

BOOK REVIEWS

Social policy: a short introduction

Dean, Hartley, 2005

Cambridge, Polity

£12.99 (pbk), £45.00 (hbk), 176pp.

ISBN 0745634346 (hbk), ISBN 0745634354 (pbk)

The reform of welfare states is at the top of the political and policy agendas in most North European nations, and issues that have previously been of marginal public interest are becoming more central to debates about the nature of the society in which we want to live—and which we can, through our collective efforts, sustain. Such is the subject matter of social policy. But this is a rapidly changing subject, with the ‘social’ of social policy shifting in meaning, being transformed in divergent ways. One shift concerns a move away from old conceptions of the social based on social insurance and collective state provision towards a new focus on social investment and social integration; another is a shift from social protection towards concepts of social well-being. Many scholars, then, are actively engaged in attempting to re-define what is now a very dynamic field: and one such is Hartley Dean. He is passionate about his subject, describing the attraction of social policy as being that it has few, if any, boundaries:

It is relevant to every facet of our lives. It is genuinely multi-disciplinary. It reaches beyond the febrile controversies of everyday politics to grasp critically at underlying issues and injustices. It is outward looking, encompassing both the global and the local; the universal and the personal. (p. xiii)

This is, as the cover says, a ‘short introduction’ intended for students and potential students, addressing past, present and future trends. Simple chapter headings—‘What does human well-being entail?’, ‘Who gets what?’, ‘Who’s in control?’, ‘What’s the trouble with human society?’—are used to package a range of complex material in an accessible way. As such it does not deal in depth with any of the issues raised, and students who want to use this to deepen their understanding of key issues will inevitably be disappointed. Perhaps for a book that is designed as an introductory text more information about how the student might take their interest forward—perhaps through sources for further reading at the end of each chapter—would have been helpful.

There are some inevitable gaps in coverage—for example I found the weakness of the way in which the author addresses questions of ‘race’, multiculturalism and social integration troubling, given that some scholars are currently arguing that increasing

social diversity is weakening the collective ties on which social welfare must be based. This is a difficult argument that cannot be addressed in the traditional social policy assessment of ‘race’, as one among many lines of difference that may produce inequality. However the text is at its strongest where the author is trying to get to grips with change—as he argues, social policy is ‘uniquely exciting’ because it is on the move. Here he deals with the so called ‘crisis’ of the welfare state and its impact in terms of welfare pluralism and managerialism, at the same time as working to expand the focus of social policy through the concept of human well-being. This latter brings into consideration a range of issues that are now becoming recognized as integral to social policy—including, for example, transport, shopping, access to information and participation, and facilities to meet cultural and recreational needs. The final chapter, ‘Where is social policy going?’, sets out four scenarios for the future of welfare. It is a pity that these were not more fully developed—perhaps another book, beginning from the last two chapters and moving onwards and outwards, might be a good next step.

Janet Newman, Professor of Social Policy, The Open University

Higher education in China

Zhou Ji, 2006

Singapore, Thomson Learning

£22.99 (hbk), 312pp.

ISBN 9812543643

‘Written with western readers in mind,’ declares the blurb, this book ‘should be of great interest to educators and organizations wishing to run ... educational programmes in China’. For the benefit of this readership, Professor Zhou sets out to portray China’s higher education system as potentially one of the world’s most vibrant and innovative, explaining the key role envisioned for an expanding HE sector in the context of China’s overall development strategy.

The essence of this strategy, as Zhou repeatedly reminds us, is ‘to rejuvenate the country through science and education and ... to make the nation strong by cultivating talent’ (p. 71). In a brief overview of the history of higher education in China, he explains that it was only after many vicissitudes that the country at last found itself set fair on the high road to progress and prosperity—or, in his preferred idiom, ‘blazing a trail’ in this direction. In this largely descriptive survey, the focus is principally on developments since the early 1990s, a period of phenomenal expansion and rapid reform of China’s higher education system.

