

References

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Education and community, by Dianne Gereluk, London and New York, Continuum, 2008, xii + 206pp., £24.99, ISBN 978 1847 060396

One of the pivotal eras in the history of western ideas is centred on the notion of the social contract: the detailed examination of what happens when individuals cement the ‘deal’ that enables them to stick together as a community. The motives were defensive (avoiding chaos, as in Thomas Hobbes), aspirational (achieving our true humanity, as in John Locke) and political (proposing frameworks of accountable power, Jean-Jacques Rousseau). Together they – and others – constructed a dialogue which has continued to this day. One of the towering twentieth century figures in the genre is the American philosopher John Rawls, with his concept of a fair society as one which one would be willing to join without prior knowledge of our role or rewards.

Dianne Gereluk’s own examination of the potential of schools to assist in the construction of satisfactory communities is firmly within the Rawlsian tradition. Her goals are twofold: to establish the role of schools in ‘fostering communities’ (x) and to identify which types of community are ‘valuable and worthwhile in a liberal society’ (xi). In addition to Rawls, she draws heavily on the work of Friedrich Tönnies and John Dewey, and has a refreshingly critical approach to the ‘social capital’ simplicities of Robert Putnam, especially its difficulties with diversity.

The scaffolding of the argument is very clear (sometimes intrusively so – an admirably accessible text is heavily studded with interim summaries and cross-references). After an intriguing autobiographical introduction (beginning in a left-wing Ukrainian community in Canada), Part I of the book explores normative principles, notably the tensions that can undermine more idealistic concepts of community such as Putnam’s. Part II offers a normative theory, consistently returning to Rawls, justice and fairness, including through his concept of ‘reasonable pluralism’. An especially powerful section is the empirical test of the theory against the reality of three very different schools: an unashamedly ‘liberal’ institution, offering a ‘whole-school’ approach rooted in global citizenship; a Muslim school carefully negotiating its religiously-based commitments against the legal and social requirements of a wider society; and a Christian fundamentalist school, proudly and defiantly separatist in its ethos. As the author says, the middle case is the most interesting, probing ‘a difficult and grey area within a liberal conception of community’ (100). Part III looks explicitly at ‘community education’, especially within the context of a changing policy environment, with its increasing stress on prescription, on competition and upon accountability. In this context, ‘community’ can be appealed to in both naïve and manipulative fashion: ‘Community is everywhere, yet it is nowhere’ (12).

The upshot is what Gereluk (following David Halpin) calls in her final chapter ‘a realistic utopian view’ (175). This is based both in the theory (a basic structure of ‘fair terms of social cooperation’) and the empirical record of ‘myriad communities’ (177). The test for acceptability of the latter includes constraints set by principles of ‘justice’ and ‘equality’; in other words ‘diversity within the boundaries of reasonable pluralism’, with an inherent drive towards a reduction of educational inequality (177–78).

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