

Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Ness, Eric (2008). *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education*. New York & London: Routledge. Pages: 183. Price: \$95.00 USD (hardback).

Reviewed by Michelle Nilson, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University.

Policy adoption and implementation provides scholars with the ready opportunity to examine two main areas: policy processes and policy outcomes. In his book, *Merit Aid and the Politics of Education*, Eric Ness provides a glimpse behind the curtain of the public policy making process to reveal how eligibility criteria for merit aid awards are determined. Using advocacy coalition, multiple streams, and electoral connection frameworks, he explores merit aid policy episodes in New Mexico, West Virginia, and Tennessee.

Merit aid policies are student financial aid mechanisms that grew in popularity in the United States beginning in the early 1990s. At present, there are 13 states with these large scale merit-based student aid programs. They are publicly rationalized as a way to staunch brain drain, reward high achieving students, and to promote academic capital in the states (Heller, 2002). Ness' study reveals other intriguing (but not so surprising) motivations for politicians to adopt and promote these policies. Criticisms of these policies are varied - from the source of their funding (regressive taxation through lottery revenues), to the beneficiaries of the awards (students who are highly likely to attend university anyway). In addition to the significant contribution this study makes to the literature, Ness argues that eligibility criteria serve as one of the gate-keeping functions of the awards. In that regard, this study supports earlier findings concerning the unintended consequences of who receives these awards. The consequences of eligibility criterion are that they have a significant impact on which and how many students may benefit from these policies.

Based largely on his dissertation, this book is divided into three sections. Ness begins with an introduction to the politics of merit-based student financial aid, and follows with a description of his comparative case study approach and the policy frameworks that he used for the case descriptions and analysis. The descriptions are useful for those outside of the US or for those unfamiliar with the use of policy frameworks, and provide a foundation for comparison across other jurisdictions.

In the second section, Ness presents rich descriptions of the policy context, policy events, and case analysis for each of the three selected states. New Mexico is the first case, as the state with the longest running merit aid program in his study. In this section, he fully explores the rationale behind the state's unique criteria, a 2.5 grade point average in the first year of postsecondary. Most other states require a higher grade point average that is calculated from high school rather than postsecondary grades. He then turns his attention to West Virginia, a state where the legislation passed under one administration and the funding in another. Ness' description follows the winding policy path, providing details about public personalities, deals, and handshakes along the way. His third case study provides details about Tennessee, where Ness was a participant observer as a policy analyst for the Tennessee coordinating board. Tennessee represents one of the latest adopters of this type of student financial aid policy; a similar program existed for 10 years prior to the adoption in this state. He carefully outlines the measured approach and serendipitous timing in Tennessee at the time of the development of the merit aid policy.

Finally, the third section provides the reader with several analyses. First, Ness conducts a cross-case analysis, using each of the dimensions of his analytical framework as a guide. Then, he provides an analysis across the three policy models to determine the utility of the policy frameworks in explaining the policy episodes. He does this by "considering the extent to which the core constructs of each theoretical framework accounted for the *within-case* and *between-case* findings" (p. 136). Ness provides clear rationale, excerpts from interviews, and compelling evidence in support of his conclusions and analyses. His final chapter provides a revised model that is a hybrid of the three policy frameworks, emphasizing the best aspects of each.

While the policy context is different across Canada, the clear and concise way that Ness articulates this study provides the foundational structure for replication. There are several lessons in this book that can inform legislative staffers, policy makers, and academic researchers alike. The first lesson that Ness points out is that higher education is "entering the political policy-making fray" (p. 154). In particular, when allocations to higher education are declining, there is more incentive for institutions to play an active role in advocating for their interests. The second lesson is that, as Tip O'Neil is reported to have said, "all politics is local." If scholars and consultants want to have significant impact on legislators, they are well advised to report results and analysis on the scale relevant to the elected official of interest. Finally, Ness advises those who wish to influence policy to find an ally in their cause—and one who has power to influence others. Throughout the book, he relays stories that refer to "policy entrepreneurs," individuals who "wield considerable power throughout the policy process" (p. 152).

While there are several studies that examine the outcomes of higher education policy events, there are but a few analyses of policy processes using multiple case studies with multiple policy frameworks. For those who are curious

about the “sausage making” of higher education policy, or want insight as to how to direct policy decision streams, this book comes highly recommended. ♣

REFERENCES

Heller, D. E. (2002). State merit scholarship programs: An introduction. In Heller, D.E. and Marin, P. (Eds.) *Who should we help? The negative social consequences of merit scholarships*, pp. 15-24. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University.

Stonechild, Blair. (2006). *The New Buffalo: The Struggle for Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education in Canada*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. Pages: 190. Price: \$24.95 CAD (paper).

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At a time when post-secondary education has perhaps never been more significant in the lives and future welfare of Canada’s First Nations, Stonechild’s book is a cause for celebration on the one hand, but a cautionary tale on the other. *New Buffalo* is a critical examination of Aboriginal post-secondary education history and policy beginning with the late 1800s to the present. The term “new buffalo” symbolizes the importance of higher education; it is seen by the author as the key to Aboriginal survival in the 21st century just as the buffalo was for the people of Western Plains in times past.

In Chapter One, we learn that education was narrowly conceived as a tool for assimilation from the late 1800s until the mid 1940s. It is interesting to discover that Aboriginal social policy under John A. McDonald’s government was influenced by Social Darwinism, notably the ideas espoused by the English philosopher and sociologist, Herbert Spencer. However, Stonechild fails to mention the degree to which social policy in general was influenced by Social Darwinist ideas. Newly-arrived immigrants, for example, were not thought of differently than Aboriginals.

Because the government’s major task during the late 1800s was to negotiate the numbered treaties in the newly acquired Northwest Territories, the education of Aboriginal children became inextricably linked with a policy of “aggressive assimilation.” The clear aim of early schooling was to assimilate children into mainstream Canada via the residential schools. The latter remained integral to this policy until 1965 when government decided to shut the schools down – without consulting the Aboriginal community. This change in policy left the Aboriginal community in limbo leaving no clear alternative. Nonetheless, the eradication of these schools, notwithstanding the formidable legacy of abuse and distrust they created, had the positive effect of politically