

BOOK REVIEWS

The education debate, by Stephen Ball, Bristol, Policy Press, 2008, 242 pp., £12.99, ISBN 978-1-86134-920-0

This short, tightly written book unpacks the realities of Tony Blair and New Labour's mantra of education, education, education. Ball concentrates on school policies but also draws on policy examples from other sectors including pre-school and higher education. He tries to make sense of the last 10 years of unprecedented hyperactivity in education policy development, identifying the main tendencies and patterns along with key moments and significant developments. To untangle these policies, Ball uses a 'political sociology' approach, calling on sociological concepts, ideas and research. Central to this is the attention he gives to 'the language of policy – policy rhetorics and discourses' (5) which demonstrates how certain ideas, topics and speakers are privileged while others are excluded. And, it shows how policy language is used to produce certain meanings and effects so that policies appear as rational and practical solutions to social and economic problems. Thus, in his exploration of education policy Ball relies heavily on extracts from 'policy texts' such as official documents and speeches:

... that 'articulate' policies and policy ideas, which work to translate policy abstractions like globalisation and the knowledge economy and public sector reform, into roles and relationships and practices within institutions that enact policy and change what people do and how they think about what they do. (6)

This is a refreshing and welcome approach. However, at times Ball does not get underneath the language of policy to show the assumptions underpinning these policies or the nature of the rhetoric, and whose interests these policies serve. For those readers with less experience of unpacking Labour'speak – this could be confusing.

There are numerous themes running through the book. Two themes, however, dominate. The first is the relationship of education policy to the needs of the state and the global and knowledge economy. Specifically, the way education is subordinate to economic imperatives – the need for economic competitiveness – at the expense of the social purposes of education. The second key theme is the relationship between education policy and social class. In particular, how social differentiations that characterised state education in the nineteenth century, especially those involving social class, continue as 'significant features of the policies and politics of education' (195). Hence despite all the reforms to the way education is governed, structured and organised, and all the rhetoric of radical reform, transformation and modernisation, the education system remains divided by social class. There remain enduring social class inequalities. As Ball highlights, equity rarely has been the prime goal of New Labour's education policy.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the reader to some of the key concepts used in the book. It locates education reform and policies within the context of the 'global economy' and knowledge economy. The chapter describes the global and international landscape of education, the role of global players, and the consequences of this for UK policy development and the framing of these policies. It concludes by discussing 'policy technologies',

the language of reform technologies, and some of the ways these technologies work emphasising the market form, management and performativity.

The second chapter provides a historical context to New Labour's policies. It explores developments over four periods: 1870–1944, 1944–1976, 1976–1997 and 1997–2007. Each period is marked off from each other by 'ruptures' related to political and economic shifts and each of these ruptures is associated with changes in the 'form and modalities of the state' namely, how it is organised and works. The chapter certainly is a whistle stop tour of education policies over the past 137 years, and, as Ball recognises, is highly selective. However it does succeed in highlighting the continuities and differences in policies over time, or what Ball calls the 'dissolution and conservation' within education policy. Perhaps, given the overall focus of the book, a single chapter devoted exclusively to the period 1997–2007 charting New Labour's policies would have been useful. This could have explored their policies in more far depth and provided a more fulsome foundation for the next two chapters in the book.

Arguably, Chapter 3 is both the most interesting and exciting chapter in the book, and the most frustrating chapter. It examines New Labour's education policy through the lens of *The UK government's approach to public service reform* (see Cabinet Office 2006). The document espouses and sets out a particular model of 'joined-up' reform based on performance management; competition and contestability; voice and choice; and capability and capacity. Ball very skilfully uses these features of this model of reform as a framework for analysing a wide range of New Labour's schools policies, demonstrating contradictions and continuities. This is a refreshing approach that firmly locates education and education policy within the far broader canvass of the welfare state and the changing nature of the welfare state – a context so often overlooked in sociological analyses of education. Somehow education policy analysts sometimes forget that, as Michael Hill states in the preface to the book, 'education is a central pillar of welfare policy' (xi) and the welfare state. Why this has been the case is an interesting question. Whatever the answer, Ball certainly does not forget this – a dimension that adds to his insightful analysis both in this chapter and the next.

