

A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL HANDBOOK OF LEARNING, TEACHING, AND LEADING IN FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Published by Springer in 2014, the *International Handbook of Learning, Teaching, and Leading in Faith-Based Schools*, edited by Chapman, McNamara, Reiss, and Waghid, established itself as a critical scholarly text dedicated to the rigorous analysis of the substantial global growth in faith-based schooling. This vital resource moves beyond simplistic definitions to deeply examine how religious identity and values profoundly shape the practice of learning, teaching, and leadership. It brings together diverse international perspectives, presenting a rich tapestry of research and practice that highlights the commonalities and distinctions in how different faith traditions approach schooling. The handbook addresses critical themes such as the integration of faith into curriculum design, the professional formation and ethical dilemmas of teachers and school leaders, and the complex relationship between the school's religious mission and its obligations to academic excellence and inclusivity in an increasingly secularised world. It serves as an essential reference for academics, policymakers, practitioners, and religious educators seeking to understand the multifaceted nature and impact of faith-based education worldwide.

By collating the work of leading scholars, the handbook provides a robust framework for understanding the pedagogical and organisational distinctiveness of faith-based schools. It delves into the practical and theoretical challenges inherent in balancing spiritual development with intellectual growth, offering insights into effective strategies for fostering a holistic educational experience. Furthermore, the volume critically analyses issues of governance, social justice, and the role of faith schools in promoting interfaith dialogue and social cohesion. For those involved in the research, administration, or reform of faith-based education, this handbook is indispensable, offering evidence-based practices and theoretical models that can inform policy, improve teaching efficacy, and strengthen ethical leadership within these specialised educational settings.

II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE BOOK

This section provides a critical analysis of the Handbook, recognising its most notable scholarly contribution while also examining the key limitations that constrain its effectiveness as a comprehensive guide to faith-based education. The volume's greatest strength lies in its innovative and diverse selection of topics, which integrates theory, policy, and practice in ways that advance understanding of faith-based schooling. However, this pioneering work also exhibits a range of structural, philosophical, and methodological shortcomings – including geographic bias, insufficient pedagogical depth, fragmented comparative analysis, limited technological engagement, and a lack of improvement / developmental guidance – that collectively limit its utility for policymakers and educational leaders. By highlighting one central strength alongside several interconnected critiques, this evaluation demonstrates both the Handbook's significance and the areas in which future research must build upon its foundation.



Strength: Diversity and Innovation in Topic Selection

The Handbook stands out for the diversity and originality of the subjects it explores. It moves beyond descriptive accounts of religious instruction to engage with complex and contemporary educational issues. This is exemplified by chapters such as *Schools and Families in Partnership for Learning*, which highlights the central role of family engagement – an area often marginalised in policy discourse. Likewise, *Learning for Leadership: An Evidence-Based Approach* demonstrates a progressive commitment to professional learning accountable to modern standards of evidence and efficacy. This thoughtful blend of theoretical grounding, policy analysis, and practical partnership elevates the discourse, positioning the Handbook as a genuinely interdisciplinary contribution to school improvement.

Despite its pioneering nature, the Handbook exhibits several critical shortcomings rooted in its structural design and philosophical caution. These weaknesses limit its capacity to function as a truly comprehensive and authoritative guide for educational reform.

Critique 1: Geographic Imbalance and Underrepresentation of Eastern and Islamic Scholarship

A prominent limitation is the Handbook's pronounced Western-centric bias, reflected in the geographical imbalance of its contributing authors. The majority appear to be from Western academic institutions, with minimal representation from leading scholars and practitioners in Eastern or Islamic institutions. This omission results in a one-sided understanding of faith-based education, neglecting distinctive governance models, pedagogical traditions, and policy challenges in regions such as Asia and the



Middle East-contexts where the relationship between religion and the state often diverges significantly from Western norms.

Critique 2: Lack of Foundational Pedagogical Depth

Although the Handbook's title foregrounds "Learning and Teaching", it fails to engage adequately with the pedagogical foundations, theories, and models that characterise faith-based schooling. Historically, many religious education systems have developed distinctive and effective methods, particularly those fostering deep learner interaction (Hosseini Zarrabi et al., 2021). A rigorous exploration of these pedagogical traditions – their rationale, structure, and outcomes – is needed. By focusing primarily on management and curriculum delivery, the volume overlooks the very processes through which faith and values are internalised and translated into meaningful learning, rendering its treatment of "Teaching" epistemologically shallow.

