REVIEW ESSAY

EDUCATIONAL REFORM AND THE POLITICS OF CHANGE

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BOOKS REVIEWED

D. REYNOLDS, B. CREEMERS, S. STRINGFIELD, C. TEDDLIE, & G. SCHAFFER. *World Class Schools: International perspectives on school effectiveness.* London: Routledge Falmer (2002). 310 pp. C$71.95. (ISBN 0-415-25348-9).

M. WALLACE & K. POCKLINGTON. *Managing Complex Educational Change: Large-scale reorganisation of schools.* London: Routledge Falmer (2002). 245 pp. C$53.95. (ISBN 0-415-20097-0).

A. DATNOW, L. HUBBARD, & H. MEHAN. *Extending Educational Reform: From one school to many.* London: Routledge Farmer (2002). 179 pp. C$34.95. (ISBN 0-415-24070-0).

Introduction

The last quarter of the twentieth century will almost certainly be looked back on by historians of education as an era of hyper-reform. Beginning with the school effectiveness movement of the early 1970s, the drive to reform educational systems found expression in an array of policies and initiatives – vouchers, charter schools, educational restructuring, school improvement, school choice and diversity, the new vocationalism etc., – aimed primarily, though not exclusively, at public schools over this period. Though the reform movement first emerged in the advanced capitalist countries of the West, with globalisation it has now spread to eastern Europe and the less developed countries of the South, as indicated by the World Bank's 'Global Educational Reform' website (World Bank 2003). Educational reform, it might be said, has literally gone global as we enter the 21st century.

From their different perspectives, the three books reviewed in this essay can be seen as carrying over the debate on educational reform into the new millenium. In *World Class Schools*, Reynolds and his colleagues examine the impact of school effectiveness approaches across nine countries. The au-

thors' focus is clearly demarcated by themes and issues that have defined school effectiveness research for almost thirty years. Based on research conducted in England over the 1990s, Wallace and Pocklington's *Managing Complex Educational Change* explores the implications of large-scale educational reorganisation for school principals and local government officials. While it takes up some of the issues addressed by Reynolds et al, its focus is on what can be called the 'meso' (or mid-range) conditions of managing change across schools within school boards. Last, *Extending Educational Reform*, by Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan, offers a radically different approach to conceptualising educational reform than that advanced by the other two books. Focused on recent attempts to 'scale up' educational reform in the US, the authors develop an analysis of school reform initiatives generated from within a critical sociology of education.

In what follows we review how each book conceptualizes educational reform. We do this by critically exploring the major themes and issues with which they engage. The last section of the paper takes up some of these themes and issues in a discussion of educational reform, aiming to suggest new avenues for future research.

World Class Schools (Reynolds et al)

Reynolds et al begin their edited collection of essays with a dedication 'To the children of the world – may they get the educational science that they need.' In many ways this dedication captures the essence of *World Class Schools* which, as its subtitle suggests, is anchored in research on school effectiveness. From its inception in the early 1970s, school effectiveness research emerged as a reaction to sociological investigations which suggested that forces external to the school had a determining impact on the educational outcomes of students. While these studies initially focused on family background as either promoting or hindering students' educational achievement, later work conducted within the new sociology of education was to reveal how schools actually reproduced class, gender and race relations that directly contributed to educational inequality (Young 1971).

Alternately, school effectiveness research has consistently attempted to show that the quality of schooling (the school effect) a pupil receives during compulsory education is central in determining her educational outcomes. Thus the dedication to "educational science" in Reynolds et al. For the authors of this volume the key to understanding educational success/failure is whether or not students have access to schools with the kind of educational science that defines an effective school. Using data collected under the auspices of the International School Effectiveness Research Project (ISERP), the book presents a multi-year, comparative study of schools using primarily quantitative measures to determine their level of success in imple-

menting such an educational science. In this respect *World Class Schools* claims to be 'intellectually and practically' at the 'cutting edge' of school effectiveness research in the contemporary period with its comparative/ global reach.

