

The Black Box of Schooling: A cultural history of the classroom, edited by Sjaak Braster, Ian Grosvenor, and Maria del Mar del Pozo Andrés, Brussels, P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2011, 330 pp., £27.00 (pbk), ISBN 978-90-5201-760-0

The expression ‘black box of schooling’ was coined by the sociologist and professor of education, Colin Lacey (1970), in his Manchester case study: *Hightown Grammar*. Lacey analysed the social systems of a particular grammar school, systems which he argued allowed certain groups of pupils to become demoralized while others, who came from families that understood the internal systems, thrived in this educational setting. Twenty-five years later, the historians of education Marc Depaepe and Frank Simon, called for a specific focus on the classroom as a venue of ‘evaporated educational relations’ (13). At that point their concern was less with explaining underachievement than with a desire to recover unrecorded mysteries from the culture of the classroom. Classrooms were, in Depaepe and Simon’s (1995) view, in danger of becoming ‘the “black box” of the pedagogical historiography’. Many resources that had been crucial to classroom-based learning across the decades had been disposed of uncatalogued and without scrutiny. In a bid to prevent further oversights and silences in classroom history, a symposium was held in the National Museum of Education in Rotterdam in 2008. It brought together contemporary researchers on the ‘black box’ of the classroom and resulted in the production of this book.

The volume includes an introduction by the editors, all historians of education, explaining the revival of interest in the history of the classroom across recent decades. There follow 13 chapters pieced together by 21 different European contributors who are drawn from diverse professional backgrounds: some work in museums, some in housing departments and teacher training, others are academics in faculties of social science, education, psychology, art history, and architecture. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century classrooms form the common subject matter for their research. I draw attention to the authors’ range of experience because it is one of the factors that makes the book engaging: there is no set formula or predictable pattern to the way in which authors argue and illustrate their research. Some write with an intense generosity and willingness to share historical images, as if they have still have scattered reproductions in front of them while writing – Jeremy Howard on painted school interiors, for instance. Others, such as Arianne Baggerman, writing on classrooms in the memory of autobiographers, step back and take a more poetic approach to explaining the methodological difficulties. How do we re-tell a history of spaces that depends not on visible bricks and mortar, or for that matter on portacabins, but on fragments of personal memory? The contributors are united by a conviction that their sources and methods must be triangulated in order to open up the ‘black box’ (25). The attention to detail is consistent throughout the book but authors also patiently explain the difficulties they face in their chosen fields. Theo Veld, for example, places his confidence in oral-history interviews with teachers because he argues that the classroom was so dominant in their working lives that they can bring rich detail to discussion. He is less convinced, however, when interviewing former pupils because he feels that their later working lives supplanted vivid records of classroom life (198).

As a wealth of prior knowledge is not presumed in the reader, the book provides an inviting prospect for undergraduate reading. Readers share in the journey of research with the authors, and the authors bring their own expertise to the debate on how authentic and useful evidence can be drawn upon to build a cultural history of this familiar space which, across Europe, we associate with formal learning. All seem to want to form links between their own expertise and broader debates on the position of the classroom in cultural history. Catherine Burke’s chapter on school murals invites the reader to think about how wall paintings relate to discourse about

the pedagogical implications of education through art. She recognizes that these murals may have been introduced with particular intended messages for the viewer and yet their lasting impact on the minds of pupils could belong to a very different personal and imaginative journey (240).

However, despite the lively range of material under discussion, the book overall feels slightly ungainly and disjointed. I think this is due, in part, to the book designer having stuck to certain conventions of presentation that limit the reader's opportunity to engage simultaneously with the visual and verbal evidence. The 52 illustrations, belonging to various chapters, are reproduced as high-quality colour reproductions, but they are relegated to the back of the book in an 'appendix' section called 'Photo album'. It would have enabled a reader to think far more carefully about the visual evidence and its relationship with written source material and with the authors' arguments if these images had interrupted the text at relevant moments. A further frustration is the absence of any conclusion. If the same energy that went into the introduction had been applied to confronting the provocative questions raised by different authors, the book would hold together more convincingly. For instance Susannah Wright ends her chapter on 'Log books from English elementary schools' with the question 'Might there be some danger in the notion of a "black box" that we miss the classroom's permeability, and the importance of movement between different educative spaces within and outside the school?' (137). Those attending the Rotterdam Symposium may have been party to how other commentators responded to this remark (if it was part of the original spoken presentation), but nothing in this published volume takes on these inquisitive moments and connects them with further debate.

The absence of a conclusion is all the more glaring because the introduction reviews how the expression 'black box of schooling' has been applied historically so that, as a reader, I anticipated some concluding review on what these chapters have provided to enrich the debate. I was also left with an uncomfortable reminder that while Colin Lacey used the metaphor of the 'black box' as part of his research into inequality and a perceived underachievement amongst groups of pupils, this volume could be misrepresented as overly concerned with material culture at the expense of a concern for the relationship between human experience and classroom history. Individually, the authors reveal their consciousness of this tension between social and material history – after all classrooms are not monuments or storage spaces but rather venues for potential mess, overcrowding, moments of enlightenment, and moments of conflict. But the editors don't complete their task because they don't draw together from the diverse chapters a lasting impression of the way classrooms can be reintroduced to pedagogical historiography, not just because of their appearance but also because of their impact on pupils.

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