A plethora of statistics are deployed to illustrate the staggering scale and speed of this transformation. For example, the numbers of regular tertiary students almost

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quadrupled between 1997 and 2004 (a graph is provided to illustrate), the number of graduate students increased by roughly the same factor (another graph), as did the level of funding for HE institutions (yet another graph). These figures are impressive enough, but Zhou is relentless—with a scientist's penchant for quantitative precision (as well as, perhaps, a politician's tendency for quantitative manipulation), he cites statistic after statistic. In the end, the cumulative weight of numbers is so great as to overwhelm all but the most resolute of Western readers.

The use made here of statistical evidence reflects the accuracy of that hackneyed, but justly cautionary, proverb. The government, Zhou tells us in his discussion of higher education funding, 'has found the solutions' (p. 62) (lessons here for the British Government, perhaps?)—though the statistics he cites by no means demonstrate this. Similarly, we are told that 'virtually all the impoverished students can pay their way through higher education studies' (p. 180), though here again convincing proof is not forthcoming. 'Social justice' in admissions to higher education has been ensured (p. 155), Zhou further assures the reader, while 'minority higher education has been an unprecedented success' (p. 212).

Zhou Ji is China's Education Minister, and few of his western readers will be surprised to find a politician engaging in spin. Who, after all, would look to Britain's Education Secretary for a balanced and objective overview of British higher education? Professor Zhou, however, evidently felt himself to be well-placed to sell Chinese higher education to a western constituency. He is the first senior minister in the PRC government to have completed postgraduate studies at a western university (he has a doctorate in mechanical engineering from SUNY Buffalo). Nonetheless, this book displays little understanding of the foreign readership at whom it is ostensibly aimed, instead following the rubric of the Communist Party's propaganda stylebook.

It is difficult to know whether Professor Zhou writes like this because his position constrains him to do so, or actually believes in the glowing portrait he paints, or is simply reluctant to wash any dirty laundry before an overseas audience. There are indications in the book's conclusion that he is aware of some of the enormous challenges that confront the system, for example when he declares, 'We hold nothing against elite education, but we must not slacken our efforts to deliver education to the vast populace either' (p. 282).

This may be interpreted as an allusion to the massive inequalities that have emerged in recent years, and which have recently been preoccupying top Communist leaders because of rising discontent and resultant threats to political stability. In education, while the expansion of the tertiary sector has gathered pace, provision of basic education for the rural majority (and recent urban migrants) has remained pitifully inadequate. This would suggest a compelling case for reordering the priorities of education policy so that provision of a decent educational foundation to all students in China—rural or urban, Han or ethnic minority—takes precedence over further investment in the 'cultivation of talent' in elite universities.

However, Zhou's repeated emphasis on 'cultivating talent' indicates a rather different approach. He sees the issue of equity in higher educational funding in terms of helping impoverished students to cope once they have reached university.

The more fundamental issue arguably relates to the underfunding of primary and secondary schooling that denies China's poorer 'masses' the education they need to pass the university entrance exams in the first place. Nevertheless, Zhou scarcely acknowledges problems at the more basic levels of China's education system, let alone discusses the impact of these on equity in higher education.

The chapter on 'Research and Social Service' suggests, by its title, that it might touch upon such issues. However, Zhou reveals that he is defining 'social service' principally 'in terms of science and technology development' (p. 149). The insistence on the overriding importance of science and technology and of the 'cultivating of high-level talent' in these areas are recurring refrains, and Zhou argues that universities' social service consists primarily in 'various uniquely Chinese modes of combining education, research and industry.' In other words, higher education produces top talent, talented individuals work for industry, industry makes money, the country gets richer, and everyone is better off.