Critique 3: Navigating Epistemological Conflict; Insufficient Treatment of Controversial Curricula

Given the Handbook's scholarly ambition, it should have confronted more directly the points of tension between faith-based doctrines and secular knowledge. Although the introduction acknowledges curriculum delivery as an area of concern, merely referencing worldviews in science education is inadequate. A robust analysis would examine how faith schools negotiate such conflicts, ensuring academic freedom and avoiding indoctrination. By addressing these issues only in generic terms, the Handbook sacrifices philosophical depth for political caution, thereby undermining its credibility with policymakers who seek assurance that religious mandates do not compromise public educational standards.



Critique 4: Absence of a Systematic Comparative Methodology

While individual chapters occasionally draw implicit comparisons between faith-based and secular schooling, the Handbook lacks a systematic, theoretically grounded comparative framework. The analysis remains fragmented and anecdotal rather than unified by a clear methodological structure. Without a comprehensive comparative lens, scholars and policymakers are left without the necessary evidence base to assess the differential impacts, costs, and benefits of religious versus secular education systems globally (Bråten, 2013). This omission weakens the work's potential as a foundation for evidence-informed policy.

Critique 5: Structural Disconnect and Lack of Coherence

Although the contents are organised into three main parts – Context, Conceptions, and Future Possibilities – the Handbook suffers from limited structural coherence. The relationship between these sections is insufficiently articulated, producing a disjointed reading experience. As a result, the work functions more as a compilation of isolated studies than as an integrated and conceptually unified guide to educational development.

Critique 6: Technology as a Neglected Domain

In an era when education is increasingly shaped by digital innovation, the Handbook's limited engagement with technology represents a major oversight. It fails to address how faith-based schools adopt, implement, or critically evaluate new learning technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and Massive Online Open Courses



(MOOCs). Many religious institutions have pioneered creative uses of these tools to enhance instruction and expand access. The omission of such technological analysis leaves the discussion of “Learning” and “Teaching” incomplete and dated, diminishing the volume’s relevance for contemporary educational planning (Jafari et al., 2017).

Critique 7: Absence of Prescriptive Principles for Advancement

As a consequence of the preceding limitations, the Handbook offers few concrete principles or strategic pathways for the future improvement of faith-based education. It remains largely descriptive, refraining from proposing prescriptive models or actionable frameworks to guide policy and practice. This lack of direction limits its practical utility for educational leaders and policymakers seeking to strengthen and reform faith-based schooling.

III. CONCLUSION:

The International Handbook of Learning, Teaching, and Leading in Faith-Based Schools successfully establishes faith-based education as a legitimate and complex field of systemic academic inquiry. Its principal achievement lies in mapping a multifaceted global landscape, integrating leadership, pedagogy, and policy considerations, while documenting the civic and values-based contributions of these institutions. By providing empirical evidence to address public scepticism, the Handbook represents a significant scholarly milestone, offering a foundational reference for researchers and practitioners alike. However, the volume’s intellectual impact is constrained by structural and philosophical limitations, including an implicit Western bias and



a reluctance to fully engage with contentious curricular issues, which restricts its ability to provide definitive policy guidance. Consequently, it serves more as a starting point for further inquiry than as a conclusive authority on faith-based education.

To advance the field beyond the 2014 groundwork, future research must adopt explicit methodological and philosophical rigour, drawing on a diverse body of expertise. This includes contributions from both academic specialists and experienced practitioners such as teachers, administrators, and policymakers across a variety of cultural, national, and religious contexts. Ensuring this breadth of input is essential to maintaining a balance between theoretical insight and practical experience, allowing future studies to address the global diversity of faith-based schooling more comprehensively.

Future handbooks must place pedagogy at the forefront (Rezaei-zadeh et al., 2023), thoroughly analysing the distinctive teaching and learning theories and interactive methodologies employed in faith-based schools. Research should move beyond simply documenting tensions to developing testable, normative policy frameworks for managing controversial curricula. Equally important is the integration of educational technologies, such as AI, AR, and VR, documenting their innovative applications and providing guidelines for ethical and effective implementation. Enhancing professional capacity is also critical, through targeted programmes for teacher and leader development, enabling educators to navigate the complexities of their environments and implement qualitative improvements in practice (Bakker & Ter Avest, 2019; Bandali et al., 2021).

Finally, successor research must deepen the study of epistemological pluralism, examining how faith schools adapt structurally to super-diverse societies, particularly beyond Western contexts, with rigorous comparative case studies in non-Christian, and non-state-integrated settings, especially in Africa and Asia. Moreover, future work should assess the broader systemic impact



of faith-based education, including its contribution to social mobility, equity, and cohesion. Developing comparative governance taxonomies will equip policymakers with robust evidence to understand how funding and oversight models either mitigate or reinforce structural segregation, thereby informing global educational reform.

IV: BIBLIOGRAPHY

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