

DIRE STRAITS-EDUCATION REFORMS
IDEOLOGY, VESTED INTERESTS
AND EVIDENCE

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Preface

The aim of this book is to address the following question: why are education reforms so difficult to implement and so easy to reverse? We have had the privilege of looking at this fundamental problem from different perspectives: as academics, policymakers and advisors to governments all over the world, a vantage point which allows us to offer new insights.

Over ten years ago we started a conversation on education which is still ongoing and which remains our prime interest. During this time, education has been the focus of our professional careers and we have devoted all our efforts to this endeavour. Although we come from different backgrounds, we share the belief that education has the power to transform lives, economies and societies. We also share the view that education policies should be based on robust evidence, since we both have professional backgrounds (in academia and market and opinion research respectively) which are evidence-based and require an ability to analyse and interpret complex sets of data, draw solid conclusions and translate them into actionable measures.

We both joined the Spanish Government at the peak of the financial crisis (as Secretary of State and Minister), when levels of unemployment were dramatically high and the economy seemed on the verge of collapse. When we accepted the task of designing and implementing an education reform in Spain, we put a lot of effort into analysing both the international and national data in order to decide which policies should be implemented to overcome the many challenges facing the education system. However, we discovered that the evidence, which was so precious to us, was either misinterpreted or just ignored if it did not align with the interests of multiple stakeholders or with the ideological stances of different political parties. We also became aware that some of the conclusions and policy recommendations commonly drawn from

international surveys did not apply to the Spanish context. This made the public debate around evidence-based policies confusing and easy to manipulate. Our education reform was approved in a context of intense political tensions and was the subject of a very polarised debate. As so often happens, when a different government came to power a new reform was approved which represented a complete reversal and which ignored the evidence about which policies had a positive impact.

After this experience as policymakers, we both joined the OECD (in different roles), where we learned how the surveys on levels of student performance, adult skills and teachers' practices are designed, the strengths and weaknesses of the data generated and the limitations of the conclusions and policy recommendations which have been so influential in the global debate on education policies. Unfortunately, we also discovered how little an impact this has on actual education reforms. One of us had the opportunity to visit many countries and discuss with governments and stakeholders the challenges that they faced, which policies had worked and which had failed, and the nature and magnitude of the political costs associated with different types of reforms. This experience made us aware of the extent to which the political costs of education policies is context-dependent. It also gave us a clear understanding of the geography of educational success: which countries and regions are high or low performers, and the reasons for such divergent outcomes.

This rather unique combination of professional experiences has provided us with a broad understanding of the dynamics of education reforms, as well as a wealth of information on the nature of the political battles, the impact of governance arrangements, the conflicts of interest which tend to remain hidden in the public debate, the disparate contexts faced by governments in different countries and the obstacles that derail most education reforms.

After this first-hand experience as policymakers and advisors to many governments, we needed to pause and make an effort to understand why education reforms are uniquely difficult to approve and implement, and why those which succeed are so easily reversed when a different political party wins the next election. In order to do this, we needed to rely on our academic training. This book is an attempt to understand why this is the case in the hope that our contribution

will improve the chances that urgently needed education reforms will be implemented and successful policies will be preserved from political infighting or vested interests.

Our perspective is comparative education policy, with a clear focus on the interplay between ideological confrontations on the social purpose of education and the means to achieve different objectives, governance arrangements and the vested interests of an array of stakeholders in the education system. We also examine in detail the evidence provided by international surveys and investigate why it has failed to improve levels of student performance, despite its indisputable influence in shaping the narrative around good education policies. As we show, there is an intricate set of interactions between these factors that to a large extent explains why the political economy of education reforms is so complex.

First, we develop a comparative perspective on the politics of education which covers those factors that play a relevant role in facilitating or hindering reforms: ideology and governance. We explain what the ideological issues that are prominent for political parties on the right and left are, as well as the extent to which they are divisive and contribute to the polarisation of the political debate. When these ideological battles play a relevant role during elections, it becomes difficult for political parties to reach a consensus on issues which have generated deep cracks between voters.

Second, we analyse the impact of different governance arrangements on the nature of the obstacles facing education reforms. At the opposite ends of the spectrum, federal systems and centralised systems have a clear division of responsibilities, including decision-making power as well as raising and allocating the funding, so that either central government or regions are responsible for both. The recent trend to decentralise education among non-federal systems has led to a division of responsibilities between central government and regions, which is more complex and often less clear. Generally speaking, central government raises the funds through taxes which it then transfers to regions, and retains relevant decision-making power in terms of defining the architecture of the system, mechanisms to do with the selection and training of teachers, the basic content of the curriculum and national assessments. In turn, regions or local authorities are responsible for the management of their school networks and have some degree of

responsibility over the curriculum and assessments depending on the precise level of autonomy that they enjoy. Decentralisation aims to make the education system more efficient and more responsive to local needs. However, in order to achieve this goal, capacity building must occur before any responsibilities are transferred and accountability mechanisms must be put in place so that the outcomes of the new arrangements can be assessed.

The complexity of *de facto* decentralised systems implies that many more actors have a relevant role to play in the approval and implementation of reforms. In countries where education is a polarised issue (since legislation tends to be approved by central government while regions are responsible for implementing the changes), when there are different political parties in power at different levels, coordination may be difficult. In addition, when the division of responsibilities is unclear this will lead to never-ending tensions between regions demanding more resources and more power, while central government implements accountability mechanisms to evaluate whether student outcomes are improving.

