FORUM
Volume 54, Number 3, 2012
www.wwwords.co.uk/FORUM

Book Reviews

The Death and Life of the Great American School System: how testing and choice are undermining education
DIANE RAVITCH, 2010
New York: Basic Books
334 pages, £9.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-465-02557-2

> I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. (*St. Luke*, 15:7)

Diane Ravitch is one such sinner; and her repentance takes the form of this wonderful account of recent changes to the American schooling system, which, she now concedes, have failed to have a positive impact on the quality of American education, and should probably be viewed as malign.

A respected academic – she is currently a Research Professor of Education at New York University – Diane Ravitch was herself Assistant Secretary of Education in the administration of George Bush Snr, between 1991 and 1993, and she witnessed the triumph of neo-liberal, free-market views in such areas as education and health. And she is anxious to make the point early on in this book that wholesale acceptance of such views was not restricted to right-wing Republican politicians, where they might be expected to find enthusiastic adherents. Indeed, the policies initiated by the Bush Regime were pursued with vigour by all those working for President Bill Clinton between 1993 and 2001. Which reminds one of the situation in England, where all the principles underpinning the education reforms of Margaret Thatcher and John Major were taken on board by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

Professor Ravitch argues persuasively that one of the books which exerted a powerful influence on both Republican and Democratic politicians was *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools,* by John E. Chubb & Terry M. Moe, published in 1990. In this book, Chubb & Moe argued that poor student performance in schools was 'one of the prices Americans had to pay for choosing to exercise direct democratic control over their schools'. So long as state schools were subject to local democratic control, a number of powerful interest groups such as the teachers' unions and teacher training institutions would work hard to protect the *status quo* and ensure that schools could *never* be improved. The only way to bring about meaningful and lasting change in

schooling, and especially secondary schooling, was through a system of *school choice.*

The Government should provide funding directly to students in the form of vouchers, and they could use these to pay for an education in the public or private school of their choosing. At the same time, any group or organisation, including a private school, that was able to meet certain 'minimal criteria' could apply to the state and receive a charter to run a public school. Local districts could continue to run their own schools, but could exercise no authority over schools with charters.

So here we have a ground-breaking book which is advocating not simply a nationwide system of education vouchers but also the idea of *Charter Schools.* Professor Ravitch argues that by the end of the 1990s, both Democrats and Republicans had come to look upon the public school system as obsolete, because it was in the hands of central or local government, and burdened by bureaucracy.

Government-run schools, said this new generation of 'reformers', were generally in-effective because they acted as a *monopoly* and, as such, they had no incentive to do better and merely served the interests of all the adults who worked in the system and not those of the students themselves. Democrats and Republicans saw a golden opportunity here to 'shrink the state', hand over education to private interests, and destroy the power of the teachers' unions, which were seen as simply protecting jobs and pensions, while blocking effective management and innovation. Diane Ravitch thinks it is easy to understand the bipartisan appeal of Charter Schools: 'free of direct government control, these schools would be innovative, hire only the best teachers, get rid of incompetent teachers, set their own pay scales, compete for the best students or 'customers', and be judged solely by their results in the form of test scores and also graduation rates' (p. 10).

Professor Ravitch admits that like many others in that era, she was attracted to the idea that the market would unleash innovation and progress, and lead to a far more efficient education system. But she has now repudiated many of the key positions she once held, and believes that the steady undermining of education as a 'public service' has had all manner of harmful consequences including the creation of greater injustice and inequality. It is simply wrong to embrace the agenda of choice and accountability whose end-result is entirely 'speculative and uncertain'. She concludes with an uplifting statement of her belief in 'a strong and vibrant public education system', which celebrates the limitless potential of all students:

> We need to reorient our social and educational vision to see each and every child as a precious human being – a person of endless potential. Not as someone rated by his or her test scores. Not defined by his or her family demographics. But as a person who is growing, developing, in need of adult guidance, in need of a challenging and liberating education, an education of possibilities and passion. (p. 288)

This is a brilliant statement of what education is all about, but, sadly, as the author concedes, 'far removed from our present rhetoric and strategies for education reform'.

