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Book Review

Living on the Edge: rethinking poverty, class and schooling
JOHN SMYTH & TERRY WRIGLEY, 2013
New York: Peter Lang
239 pp., £24 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-4331-1685-8

Class divisions have always been a powerful force in education in England, but they have been exacerbated in recent years as the twin forces of neo-liberalism and globalisation have taken hold and the gap between rich and poor has grown ever wider – a process which looks set to accelerate as the present government pursues ruthless austerity.

As Robin Alexander, chair of the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, has written:

> what government has given with one hand via the Pupil Premium it has taken away with another through economic and social policies that have made Britain the most unequal OECD country in Europe in terms of income distribution, with 3.5 million of its children living in poverty (with numbers predicted to rise further) and one million people dependent on food banks. (Cambridge Primary Review Trust, 5 May 2015).

Why should this be so? What is the relationship between class and poverty? How are children affected? What sort of schools and education policies might begin to repair the damage? These are the questions which John Smyth and Terry Wrigley seek to answer in *Living on the Edge*. They deal with the issues in an international context but with a focus on developments in the United Kingdom, North America and Australia.

Living on the Edge is in three parts. Part One examines the nature of class and poverty; Part Two looks at how individuals, families and communities are blamed for their own poverty; Part Three considers the role of the school and suggests policies and strategies which could improve opportunities not only for the poor but for all students.

But first, in their Introduction, Smyth and Wrigley give an overview of the subject, covering the effects of neo-liberalism and globalisation; the history of mass schooling in England and the USA; the fallacious theory of inherited intelligence, which 'not only blames the victims but makes low achievement

seem inevitable' (p. 9); the way linguistic difference is often treated as deficit; the assumption that young people growing up in poverty lack ambition; and the flawed research on school effectiveness and school improvement which results in recommendations which 'not only leave neoliberal economistic aims and government surveillance methods unchallenged, but also treat each school as an autonomous manageable entity in competition with other schools' (p. 10).

In considering the curriculum and pedagogy, they raise serious questions about 'the recourse to vocationalism as an alternative rather than a complement to academic learning' (p. 10); and they note that limited kinds of teaching tend to predominate in schools serving areas of poverty. They acknowledge that education for work is important but argue that in the current utilitarian climate we need to insist on a wider vision of the work of schools. They see current forms of accountability as a form of political bullying which 'does nothing to promote greater equality of achievement, let alone engagement or enjoyment', and they hope their book will 'help to keep alive a more fruitful and just understanding of educational change' (p. 12).

In Part One, 'Understanding Class and Poverty', Smyth and Wrigley provide the conceptual and sociological foundation underpinning the issues. They examine class in economic and cultural terms, explain the traditional terminology (upper, middle, working class, etc.), and argue that the labelling of the most vulnerable section of the working class as an 'underclass' is 'intensely destructive' (p. 31).

They seek to explain the nature of poverty – a 'misunderstood phenomenon' (p. 39) – and how it derives from class divisions. They argue that 'there are structural causes for poverty in the fundamental inequalities of exploitation and dispossession, exacerbated by the seismic shifts of globalization and neoliberalism' (pp. 39-40).

They examine poverty's links with differences of race, gender and disability, its geographical distribution, and its effects in terms of defeat and demoralisation, stigma and marginalisation. They note that 'Children are at greater risk of poverty than the population as a whole' (p. 51), notably in England, the USA and Canada, and that this has 'a substantial effect on educational achievement' (p. 51). They conclude that

> children and families in more affluent countries do not generally face poverty because of personal inadequacies or violent tendencies nor from individual or social peculiarity, individual fecklessness, or a collective culture, but because they are the most vulnerable section of an exploited class that is economically and politically under attack due to the limitless greed of the one percent who control the lives of others. (p. 55)

In Part Two, 'Blaming Individuals, Families and Communities', Smyth and Wrigley examine the 'long history of seeking to place the blame for academic underachievement outside the school system' (p. 57). They note that students, parents and neighbourhoods have traditionally been the targets of this culture

of blame, but more recently individual schools in areas of poverty have come under attack.

They confront 'the myths of fixed, singular, and inherited intelligence that have been used to tilt the education system in favour of some young people to the considerable detriment of many others' (p. 81) and conclude that 'rethinking what is meant by intelligence is crucial to the way marginalized young people and their families are treated educationally' (p. 81). They suggest that language deficit theories – focusing on class in the United Kingdom and race in the USA – have often replaced the discredited theory of inherited intelligence. They reject the notion that children from working-class families are unambitious and argue that 'we need to show them real possibilities and provide genuine pathways and opportunities' (p. 120).

