Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEWS

Student's perspectives on schooling, by Audrey Osler, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2010, 200 pp., £19.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-33522-360-2

My first teaching job was in an inner-city school in Peckham, South London. There I encountered the world of research for the first time–as one of its subjects. Peter Mortimer, then a researcher, followed me and countless other teachers around. He wanted to know what we did and why.

The end product was the seminal study *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children* (Rutter et al. 1979). This book reinforced my belief as a practitioner that schools could make a significant difference to the lives of young people. But it did not tell me what they thought. It did not help me understand their lives.

Some years later, I got into the messy business of research myself. This was for a PhD on race and gender issues in South London schools. My focus: young people. What did schools have to offer them? How did they see themselves in their future lives?

It was an eye-opener. Their humour, their candour and their reflections gave me fresh insights into the world of the school. I learned more some years later through a project working with disaffected students. It was then only a hop, skip and a jump before making the final leap of working to develop young people themselves as researchers.

What I learned is that schools can be transformed by taking account of young people's experiences and views. This is the message at the heart of Audrey Osler's informative book.

The book, and Osler's own research agenda, is anchored in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. She argues, powerfully, that we need to do more than listen to young people. We need to take account of them. We need to find ways of ensuring that they can help shape the educational decisions of policy-makers, as well as the day-to-day practices of schools. She reviews the growing field on student voice. And from her own wide-ranging research, carried out with a number of colleagues, she offers young people's answers to tantalising questions about school life, such as:

- I would enjoy school much more if …
- I could do better in school if …

For me, the most interesting section is Chapter 7, on social justice. Here Audrey comes into her own. She explores, digs and questions the many contradictions within our school system. Schools may want to promote peace, tolerance and equality. But to do this, they need to create a climate of respect for difference–not an easy task. She raises important questions: How do you enable young people to express views that may be contentious? How do you ensure that they have the opportunity to discuss significant, not trivial issues? Or as one young male interviewee put it candidly: 'Give us a voice not just some poxy little council which discusses how much the price of chips are' (110).

At the end of that chapter, Audrey Osler reminds us that not only do young people experience injustices in schools but they also have practical solutions to offer about tackling racism, promoting diversity and encouraging equality. Where this takes us is thinking about how schools, young people and their families can work together to promote social justice. An interesting topic of enquiry for a practitioner or a researcher?

Reference

Rutter, M., B. Maughan, P. Mortimore, and J. Ouston. 1979. *Fifteen thousand hours: Secondary schools and their effects on children*. London: Open Books.

Kathryn Riley
London Centre for Leadership in Learning
Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK
K.Riley@ioe.ac.uk

Struggle for the history of education, edited by Gary McCulloch, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, 139 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780415565349 (hardback); ISBN 9780415565356 (paperback)

Struggle is a term not easily associated with the history of education, either in the form of its products or its practitioners. Struggle connotes strikes, occupations, marches, demonstrations, barricades and sometimes – armed insurrection. With one or two notable exceptions, historians of education during the period covered in this book have tended to be, like many others in the field of education, either conservative in outlook or apolitical, which in many respects, amounts to the same thing. Struggles are also often, like the current Occupy Movement, usually against something and often less clear about what they are for. It is in this context that the question arises in relation to McCulloch's curious title, what is the struggle for the history of education against and what is it in favour of? Put crudely, it would seem from this book, that the answer to the latter question is its survival and to the former question, those things that threaten its continued existence.

It was Adams, Principal of the Institute of Education's forerunner, the London Day Training College, who warned that there was no more 'tyrannical idol' than a 'metaphor that has taken the bit between its teeth'. Seemingly immune to Adams' admonishment, McCulloch extends the struggle trope across seven substantive chapters and also returns to it in his conclusion. The struggles are organised as a binary opposition. The first four chapters refer to exogenous struggles for social progress, social change, social equality and educational reform, whereas the final three, for theory and methodology, the struggle for new directions and the struggle for the future, are endogenous.

An account of the recent history of the sociology of education, which faces similar challenges to those encountered by the history of education, found that the diagnosticians of its morbid symptoms tended to emphasise either internal or external explanations (Brehony 2001). Few attempted to combine the two. McCulloch, while conceding that in the early years of this century, the external position of history of education was 'weak' in many countries and 'increasingly marginal to educational research', claims that internally it maintained its position as 'an entrenched community of knowledge'. Noticeably, internal criticisms of aspects the direction the field has taken, such as those from Herbst, Depaepe, and Lawn