We also analyse the role of different stakeholders and their bargaining power. Education systems serve students (and their families) but parents are rarely organised in an effective way. Employers also benefit from a good-quality education system, but their role is normally limited to providing on-the-job training for vocational education and training students and apprentices. Since education systems invest huge amounts of funding, there are many stakeholders who obtain direct benefits from the education system and whose support or rejection of reforms will depend to a large extent on the impact that the latter have on the level of resources that they receive. Among education systems, most of the funding is allocated to paying teacher salaries; as a consequence, teachers have become organised as unions to defend their working conditions. Most unions defend job safety and similar salaries (unrelated to performance) for their members. In countries where unions are politically influential and have veto powers, they often block reforms which aim to introduce more demanding criteria to enter the profession, performance-related pay, or the dismissal of underperforming teachers.

Third, we analyse in detail the evidence provided by international large-scale assessments (ILSAs) to examine the extent to which there

is robust evidence to support policy recommendations. We find that the strongest evidence there is about what does not work in education concerns investment. Contrary to the widespread assumption that levels of investment are directly related to levels of student performance, all analyses conclude that this is not the case when levels of investment are above a certain threshold. Since investment is the product of class size (which determines the number of teachers) and teacher salaries, none of these two variables has an impact on student outcomes.

The analyses show that there is another set of variables which is strongly context-dependent. The most influential is school autonomy, a policy recommendation which has been followed by many governments. However, for school autonomy to have a positive impact on student outcomes two conditions need to be met: it has to go hand-in-hand with accountability mechanisms and it only works among education systems which have already achieved high levels of quality.

The last group of variables represent different ways to measure a multifaceted dimension of the education system: equity. Unfortunately, our analyses conclude that no single variable can be used to measure levels of equity or progress over time. Furthermore, the seemingly arbitrary use of one or a few of these variables frequently leads to the wrong conclusions, a problem which is exacerbated by the fact that some of the most important aspects of equity are captured by variables which the international surveys neither measure nor take into account.

Finally, we examine the interplay between the evidence generated by international surveys, and the policy recommendations based on them, with ideology and governance. We conclude that the most robust evidence, i.e. lack of impact of greater levels of investment, decreases in class size and increases in teacher salaries, has had no influence whatsoever because it generates a head-on conflict with the vested interests of unions and most of the stakeholders that strongly oppose policies which lead to a decrease in the levels of resources that they receive. The evidence on variables which are strongly context-dependent (such as school autonomy) may be difficult for policymakers to interpret, since it requires a precise diagnosis of the state of maturity of the education system, which is often lacking. Furthermore, policy recommendations often ignore this fact and advocate such policies universally with dire consequences. Finally, the evidence concerning

variables that attempt to measure equity is partial and non-conclusive, so the policy recommendations have been heavily influenced by ideology. This has led to a universal recommendation to apply comprehensive policies and avoid those that are regarded as “discriminatory” (such as ability grouping and early tracking). But the evidence shows that radical comprehensive policies lead to the worst outcomes in terms of equity among non-egalitarian societies. We argue that “policy borrowing” from egalitarian countries is based on the wrong assumption that inclusive education policies have led to high levels of equity. An alternative explanation is that among societies that are already equitable, the education system does not need to compensate for major inequalities and, therefore, inclusive policies work. The fact that such inclusive policies, when implemented in non-egalitarian countries, lead to bad outcomes suggests that other mechanisms are required in order to deal with the large degree of student heterogeneity present in societies with high levels of inequality.

Fourth, we look at the policies implemented by top- and low-performing systems and we examine which regions have succeeded in improving over time and which have failed. Countries in East Asia have transformed their education systems very fast over the last decades, allowing mostly illiterate societies to become the most successful systems in the world. The key to their success seems to be a trade-off between class size and teacher quality which has delivered excellent results. Substantial investment goes into selecting the best candidates, offering high-standard training, implementing demanding procedures to enter the profession and designing clear career pathways with high-quality professional development. In exchange, they have very large class sizes. Such countries do not have powerful unions which can veto these kinds of reforms and they all enjoy consistency for long-periods of time because their political systems are either semi-democracies, authoritarian, or full democracies which have adopted a very pragmatic, non-ideological approach to education. Latin America represents the opposite extreme since these countries have made huge efforts in terms of expanding access to higher levels of educational attainment (including university), but the returns are very poor because student performance remains very low compared to East Asia, and also to OECD countries. In this region the power of unions is unparalleled and they have played a major role

by putting pressure on governments to decrease class size over time and by rejecting attempts to improve teacher quality and evaluate teachers or students. Thus, the trade-off has been exactly the opposite.

When we analyse the trends of countries positioned somewhere between these opposite poles (Europe, United Kingdom, North America, Australia and New Zealand), we find that most of them have not managed to improve their education systems during the last decades, despite major increases in levels of investment and many reforms. This clearly shows that the evidence provided by international surveys has not had the expected impact on the performance of education systems. We argue that this is partly because some policy recommendations are misleading, and partly because in certain political contexts solid evidence is not enough to overcome huge political costs, which tend to be the result of ideological battles and/or strong underlying conflicts of interest.

Despite this pessimistic conclusion, we remain convinced that the only way forward is to obtain robust evidence and, more importantly, to improve the policy recommendations so that they adapt more readily to the specific context experienced by each country. In countries where the magnitude of the political costs and underlying conflicts of interest are too great, the only way forward may be to start pilot projects rather than to implement systemic changes. If successful, such pilots may be expanded, but small steps like this will require time, and students may not have much time to spare since they need to face an uncertain, challenging and rapidly changing world.