The book is organized into three sections. Part one is composed of three chapters: the first explores the intellectual and policy context of the school effectiveness movement; the second marks out the methodological ap- proach of ISERP; and the third presents an analysis of the quantitative data from the study. Part two constitutes the core of the book with its nine chapters on case studies of 'more effective and less effective schools' in nine countries taken from North America (Canada and the United States), Asia (Hong Kong and Taiwan), Australia and Europe (Netherlands, Norway, Irish Republic, and United Kingdom). Part three concludes with two chap- ters that, respectively, are concerned with a comparative analysis of data generated from the nine case studies and a review of ISERPs major findings. With the contributions of the five editors, the book has brought together work conducted by 31 school effectiveness researchers in nine countries across five continents. In its organization and scope, therefore, the book presents an impressive and comprehensive overview of scholarly debate, methodological trajectories, and policy implications and trends that define school effectiveness research in the contemporary period. In this respect *World Class Schools* makes a significant addition to the literature on school effectiveness.

However, while Reynolds and his colleagues may break new ground within the context of school effectiveness, this book – as does the wider literature – either fails to engage with, or willfully ignores, research conducted by sociologists of education that potentially subverts the very foundations on which the conceptual practices of school effectiveness have been con- structed over the last 30 years. As Angus (1993; 1994), Elliott (1998), and Smyth (1993) have pointed out, despite their broad appeal among teachers, administrators and policy makers, school effectiveness approaches perpetu- ate a vision of schooling that is inherently one dimensional. This has been expressed through several recurrent themes within the broader literature and these themes are also reproduced within *World Class Schools*.

First, there is a persistent tendency to abstract schools from the social, cultural and political contexts in which they exist. Issues such as class, gender, race or historical processes (such as colonization in the case of aboriginal people) are either seen as irrelevant or are reduced to quantita- tive measures that deny the complexity of the impact of these factors on contemporary schooling. Second, the reification of schools is further rein- forced by a commitment to a methodological positivism that eschews any form of sociological analysis in favour of a limited problem-solving approach

that aims to provide quick fixes to enduring educational problems. Third, this positivist orientation is coupled with a form of technical-rationality which assumes that educational problems can be fixed by technical means. Interventions aimed at, for example, improving test scores, student attendance or the quality of leadership in a school are viewed as managerial (instead of educational) problems. Fourth, although school effectiveness research purports to be an apolitical educational science, it is both significant and telling how governments and international agencies pursuing neo-liberal agendas have embraced it in implementing educational reform (e.g. World Bank and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). The very problematic impact of the reform process on schools around the globe, particularly on teachers (see Robertson and Smaller 1996; Sinclair et al. 1996; Smyth 2001), casts a long shadow over the apparent neutrality of this type of research, particularly its connections with neo-liberalism. Last, the search for best practices or common factors that produce effective schools can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism in which educational technologies, such as school effectiveness, have been implicated since the inception of mass schooling in the mid-nineteenth century. Just as nineteenth century educational reformers viewed schools to be profoundly connected with "progress" and "improvement" in the new social order that was emerging, so it was that they envisioned these new institutions as a means to orchestrate forms of cultural and class control (Johnson 1970). With the 'internationalization of the field' that World Class Schools is attempting to pioneer, it appears that this process is to be harnessed to neo-liberal globalization as we enter the 21st century.

Managing Complex Educational Change (Wallace and Pocklington)

The book by Wallace and Pocklington seeks to address what they view as a lacuna in contemporary research on educational reform. As they put it, 'We are centrally concerned with managing complex educational change' (p.xii). Drawing on case study research conducted in 18 English schools and their respective local education authorities (LEAs) over two years, the authors focus on how senior LEA officials and school principals mediate and implement large-scale reorganisation of schools that have occurred as a direct consequence of educational reforms over the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, while their concerns can be located within the field of educational management per se, it is the practice of management within a period of complex educational change – "complex" because of the extent, frequency and intensity of reforms directed at schools over these decades – that is the focus of the book. Although the book does not aim to produce a manual or toolkit for aiding administrators and principals, Wallace and Pocklington do claim to be concerned with generating 'knowledge for action' that educational practitioners can utilise when confronted with complex change processes.