The problem with this vision is that in fact some have become much better off extremely quickly, while most have witnessed little or no gain in their standard of living—with social services, including education, actually deteriorating for many of China's poorer communities. According to this Thatcherism with Chinese characteristics, there is no such thing as society—but here that is because society and the state are conflated. Although East Asia's tiger economies, such as Korea or Taiwan, were arguably well-served by highly dirigiste state apparatuses when they were at comparable levels of development, this was in large part because of the role that their states played in redistributing the benefits of economic growth, and ensuring relatively equal access to schooling and other basic public services.

In no area, perhaps, do the priorities of state and populace conflict more starkly than in that of 'minority education'—in other words, the education of non-Han Chinese groups such as the Tibetans, Uighurs and Mongols. 'Minority higher education,' Zhou declares:

... cannot do without efforts to raise the cultural and scientific attainments of minority peoples, boost socio-economic progress in minority-inhabited areas, carry forward the country's diversity of outstanding cultural traditions, close the ranks among people of all ethnic backgrounds, and maintain social stability and safeguard national unification. (p. 227)

The price, in other words, for developmental benefits bestowed on regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang is an unquestioning acceptance of Chinese dominance. Zhou alludes to the practice of sending thousands of 'minority' students from these regions to study at universities in the Chinese 'hinterland'. In their studies here, he explains, 'stress will be on learning concepts of ethnic diversity, religion, and related government policies' (p. 218). He does not explain that among such policies are measures severely restricting the exercise of religious freedom on the part of students, as well as state employees.

In the days of Mao Zedong, religious belief was characterized as 'feudal superstition', and as such was seen as an obstacle to the exercise of rational, 'scientific'

thought on the part of the ‘masses’. In today’s China, as Zhou explains, there is a growing premium not just on scientific thought, but on the kind of independent and creative thinking skills that will be needed for the country to succeed in ‘the globalized knowledge economy’. This is why many universities have been ‘trying out research-based and explorative study in class’ (p. 164). However, apparently sensing no contradiction here, Zhou immediately proceeds to assert that ‘a 5000 year cultural legacy has shaped China into a land of propriety and righteousness’, so that ‘Chinese college students have a strong sense of belonging and cherish the aspiration to bring glory to the collective’ (p. 166). Fostering a capacity for independent thinking is very much part of what Zhou terms ‘character education’, and student associations are assigned an important role here. However, independent thinking is evidently expected to operate within rather limited parameters. For example, Zhou cites with approval student ‘theatrical works in eulogy of traditional values and the fine social mores of the new age’, going on to enthuse that ‘the vivid art activities serve to educate students in patriotism, collectivism, socialism, and national spirit, disseminate scientific knowledge, promote advanced culture, foster beautiful minds, advocate scientific spirit and uphold justice on campus’ (p. 173).

Independent thinking, like intellectual endeavour in general, is here clearly valued not in or for itself, but primarily in relation to its capacity to serve the goals of the state. This overwhelmingly statist orientation is also reflected in hints of a eugenicist mindset—all students have to undergo a health check upon registration, and those diagnosed with ‘diseases’ (unspecified) may be denied entrance. The position of physically disabled students in Chinese universities has admittedly improved considerably since the 1970s, largely due to the advocacy of the crippled son of the late patriarch, Deng Xiaoping. However, state concern for students’ health is informed by a discourse of ‘population quality’ (*suzhi*) which encompasses both physical and psychological well-being. Since 2002, most higher education institutions have been required to establish a ‘Psychological Health Education and Research Section’ and a ‘Psychological Consultation Center ... to disseminate mental health knowledge and guide students in conducting mental self-readjustments’ (p. 166). The remit of these bodies is defined as ‘fostering among college students a right and healthy way of life [and] helping them to form a correct attitude towards life and build a sound personality ...’ (pp. 166–167). (Elsewhere Zhou refers in passing to a ‘pictorial database on Chinese brains’ run by the Handsbrain–China Children’s Science Education Net, though it is unclear what research agenda this project serves; p. 241.)