Clyde Chitty

Changing Schools: alternative ways to make a world of difference
TERRY WRIGLEY, PAT THOMSON & BOB LINGARD (Eds), 2012
Abingdon: Routledge
220 pages, £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-55860-0

We need more books like this. Not only does it demonstrate the practicability of socially just, humanly fulfilling, intellectually demanding and creatively compelling alternatives to the dreariness and desolation of dominant models of education in many school systems across the world, it does so in ways that inspire and enable.

With contributors from Australia, Brazil, England, Germany, Norway and the USA, its 14 Case Studies of teachers, students and communities working successfully and vibrantly, often against considerable odds, provide a wonderful resource. Both theoretically rich and empirically enabling, this is a book that demonstrates 'the difference education can make' (p. 212); a book that wrestles with injustice through naming it, confronting it and transcending it; a book that demonstrates, in one of Tim Brighouses's favourite phrases, 'It does not have to be like this.'

The opening and closing chapters that frame the case studies not only provide a compelling analytic account, both of what we should oppose and what we might do instead. At its best their manner of telling is at one with the substance of their advocacy. Thus, 'Schools' not only focus on learning, they also focus on 'serving rather than the provision of services. ... (They) enact education as a public good' (p. 4). As befits three of our leading engaged academics whose values and experience have contributed much to emancipatory praxis, there is an edginess and urgency to many of their insights that suggest knowledge born of engagement and struggle over time, to 'hard intellectual and emotional work against the odds and, often, prevailing policy trends' (p. 4).

Of the many dimensions of this excellent book likely to appeal to Forum readers there are two that strike me as particularly apposite as our increasingly impoverished public education system is dispatched to the poorhouse of market ideology by an authoritarian Secretary of State increasingly intoxicated by the blandishments of misremembered nostalgia and the presumptive arrogance and self-congratulation so typical of patrician government.

The first concerns a commitment to 'differentiation' without resorting to flawed notions of 'ability'. Serendipitously consonant with the focus of the next issue (Volume 55 No.1, Spring 2013) of *FORUM* which will explore '*Fixed*

Ability' Thinking, and Ability-based Practices in English Schools, the assumptions, dispositions and practices that challenge 'Fixed Ability' thinking weave their way through the tapestry of the book's narrative. Thus, in the first of their overview chapters Pat Thomson, Bob Lingard & Terry Wrigley insist that

> All of the schools (in this collection) demonstrate that it is possible to differentiate – that is to tailor-make the curriculum for the specific interests, concerns, languages, needs, identities and knowledges of particular individuals and groups of children and young people – without this becoming a means of creating hierarchies of 'ability'. There are various ways to group students that do not involve tracking and setting, and in this book they include new structures of collaborative learning, breaking the age-grade nexus, and using structures that keep groups of children and teachers together over longer periods of time. (p. 11)

Thus, in Chapter 3 on the Laboratory School at the University of Bielefeld in Germany we read that the last of the school's six principles which guide its work insists that 'Individual learning is not tested normatively and reported back comparatively. The Laboratory School entirely avoids giving marks or grades until the end of Year 9 but reports on pupils' learning in terms of their own progress' (p. 28). Furthermore, evaluations of this approach 'have confirmed the benefit of the school's policy to delay giving numerical marks or grades until these are finally required for transition at age 16 to the next stage of education or training. Such competitive marks are regarded as humiliating and demotivating for many' (p. 30).