The book begins with a very useful and informative chapter on educational reforms introduced in the English educational system over the 1990s. This is followed by a chapter on 'Unpacking complexity' which, as its title suggests, attempts to define how the authors understand and operationalize the concept. As well, it outlines the design and methods employed in their research. Chapter three presents 'an eclectic conceptual framework' that draws on both pluralist and neo-Marxist theoretical perspectives in an attempt to understand 'agency and the impact of structural limits on its operation' in the management of complex educational change (p.46). Chapters four through seven then move on to explore, respectively, the origins, management, implementation, and institutionalization of education initiatives discussed in the book. A concluding chapter attempts to consolidate the findings of these chapters in outlining a '"knowledge for action" agenda'. This comprises a discussion of transformational leadership, questions of equity in educational change, and 'change management themes' generated by their case studies (p.210).

In writing *Managing Complex Educational Change*, Wallace and Pocklington have produced a sophisticated and nuanced account of how educational reform is refracted and then emerges in new or 're-structured' types of social organization and practice within LEAs and schools. This book is also important in the contribution it makes to our understanding of how periods of rapid and multiple policy shifts (that characterized the English educational system over the 1980s and 1990s) can produce complex change processes that require the generation of alternative approaches to educational leadership and management. Since evidence from around the world suggests that this is not a peculiarly English experience, particularly given the spread of globalization, it is likely that the book's theme, managing complex educational change, will attract increasing attention from policy makers concerned with educational reform in the international arena. Unfortunately, in our view the book has three weaknesses that compromise its contribution.

The first problem with this book is the unnecessarily dense and highly conceptual language that it employs. Consider the following examples: 'Complex educational change tests the potential of agency to the structural limit in a context of global competition where change costs threaten to overburden the public sector' (p.51). Or, 'The process of interaction culminating in these outcomes was interpreted as the pluralistic and unequal but reciprocal channeling and delimiting of individuals' agency inside deeper structural limits imposed by unquestioned assumptions and economic conditions' (p.209). Unfortunately the book is replete with such sentences that seem to jump off almost every page. Second, at the level of theory, the authors' utilization of liberal-pluralist and neo-Marxist perspectives seems very unconvincing. Without being theoretically purist, it does seem odd, at

the very least, to combine two distinct theoretical traditions that histori-cally have been fundamentally opposed and contradictory. Although the argument for using them makes some superficial sense i.e. pluralism is strong on agency and weak on structure, while neo-Marxism is good on structure but weak on agency, it is nevertheless a facile reading of these two theoreti-cal traditions which leads to the belief that they can be somehow synthe-sized. Third, we find the central theme of the book's analysis, 'complex educational change,' to be problematic. As sociologist Howard Becker (1986) has pointed out, social scientists are apt to use abstract words that, while they act as placeholders, have no particular meaning in themselves. One such word is "complex" which, as he notes, '. . . doesn't tell us, it just says, "Believe me, there's a lot to it," which most people would concede about almost anything' (p.83).

While Wallace and Pocklington provide myriad examples of educational change, the reader is still left wondering what makes this "complex"? Moreo-ver, when they do provide an example of what they define as a continuum of complexity, they misconstrue it. This is particularly evident in chapter two where in their description of a continuum they define a teacher's routine experience of receiving a new class of students as 'simple,' whereas large-scale reorganization of schools is determined by the authors to be 'highly complex' (p.25) Surely this can't be. As numerous ethnographies have shown, classrooms are dynamic, multi-layered, multi-faceted, and highly nuanced environments in terms of social organization, inter-personal communication, teacher-student interactions, spatial relationships and so on (Hammersly 1993). One is left wondering whether, for Wallace and Pocklington, the notion of complex is simply reserved for instances involv-ing the change process as it presents itself to managers.