Yet, Chapter 3 is frustrating because, as a reader, I want to know more about the numerous and diverse policies Ball discusses, and about the actual issues these policies aimed to tackle. (Perhaps they could have been included in the additional chapter suggested above.) These policies are very important because of the roles they play and the new values systems they introduce. As Ball observes quoting Clarke et al. (1994), these policies establish 'new orientations, remodel existing relations of power and affect how and where social policy choices are made' (149). Consequently, I want to understand more about both the challenges the government *believed* they were addressing and the *reality* and evidence base, if any, of the nature and scale of 'the problem'. In other words, we need to go beyond the rhetoric encapsulated in the 'policy text'.

Ball in fact does this very well, but in the next chapter which moves on to examine New Labour's policies that relate, directly and indirectly, to issues of social equity in education. He very clearly sets out the nature of the problem. Here Ball includes evidence showing 'race', class and gender differences and inequalities in achievement and participation throughout various parts of the education system. The final chapter brings together various themes in the book emphasising the circularities and discontinuities within education policy and the recurring themes outlined above.

Overall, the book is an important contribution to the analysis of education policy with its trenchant analysis and astute observations. It will join many others of Ball's scholarly works on students' reading lists. There are gaps in the issues the book covers, but this is inevitable in a book of this size. The one gap in the overall approach of the book that does

matter is that it only discusses policy in the UK, and mostly in England. It does not look outside of the UK. Thus, we lose the lessons that can be learned from the experiences of other countries of what can be achieved through educational reforms. Perhaps that could be his next book?

References

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The governance of British higher education: The struggle for policy control, by Ted Tapper, Dordrecht, Springer, 2007, 257pp., £88.50, ISBN -10 1-4020-5552-8

This is an important book from two points of view. It is the first major book on higher education policy, studied from a national perspective, since Kogan and Hanney's *Reforming higher education* published in 2000. Tapper is the first scholar to be able to write with authority on the impact of political devolution on British higher education policy and his masterly account of the development of research assessment policy, the most critical force in the shaping of British higher education, from the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) through the 2003 White Paper to the Roberts Review and the latter's eventual rejection, and the interposing of a metrics solution, provides the clearest account so far of a contentious policy area.

The second ground of the book's importance is that Tapper is a political scientist who regards an analysis of the development of higher education not as an end in itself but as an illustration of the changing relationship between the state and society in modern Britain. There are strengths and weaknesses in this position. On the one hand the study of higher education benefits enormously from the interventions of scholars from other disciplines – economists, political scientists, sociologists and so forth – but on the other there are dangers if higher education's unique identity as an area of public policy is not recognised. Tapper claims that 'The study of the governance of higher education makes sense only when placed in the disciplinary framework of political science' (8). This is a large claim which higher education scholars may think takes them back to Isaiah Berlin's famous essay 'The hedgehog and the fox' (Berlin 1953) ('The fox knows many things but the hedgehog knows one big thing'), where Berlin compares writers who base their thinking on 'a single, universal, organising principle in terms of which alone all that they are and say has significance' to 'those who pursue many ends, often related and even contradictory, connected, if at all, only in some de facto way'. Indeed, Tapper's own excellent case studies on the politics of quality, the RAE and on access would seem to suggest that he is by no means the hedgehog that he appears to be claiming to be.

The central thesis of the book, with which it is impossible not to agree, is that higher education is part of a wider narrative which begins with the political breakdowns of the 1970s and is taken forward by the recognition 'that there needed to be a restructuring of the funding, delivering and purposes of public policy, of which higher education was but a part' (225). He is also surely right when he concludes that, certainly over the last decade, there has been a fragmentation of state responsibility of higher education partly as a result of devolution