden and, often, theory-bound books that so frequently grace the shelves of would-be decision-makers. After all, it is difficult to take a general theory of decision-making and apply it to a specific issue that is of particular interest to an individual, be they a student, parent, teacher or administrator. One of the finer things about this volume is that it does exactly that, validating the use of the case study approach.

The next chapter offers a scenario that may be viewed from several different vantage points. The chapter concerns Frank, a non-attender. This is a situation that is so common in schools that it is frequently ignored in terms of educational theorizing. However, the author describes a standoff between the school and the parents, with the parents requesting homework be provided to their son and the school refusing because Frank would not go to school. The divide between practicality and procedure is not only entertaining it remains an all too familiar scenario in far too many schools. In order to gain a deeper perspective on Frank's case, a Popperian approach is used to develop recommendations for a successful resolution of the issue. In addition, Bolman and Deal's Four Frame Model is also introduced to assist readers in developing a rational and realistic response to this dilemma.

Next, we have a situation that is very likely familiar to all educators. What can we do with an exceptionally bright child who is just beginning his or her educational journey? Cognitive tests show this youngster to be in the top one percent range with regard to the entire population. The issue is compounded by the fact that this youngster is only in kindergarten and this situation will likely follow the student throughout his school journey. The question remains, "How can this school meet the learning needs of this young student?" The case provides an opportunity for educational leaders to question decisions made for the sake of the student in an era of accountability. In so many instances, educators see a solution as being definitive without realizing that, when it comes to educating children, in particular, decision-making becomes a process. This is one of the more subtle points that this volume presents and, in this chapter, as in life, most solutions are provisional.

The final case study is also a very common, but very convoluted problem. This case presents a challenge to the principal's dealing with a group of Muslim students, who regularly miss classes due to religious accommodation and observances. Because the school has no religious faith and

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beliefs policy, marks are taken off for each class missed. The students, themselves, often use their religion as an excuse to miss classes that they do not want to participate in. Although the case is used to reveal how Popper's critical rationalism can be employed to help resolve the issue, it is fascinating to see how the case unfolds and how the decisions, in the end, affect very real people, who may or may not feel that justice has been served. In a very nuanced way, this volume suggests that decision-making cannot exist in a vacuum, but it must also be concerned with values, beliefs, traditions and cultures. It is only in this way that decisions can made that are equitable and for the benefit of all. This is a very difficult concept to master and to put into practice.

This volume, Understanding Decision-Making in Educational Contexts: A Case Study Approach, represents a very postmodern approach to problem-solving and decision-making. It takes a hands-on attitude towards the process of making decisions, on the one hand, and delivers a number of different frameworks, concepts and theories by which decision-makers can be better assured that their decisions are derived from evidence and data. This is to say that a thoughtful, reasoned approach to decision-making is possible, even in the thick of the multitude of issues that seem to dominate every school day. A seasoned educator can be armed with a series of alternate constructs to allow for a better outcome to his or her decisions. Even when the decision has been poorly conceived, it is not irrevocable, in many cases. Decisions can and probably should be revisited on occasion or tweaked when they fall short of expectations. This volume encourages school administrators to dare to be courageous in working with their experiential knowledge, their learned knowledge and the knowledge that others will offer in any given situation. This book offers subtle and constant encouragement to view decisions, not as fiats or inviolate rules, but to approach them with understanding and confidence, secure in the belief that, by working together, we will all succeed together. After all, to paraphrase Zig Ziglar, an American author, salesman and motivational speaker, we get what we want by helping others to get what they want. This endearing book helps us to help others to get what they want, particularly in terms of quality decisions. And those decisions are always developed within a context that recognizes and enhances the need for humane and democratic decisions from school leaders who exert such enormous influence on the leaders of tomorrow.

Dr. Robert E. White began his teaching career in 1972 and has taught in public schools across Canada. Currently, he is Senior Research Professor at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada. He has journal publications, as well as numerous books on topics relating to critical literacy, pedagogy, social justice issues, educational leadership, globalization in education, corporate investment in educational institutions., and qualitative research. Professor White is an Associate Editor of the *International Journal of Leadership in Education.* He has received five Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada research Awards, the President's Research Award (2013) and the American Educational Studies Association Critic's Choice Award for his book, *Qualitative Research in the Postmodern Era: Contexts of Qualitative Research* (2012).

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