In Part Three, 'The Role of the School', Smyth and Wrigley argue that much school effectiveness research is flawed, but that it is used by politicians as 'yet another excuse for not facing up to the massive economic divisions in society: the implication is that it is not poverty but poor teaching that is damaging young people' (p. 129). They bemoan the hypocrisy of politicians, government agencies and the media, who 'seem not to notice the contradiction between stigmatizing the most marginalized sections of society and castigating those whose job it is to educate them' (p. 130).

In their examination of neo-liberal school reform, they note that the privatisation of education was intended to drive up standards by increasing competition, but in fact it has 'proved to be a mechanism for promoting social segregation' (p. 143). They note Diane Ravitch's damning indictment of this process in the USA – 'all the more telling because she is a veteran scholar of unimpeachable conservative values' (p. 143).

They highlight the inadequacies of dominant models of school improvement, and examine issues of school culture and structure, including patterns of differentiation. They note that '[s]ocial class is a significant predictor of set placement' (p. 160) and warn that labelling children becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: 'The characteristics of a C stream child come into being through the existence of C streams' (p. 162).

They offer some key principles for socially just curricula and pedagogies, rejecting the idea that a curriculum can be based predominantly on 'basic skills' taught outside an engaging context. Education, they say, should be seen as liberation, not control. They bemoan the fact that poor children are often subjected to a 'pedagogy of poverty' in which 'we see the self-fulfilling prophecy of low ability at work when some teachers decide to limit what they teach because the children do not know much' (p.178).

They argue for authentic forms of learning and assessment, and for 'real literacy' (p. 188): 'Versions of literacy that squeeze out interpretation and self-expression in favour of the technical features of reading and writing simply dumb down human development' (p. 189). They note that

> The neoliberal era has increasingly sought to control schools through tests of basic literacy and numeracy, resulting in a neglect of

> critical and creative activity and of many other curriculum areas. In England particularly, this has been reinforced by the publication of league tables of test results, by an intimidatory inspection regime, and by performance-related pay for teachers. (p. 194)

In their Conclusion, 'Schools for Social Justice: theories of good practice', Smyth and Wrigley bring together 'the basic principles of an alternative framework' (p. 196). They argue for 'a different way of doing education – one in which the structure and culture of schools and what goes on in them are radically reconstructed' (p. 200). There is no reason, they argue, why England, Australia and the USA should have education systems based on inequality, and they offer some principles for renewal in terms of ethos and community, curriculum and pedagogy, meaningful collaboration and purposeful leadership.

Living on the Edge is a profoundly important book, and given that the policies of the present UK government are likely to make the situation worse, a timely one for British readers. I hope it will be widely read.

I have to say that I found Part One (on the theoretical underpinnings of class and poverty) heavy going. It reads like a textbook for a degree course in sociology and I had to reread some of the jargon-filled paragraphs several times to try to grasp their meaning. Now, I readily acknowledge that the fault here is probably mine: it is many years since I did my MA and I am out of practice when it comes to reading academic material. I would urge readers not to be put off: either persevere (as I did) or skip to Part Two.

The contrast between the dry theoretical language of Part One and the commitment and vigour of Parts Two and Three is stark, for it is here that the 'the power of ideas and the passion with which we hold them' (p. vii) become clear. Smyth and Wrigley have written a damning critique of the damage wrought by a neo-liberal economic system in which the few have much and the many have little, an education system which mirrors and so prolongs these divisions, and a culture which blames the victim. They offer a humane and compassionate manifesto for decency and fairness for all children, but especially for the many whose lives are blighted by the effects of poverty. Moreover, they provide practical suggestions as to how this could be achieved at both national and local level. They challenge all of us who care about the education of our children and about the nature of our society to fight for a better future:

> Since social justice cannot be achieved by schools alone, this will involve new combinations of action within schools and in the wider society. We have to exert collective power to bring about serious change in schools and struggle alongside marginalized young people for their right to life beyond the edge. (p. 208)

Postscript

On the morning I finished writing this review two news items caught my attention. In *The Guardian,* economics editor Larry Elliott reported that 'Even

the IMF recognises the vicious circle in which inequality breeds instability, which causes recession and spending cuts that make inequality worse'. The IMF's study of inequality, he wrote, 'contained a helpful chart showing that the Nordic countries tend to have the highest levels of equality and social mobility, while the US and the UK have the lowest. There is no trade off between the two' (*The Guardian*, 22 June 2015).

And on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, government apologist Dr Samantha Callan was asked about the proposed draconian cuts in welfare spending. In a classic example of the culture of blame, she claimed that child poverty was about more than income. 'We have to tackle the root causes of poverty', she said, and she listed 'poor education, serious personal debt, very importantly, family breakdown, drug and alcohol addiction, poor mental health and welfare dependency' (BBC Radio 4 *Today* 22 June 2015).

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Reference

Cambridge Primary Review Trust (2015) *Election 2015: here we stand.* 5 May. http://cprtrust.org.uk/cprt-blog/election-2015-here-we-stand/