Interview with Jacques Hallak and Muriel Poisson, the authors of “Corrupt Schools, Corrupt Universities”

What is the aim of this book?
Jacques Hallak: To put corruption on the agenda in a positive way – not to point the finger but not to sweep it under the carpet either. The book offers constructive help to fight this perennial problem.

What are the most common problems?
Muriel Poisson: The list is long, unfortunately: the financing of schools, teacher management and behaviour, public contracts, particularly for school construction, production and distribution of textbooks, the organization of examinations, accreditation of higher education institutions, private tutoring, and more.

Corruption is found in many walks of life. Why is it such a concern in education?
Jacques Hallak: Mainly because it is such a drain on the effective use of resources. This was already a concern of the Drafting Committee of the World Education Forum, Dakar 2000. Corruption influences both access and quality in education because it affects the availability and quality of educational goods and services. At the same time, corruption in the education sector contradicts one of the major purposes of education, namely, to transmit values and promote principled behaviour. If the management of the education sector is unethical and pupils are directly confronted with malpractice at classroom level, how can education foster attitudes that reject corruption?

Is corruption universal or confined to certain countries and regions?
Muriel Poisson: Six years of research and the experience of over 60 countries have shown that no country has a monopoly on corruption in education. The media have uncovered scandals everywhere, from countries with poor governance and low-paid staff to affluent Western democracies.

Can you point to any success stories in tackling corruption?
Jacques Hallak: Thankfully, there are numerous examples of good practice. A decade ago in Uganda, only 13 per cent of the annual grant per student actually made it to the schools! Today, the figure is around 85 per cent, thanks to campaigns that informed local communities where the money was actually going. New York City has drawn up new procedures for selecting suppliers in school construction. To eliminate bribery in textbook selection, Argentina set up an ‘integrity pact’, helped by Transparency International. Chile has reviewed its strategy of school meal distribution. Hong Kong has set up a code defining teachers’ commitments. Azerbaijan has reduced fraud in university entrance examinations. Private tutoring is problematic, so many countries in South and South-East Asia have banned it, regulated it or, best of all, reducing the need for it altogether. Many more success stories are presented in the book.

What is your message to decision-makers?
Muriel Poisson: Build a ‘virtuous triangle’: a learning environment that values integrity; transparent and accountable management and a system of social control over the use of resources.

Is tackling corruption something that can be taught?
Jacques Hallak: Diagnosing corruption and developing anti-corruption strategies are important skills that can be taught. Training materials are currently being developed based on the book and a summer course will be organized by the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO) to build capacities in these areas*. 

*This reference is not present in the extraction.
What impact do you hope the book will have?

Muriel Poisson: If, in five years’ time, corruption in education is higher on the education agenda, being monitored and generally taken more seriously, then we will have achieved our objectives.