The second aspect of the book likely to resonate strongly with Forum readers is the pervasive insistence that we go back to purposes, to fundamental questions about the nature of education and what it means to lead good lives together; that, in the words of Bjorn Bolstad, we resist 'the winds that have been blowing across the Western world ... (that) have demanded a focus on 'basic skills', established test systems, and focused more on short term results than long-term development' (p. 44). These more profound and more important understandings of what education could and should be recur again and again throughout the book. Among the most eloquent and inspiring explorations of both their necessity and their possibility informing the daily practice and future aspirations of teachers, young people and communities comes from the remarkable chapter on the Landless Workers' Movement in Brazil which opens thus:

> We are living in an age when humanity is in danger and when capitalism, now hegemonic across the world, is showing itself ever more dehumanizing and cruel in its logic. As teachers, we need to look to the horizon and to open ourselves up as educators to the experience of constructing alternatives for humanity. You cannot truly teach without this broader vision. (p. 71)

Finally, in bringing this review to a close, let me draw again on the chapter by Roseli Salete Caldart and the Movement of Landless Workers in Brazil. Reflecting on what they call 'the pedagogy of history' they argue that 'Collective memory is fundamental for the reconstruction of identity' (p. 76). They argue, too, that it is important to 'situate the pedagogy of the (Landless Workers') Movement within the broad history of education and pedagogy. However, to do so, we need to turn the official history upside down. We need a 'pedagogical occupation' of the territory of educational history' (p. 82).

They are right, not only because, as I have argued in an earlier issue of *FORUM* (Vol 47, Nos 2 & 3), we must reclaim and renew the radical traditions of education we too easily and too wastefully forget. They are right in the contemporary sense that 'occupy' now carries with it: 'occupy' as a transgressive affirmation of an alternative way of living in and changing the world; occupy as a mass movement; occupy as, in a phrase emblematic of anarchist, syndicalist, and libertarian socialist traditions, 'the creation of a new world in the shell of the old.'

Concluding their remarkable chapter 'Educating in the margins: lessons for the mainstream', Glenda McGregor, Martin Mills & Pat Thomson argue that 'the mainstream needs to look to the kinds of alternative schools ... foregrounded in this chapter to learn from them how best to ensure that government schooling is indeed for all.' (p. 58). Indeed so, and in a more extended sense of 'alternative school'; in the sense of 'alternative schools' as mainstream schools that have, together with their radical forbears, pioneered the kind of education which Glenda McGregor, Martin Mills and Pat Thomson demonstrate is both desirable and possible in the here-and-now of neo-liberal desolation. My applauding annotations in the margins of almost every chapter again and again reminded me of my own experience as a teacher in radical community comprehensive secondary schools (Thomas Bennett Community School, Crawley and Stantonbury Campus, Milton Keynes) in the 1970s and 1980s. This is not to hark back to a chimerical golden age or to mythologise schools that were as imperfect as any human undertaking must inevitably be: rather it is to urge us to understand better than we currently do how the kinds of work described so convincingly in this book and exemplified by places like Stantonbury and Thomas Bennett can be sustained and developed in unpropitious times.

Read this book, lend it to friends, tell colleagues about it, get your library to buy at least one copy. It is a practical book which illustrates not only the inspirational power of telling each other stories of how the world could be different now; it is also testimony to the well-known adage (which the authors themselves acknowledge) that there is 'nothing as practical as good theory'. It is a book which, in the words of the editors, presents 'evidence of small narratives of progressive school change, and as thinking towards a reimagined future, which could result in reworked schooling systems and different policy frames, as part of a new social democratic imaginary' (p. 12). Above all else this is a book of hope, one which demonstrates 'ways of working that hold promise for

renewed educational possibilities' (p. 8). Now, more than for many years, those possibilities need to be made more visible and more compelling. Citing Raymond Williams's observation that progressive politics is always about making hope practical, rather than despair convincing, they insist their collection does not rest on 'stupid optimism': rather it offers 'good reasons for hope and (a recognition of) the necessity of hope as we struggle towards a better future' (p. 12). It does indeed and I thank them and applaud them for it.

Michael Fielding