

BOOK REVIEWS

The death of progressive education: how teachers lost control of the classroom, by Roy Lowe, London, Routledge, 2007, 180 pp., £22.99 (paperback), ISBN 0-41-535972-4

The Death of Progressive Education is a very useful reminder of some of the major ideologies, movements, and contradictory impulses that have helped constitute recent education policy. Too often, the pressing need to simply get by, to do the best one can given existing pressures in and on schools, can lead to a significant loss of collective memory. Roy Lowe aims to restore parts of that memory by tracing out the history of education policy from the 1940s to today. In many ways, this is something of a Herculean task, one that can involve an immense amount of historical data and a very hard set of choices about what to put in and leave out. Lowe's choices involve telling the story of a largely internalist history of debates within education with the addition of some material on external economic and political changes.

But Lowe is not committed to telling only a top-down story. Although it is not always clear how representative they are, among the book's more interesting sections are the ones involving the use of letters from multiple people over the years worrying about the transformations that were occurring in schooling. The volume picks up momentum and critical bite as it gets closer to the present. Lowe's argument centres around the loss of teacher and curricular autonomy and the concurrent growth of more centralising and conservative policies, and the ways in which such policies have become so hegemonic that they are now accepted as common sense by Labour.

In many ways, *The Death of Progressive Education* asks a set of question with which I and others have been attempting to grapple in the United States, England, Australia, and elsewhere. How did neoliberal, neoconservative, and new managerial assumptions become dominant? What were the internal and external politics that were associated with the rise of this complex ideological assemblage? What was the creative ideological work (really a large-scale social/pedagogic project) that enabled this to happen? While the book is less politically and conceptually powerful than it might have been, it has other benefits that certainly make it a worthwhile addition to the growing literature on the set of issues associated with these questions.

As is evident in his earlier books as well, Lowe is an engaging, clear, and thoughtful writer, someone who is also deeply committed to the cause of teacher autonomy and more progressive forms of educational policy and practice. His commitments and experiences give the book a more personal flavour than one is likely to find in other volumes that are critical of past and current education policy. Thus, the book has a number of very evident strengths. But it also raises some questions and issues in my mind that I wish to mention here.

As a former teacher union president myself, I have a good deal of sympathy for Lowe's defence of teacher autonomy in decisions over curriculum, teaching, and evaluation. Indeed, a critical analysis of the loss of control and of the deskilling and intensification of teachers' work and an articulate defence of the professional rights of teachers are even more important in this time of what might best be called 'management by stress.' However, a largely unquestioned defence of teacher power has its own set of contradictions. Much of the assemblage of rhetorical

resources used by many people in such a defence (autonomy, professionalism, etc.) may act in negative, not only positive, ways when multiple relations of power are considered.

In, say, racially charged situations where community activists are demanding a voice in the debates over educational decisions, such a defence can deny the right of subaltern groups to speak, to be heard, and to have some serious influence on education. Indeed, as I have shown in *Educating the 'Right' Way* (Apple 2006), denying such collective voices from below and not listening carefully and more respectfully to the elements of good sense in their own critiques of the ways in which education is currently carried out, may force people of colour into an alliance with groups whose solution to this issue is the neoliberal mantra of marketisation and 'choice' and the new managerial emphasis on the constant production of evidence of 'success.'

The issue of 'race' is important in another way, not only in the manner in which even progressive educators may be pushing oppressed groups into alliances with which we may have justifiable worries. One of the most important ways of judging books, even ones that are based on an educational commitment with which I have a good deal of respect, is to focus on *absent presences*. That is, what is missing in a book is often just as important as what is there. If there is one major silence in Lowe's book, it is the absence of any discussion of the place of race and immigration in his account. Indeed, I want to argue that no discussion of the politics of education policy in England can be complete without a stronger recognition of the fact that 'the empire has come home.'