The phrase ‘with Chinese characteristics’, originally coined by late supreme leader Deng Xiaoping to describe Chinese ‘socialism’, occurs repeatedly throughout this book. As with that broader usage, so with respect to ‘higher education with Chinese characteristics’, no coherent definition of what these characteristics actually are is forthcoming. This should come as no surprise, since the concept was invented not to clarify, but to obfuscate, providing blanket legitimacy for all the regime’s policies. A more enlightening study of Chinese higher education would seek to address head-on the issue of precisely what the ‘Chineseness’ of Chinese higher education does, or should, consist of (Ruth Hayhoe to some extent attempts this in her seminal history

of modern Chinese higher education). According to the vision presented here, universities are conceived of simply as tools in a massive state-directed project of social engineering. Meanwhile, their contribution to the crucial but neglected debate over what the ends of that project should be remains severely limited.

Edward Vickers, Institute of Education, University of London

Assessment

Mary Simpson, 2006

Edinburgh, Dunedin Press

£11.95, 96pp.

ISBN 1-9037-6545-5

There is a well-meant saying in education policy circles that ‘we know the system is better in Scotland, though we don’t really know how’. The same is also said of Finland’s education system, that it’s better but we don’t know the detail of why or how.

This book illuminates why assessment is different and in many ways better in the Scottish system. It focuses on contemporary interest in the ways in which ‘assessment for learning’ might counter overly-instrumental assessment systems that are increasingly used for accountability purposes rather than for assessing learning in productive and motivating ways. It also describes how these debates have taken place in Scotland.

Importantly, it does not just illuminate the political and academic debates around assessment. Instead, the book shows how the Scottish Executive grappled with a drift towards the use of classroom assessment in schools for monitoring in order to promote ‘assessment for learning’ and then attempted to change the assessment and teaching practices of school teachers in radical and far-reaching ways. This overtly educational attempt to use the principles of assessment for learning in order to change ideas and practices in teaching and learning is in stark contrast to the English government’s much more instrumental use of assessment for learning to raise levels of achievement in national tests (see Daugherty & Ecclestone, 2006).

Discussions on previous arrangements for assessment, their political rationale and the viewpoints of diverse stakeholders in the Scottish system, and the logistics of attempts to change practice enable the book to offer a rich case study of assessment policy in a particular cultural and social context. In this respect, the book combines technical and theoretical insights about translating the principles of assessment for learning into policy texts and then into long-lasting changes to practice. And importantly for debunking some myths about how everything is better in Scotland, it

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shows that there are significant barriers to change. In particular, Mary Simpson argues that serious attention has to be paid to the sort of professional development needed to create lasting change to assessment practices and to overcome entrenched ideas about curriculum and pedagogy in Scotland's education system.

As a researcher in the policy and practice of post-compulsory assessment systems, I found the book both illuminating and interesting, not least because it treats assessment practices as 'socio-political in origins and ultimately shaped in their educational detail by historical understanding of learning and teaching, the stability of long-established professional practices and by compromises negotiated between powerful factions with conflicting, social and professional interests' (p. 69). This approach is important because it avoids an overly-technical treatment of policy and practice. The case study is therefore invaluable for researchers in the field of assessment, whatever level of the system they are studying or, indeed, in whatever country.

Despite these strengths, the book's important insights perhaps require some meditation for different audiences, not least teachers who might want to change their assessment practices, and designers of assessment systems in the UK's many awarding bodies and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. It was here that I felt there was some potential to draw ideas out more overtly for different audiences and stakeholders, particularly in systems outside the Scottish one and outside compulsory schooling.

Nevertheless, I shall use the book in my own research and in my work on assessment with teachers in post-compulsory education. And at least I shall now be better and more critically informed when the point is made about the Scottish system being better.

Reference

Daugherty, R. & Ecclestone, K. (2006) The politics of formative assessment in the four countries of the UK, in: J. Gardner (Ed.) *Assessment for learning* (London, Sage).

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