

Schools are seen as critical in ‘addressing social inequalities’ and thereby ‘creating liberal communities’ (181). The tools available to them include creating safe spaces, fostering key relationships, ensuring appropriate participation in decision-making, developing a curriculum and pedagogy which stresses reciprocity and mutuality (with a particular focus on the power of formative assessment) and drawing in the surrounding community.

While careful not to romanticise their achievements, Gereluk offers as worked examples the ‘small schools’ movement in the US and the ‘integrated schools’ initiative in Northern Ireland. She is also deeply conscious of what might be called the Basil Bernstein principle: ‘schools cannot compensate for society’ (70). It is, however, emblematic of the achievement of the book as a whole that it should return to concrete cases, since its distinctive achievement is to weld together a sophisticated reading of the history of ideas, a cold-eyed account of trends in policy and management, and a rich, hopeful and enthusiastic confidence in practice.

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The globalisation of school choice?, by Martin Forsey, Scott Davies, and Geoffrey Walford (Eds.), Oxford, Symposium Books, 2008, 252pp., £28, ISBN 978-1-873927-12-0

The globalisation of school choice? is a collection of papers originally presented at a symposium held at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Western Australia, in 2006. It is ‘interested in the practice of choice’ (10) and presents a number of studies of choice policies in action in order to examine whether a ‘global education policy consensus’ (14) emerges.

Whatever other criticisms might be levelled at it, there can be no doubt about the global reach of the book. The reader is presented with a range of chapters addressing school choice issues in countries as varied as England, Canada, the US, Australia, Argentina, Israel, Japan, China, Singapore and Tanzania. As one might expect from the proceedings of a conference, two different approaches are offered: there are writers reporting their own empirical research, and those offering what might be called critical policy portraits of school choice mechanisms in particular countries. The papers present a diverse picture: choice policy is more often than not ‘corrupted’ rather than simplistically ‘borrowed’, as national governments seek to mediate between the pressures of globalisation, their agendas for political economy and their sociocultural imperatives for schooling – all within the specific political–ideological context prevailing within each state. Few readers will fail to find something new in the book, given its geographical range and the varied scope of the topics covered.

So this international melting-pot of a book informs us that in Israel, for example, ‘controlled school choice’, was introduced with the primary objective of increasingly integration amongst different ethnic groups and classes, with the overriding policy objective of improving social cohesion and mobility. The reader also learns about Singapore’s attempts to turn the country into a ‘global schoolhouse’ (chapter 11) and low-fee schools in India (chapter 10). Andrew Kipnis, in chapter 9, points out that the main concern of policy makers in Zouping County in the rural Chinese province of Shandong is, it appears, to prevent school choice. They do however, use market, or managerialist, mechanisms to create competition between institutions. Choice in itself is not regarded as important, and the impact of these ‘audit culture’ policies tends more towards standardisation than choice and diversity, in addition to inculcating attitudes about discipline and performance at work. This is an interesting article in which the writer observes

that the term 'neo-liberalism' itself can be misleading if only certain aspects of it are considered. This critique is one of the most important and the recurrent themes of the book are treated especially well here.

If policy platforms can be corrupted then this implies some purer ideology, rationale or implementation strategy behind them. The editors offer an insightful critique of neo-liberalism in a short but wide-ranging introductory chapter, which would provide a good stand-alone theoretical introduction to the subject. Their discussion of choice as a narrative – a 'key economic and social slogan... of our time' (9) – notes how the rhetoric conceals an ideology which shifts responsibility for the provision, or perhaps efficacy, of public services from the state to individual citizens following their own private interest. Educational ideology has changed to embrace competition and markets; whilst the language of choice carries persuasive clout to the extent that research shows that parents who are not in practice interested in choosing a particular school nevertheless express concerns about having a choice when this is talked about in the abstract.

If globalisation is a flow of ideas, the key message in this book is that gaps between actual reforms and the rhetoric of choice are striking. That is, the same language is used to describe, or justify, a range of strategies such that the lexicon of choice becomes 'a loose and malleable language for a variety of actors to pursue widely ranging goals'. The important conclusion to all this is that the global dominance of neo-liberal discourse has meant that in the public conversation choice has surpassed equality as a policy objective, whilst politics itself is subjugated to a struggle for economic advantage as nations respond to the pressure of transnational companies and the organisations representing them – the WTO, IMF, World Bank – 'push for a globally unified economy' (13).

One particularly interesting chapter, and in the view of this reviewer, the one exhibiting the most meticulous scholarship, is not about school choice itself but about the research into it. Christopher Lubienski's *School choice research in the United States and why it doesn't matter* is especially important since US policies are often borrowed and adapted for use elsewhere. The US has seen a burgeoning of private schools in addition to a growth in charter schools (similar in some regards to English Academies or Trust Schools), of which there are now, we learn, 3977 educating 1.1 million US children or 2.3% of the total school-age population. There is a similar number of homeschoolers. The other main choice mechanism in the US is vouchers. Advocated by the economic guru of the right, Milton Freidman, vouchers have almost totemic status in the US and have become 'a lightning rod for policy and advocacy battles' (35).

The main thesis here is how choice has become an ideology pursued by advocacy groups formed from strategic alliances of the powerful and wealthy in order to facilitate research and develop media policy to promote its findings. They often organise in think-tanks and set up their own journals and alternative research outlets in an attempt to 'rival the hegemony of universities'. It is for Lubienski a concerted right-wing effort to create an alternative research structure and represents nothing less than the 'new political economy of research production and consumption in the USA' (43). Lubienski produces a forensic examination of the results of much of this advocacy research and dismantles it in powerful fashion: almost none of it has been subjected to peer review, there is a lack of academic rigour and integrity, and its findings are often tenuous. The original aims of the choice agenda in the US centred on equity, changing the approach of education professionals and improving academic standards. There is next-to-no evidence that this has worked – private schools' better results can more easily, and probably more convincingly, be explained by smaller class sizes – and even these well-funded research projects have reverted to arguing that choice is not only appropriate but harmless. Thus, as the research catalogue grows which is unable to support the choice mechanisms in the US, it must be assumed that policy-making has reverted back to an ideological rather than empirical mandate, 'designed

to privilege desire over data' (ibid.). It reminded me of the preference which has developed in recent years, and been accentuated under New Labour, for the case studies which are now routinely included and adduced in support of UK policy documents and the favouring of the views of political advisers on specialist subjects, such as education, rather than those from academic life.

There are downsides to the global range of the book. Its main shortcoming is that for readers who already have some knowledge of a particular country's education system, the treatment can sometimes seem rather cursory. In the case of Walford's chapter on school choice in England this is exacerbated by the fact that the book has been overtaken by events. There is no mention of the further intensification of privatisation in the state system through Academies and Trust schools because the book predates the publishing of the White Paper *Higher standards, better schools* and legislation following it. Not, of course, the fault of the author, but it does it leave the reader feeling somewhat dissatisfied.

The changing role of teachers and the school workforce labouring in a market-driven system is not really addressed and the book might have benefited from a more thorough consideration of this, since some interpretations of choice policy seem to subvert the very notion of professionalism in education. There is also a growing literature on the psychology of choice and this would have provided an added dimension to the book. If the book is updated, future editors should note too that some chapters would have benefited from a more rigorous proof-reading and editorial oversight. Overall, though, this is a good book which I will use in both my research and teaching.

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