In the United States, to be fully serious about understanding the politics and effects of reforms, one needs to also understand the ways in which policies that focus on 'standards' and 'choice' are connected to the perceived needs of many white parents who – whether consciously or unconsciously – do not want their children to be near the 'pollution' of the culture and body of 'Other.' I would urge scholars on the English side of the Atlantic to think more carefully and cogently about these kinds of dynamics as well. Increasingly, education policy and practice in England is related to the dynamics of race as well as class and gender, even when race and racialising structures are seemingly overtly absent (see, for example, Gillborn 2008).

Lowe's nicely written account may as well be a somewhat romanticised interpretation of the history of progressive education and of its social commitments and effects. One need not be in total agreement with Basil Bernstein's earlier worries about the class-related nature of some aspects of progressivism to have concerns about how progressive policies are played out in a society riven by class conflicts and antagonisms. Do not misinterpret me. Like Roy Lowe, I too have considerable sympathy with such policies. As detailed descriptions of democratic schools in the United States document, when such practices are connected to a larger critical cultural and political project they can indeed be very powerful (Apple and Beane 2007). But it is still essential that we consistently act in reflexive ways and interrogate the classed and raced assumptions behind certain aspects of these educational visions and commitments. I wish that Lowe had engaged in this reflexive act a bit more.

None of these cautions are meant to dissuade you from reading the book. Indeed, it is a statement about the engaging nature of the book that it generated the issues surrounding a number of absent presences in the first place. If it is read alongside more detailed and substantive social and historical accounts of the ways in which hegemonic alliances create the conditions for their success in changing education policy, *The Death of Progressivism* is a real contribution. With its broad sweep and engaging style, the book deserves an audience of readers who want a sense of history and who are (correctly) disappointed with current education policy. Lowe's overall conclusions seem correct to me, as do his concerns about what is happening to teachers in all too many nations.

References

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Changing faces of adult literacy, language and numeracy: A critical history, by Mary Hamilton and Yvonne Hillier, Stoke-on-Trent, Trentham Books, 2006, 208 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 1-85-856348-8

This book is a major output of the Economic and Social Research Council research project 'Changing Faces of Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy: A Critical History of Policy and Practice 1970–2000' (ESRC Ref. No. R000239387), a collaboration between Lancaster University, City University and the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, London. It is the first comprehensive historical study of adult literacy, language and numeracy (ALLN) in England covering the period from the 1970s adult literacy campaign to the eve of the government's 'Skills for Life' strategy to improve adult literacy and numeracy in England.

The project aimed to identify the key issues and forces that have driven change in the ALLN field and to investigate and represent the perspectives of the main protagonists through oral history interviews. The research team collected documentary and statistical evidence and carried out 200 oral history interviews with representatives of three interest groups: 'policy actors' (decision-makers in government and national agencies); practitioners teaching and organising within ALLN programmes; and adults with basic skills needs. Four case study sites give a geographical spread and a range of urban and rural areas: North East London; Norfolk; Leicestershire; and Manchester. Data were analysed using an interpretative, pragmatic and deliberative process known as 'deliberative policy analysis' (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). The study is situated in a social practice framework that emphasises the uses, meanings and values of reading, writing and numeracy in everyday activities, and the social relationships and institutions within which these are embedded.

The project has created an archive of material accessible through the project website (<http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/edres/changingfaces/>); items may be browsed via <http://litcent.lancs.ac.uk/RIS/RISWEB.ISA>. The website (which is still being populated) also includes details of the research team, the methods and activities of the project, timelines, analysis, findings and the project's final project report, as well as lists of publications and other resources. Together, the project outputs constitute an invaluable resource for the use of present and future participants and researchers in the field.

The book is well produced, with comprehensive and informative appendices with timelines and lists of archival sources and interviewees quoted and a useful index, glossary and bibliography. It traces the story of ALLN through four policy phases: (1) the mid-1970s, when a campaign led by voluntary agencies worked in partnership with the BBC to bring adult literacy to public attention; (2) the 1980s, with ALLN provision supported by local education authority (LEA) adult education services and voluntary organisations, and leadership, training