

## **Review of Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers**

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***Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All*, Sir John Daniel, Commonwealth of Learning. Published by Routledge, February 9th 2010.**

Paperback: 978-0-415-87205-8: \$43.95.

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This book presents a macroscopic view of education from a geographical, historical and sociological perspective. It harks back to Adam Smith's division of labour, specialization and equipment and uses this model to take a bold step forward reaching to the establishment of integrating mega-schools, open schools and mass in-service training of teachers using distance methodologies. It is very well cross referenced internally, fairly engaging and relatively easy to read, with a logical development of its message through successive chapters.

It speaks to a global audience because of its universal themes and specific geographical references to countries served by Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO. It also refers to many projects which have been implemented across the world. The book will appeal to education policy makers and educators at all levels of the education system. Since it also speaks about lifelong learning which affects everyone, its audience is limitless.

The message is emphasized that education for all is desirable and cannot be achieved in the traditional ways. It forcefully re-iterates arguments for the pursuit of education for all – peace, order, freedom and human right, a base for human development and even climate change, among others. It identifies some barriers including cost and proposes the establishment of mega schools as a way of breaking the iron triangle of access, cost and quality.

The potential for the use of technology in communities and in mega schools is explored and past experiences are critically assessed while research findings are presented on both sides of the argument. The recommendation is made for the establishment of open schools as a means of implementing educational reform and tackling cost, quality and technological update. Full recognition is given though to the dilemma of government control versus school autonomy and flexibility.

The book confronts very directly the need for more and better teachers and re-examination of the preparation, ongoing professional development and retention of teachers. In-service open and distance learning is seen as valuable for the mass training of the brightest and best teachers in their local setting at an affordable cost.

There are three specific weaknesses to which I will refer. Firstly, the writer takes a pragmatic approach and refers to many specific cases and projects and in this regard, uses a large number of acronyms in the text. This impacts on the readability of an otherwise easy to read document. Secondly, the legitimacy of Open and Distance Learning is growing for tertiary education but appears to be trailing behind in the policies for secondary education. The author himself quotes from Perraton who confirms that ODL is still seen as a "second-rate shadow of education". This is a real and important challenge which perhaps is not adequately recognized or addressed. Finally, the global reach of the text may be influenced by the ability of a region to see itself targeted as a significant audience. In the case of the Caribbean for example, there are few references to

projects or activities from that area, notwithstanding the mention of COL's collaboration with CXC, the development of self-instructional materials in Trinidad and an extension of school-day project in Jamaica. Because of the small population in the region, this may not be an important consideration.

Some specific strengths of the book include the integrity of each chapter as a discrete unit which has an introduction and a summary but which is also cross-referenced with other chapters and annexes. Secondly, the book takes a pragmatic approach, acknowledging successful projects like "Hole in the Wall" and also citing some failed projects. It confronts dilemmas and offers likely solutions. It also mentions experiences which may be further explored or adopted like the "lapdesks". Thirdly, there are many pithy statements and comments which enhance the appeal of the book. Two include: "Technology is the answer, what is the question?" and "Private Schools –a poor choice or the choice of the poor?" Finally, it confronts the matter of the high set-up costs which are required for this 21<sup>st</sup> century educational ecosystem but offers hope for enhanced effectiveness and cost-recovery once scale is achieved.

In sum, this is a valuable work which can serve not only as a reflection of where education has come from and where it should aspire to go but also as a compass which indicates what are some benefits and consequences which are likely to result from judicious choices, informed by the potential of the application of new technology.

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