Extending Educational Reform (Datnow, Hubbard & Mehan)

Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan's book not only offers a theoretically sophis-ticated account of educational reform, it also marks out new paths for understanding and conceptualizing the reform process that technical-ra-tional accounts have hitherto been unwilling or unable to provide. Despite the book's orientation toward the US market – where school effectiveness and improvement approaches reign supreme – Datnow and her co-authors have not compromised. They have written an account of educational reform that is informed by a critical sociology of education that challenges and reformulates taken-for-granted axioms in the literature that have prevailed for the last quarter century. In this respect alone, the book is a timely and refreshing departure from a literature that is saturated in one-dimensional thought (Marcuse 1964).

Extending Educational Reform explores the impact of nine school-based initiatives in the US aimed at 'scaling up' educational reform. Based on two longitudinal research studies and several smaller research projects conducted across the US between 1996 - 2000, the authors develop an analysis of educational reform that attempts to go beyond the managerialist discourse of school effectiveness and school improvement approaches. The book attempts to do this in three ways.

First, it challenges dominant models and concepts of educational reform, noting that not only do these rarely originate from teachers, but that they are increasingly saturated with a lexicon borrowed from the private or corporate sector. Over the last decade concepts such as "client," "voucher," "accountability," "efficiency" and the ubiquitous "value added" have 'come into wide use among policymakers, educators, and researchers' (p.3). As the authors note, it is not only questionable whether such concepts are appropriate, but they render a vision of schools as if they were businesses operating in a market. Second, instead of embracing an educational science, Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan develop an alternative theoretical framework of educational reform as a 'co-constructed process.' This implies an analysis that attends 'to the possibilities and constraints of the political and economic conditions (including, but not limited to the changing nature of work, capitalism, and race, class and gender inequalities etc.) of society at large when we attempt to understand, much less implement, school reform' (p.17). Flowing from this framework, they develop an analysis of scaling up reform initiatives that systematically engages with the 'agents' (i.e. principals, teachers and other educational practitioners)' responses to reforms, as well as the 'structural' (i.e. social, economic, and political) conditions under which they occur. In doing this, the authors move debate beyond the managerialist imperatives of school effectiveness and improvement, to consider for example, issues of teacher ideologies, participation and resistance in the reform process. Third, the book draws a clear connection between educational reform and an ethic of social justice. Unlike the managerialist and business-like orientation of many contemporary educational reforms aimed at schools in the US (one thinks of the Edison Corporation, Channel One and the rhetoric of the Bush administration's *No Child Left Behind* (Department of Education 2002)), Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan emphasise that, 'A concerted effort must exist on the part of design teams and school-site educators to accomplish social justice goals' (p.137). In asserting the centrality of social justice issues in educational reform, these authors make a welcome intervention in a literature that is too often preoccupied with narrow managerial and technical concerns rather than the underlying ethics of what it means to participate in a democratic education.

This book makes both a valuable and timely contribution to the literature on educational reform. Drawing on extensive empirical research in schools,

the authors have managed to produce a text that will encourage policy makers, administrators, and teachers to reflect on and critically re-examine their experiences of educational reform. With its clearly written and accessible style, and its excellent description of the impact of scaling up initiatives (that are usefully summmarized in an appendix), this book deserves a wide readership.

Conclusion

All three books, therefore, make a significant contribution to the way in which we can understand and implement educational reform in the contemporary period. However, where *World Class Schools* and *Managing Complex Educational Change* elaborate an essentially technical-managerial agenda for educational reform, *Extending Educational Reform* offers a sustained critique of this type of analysis through the adoption of a critical sociology of education. In doing this, Datnow, Hubbard and Mehan shift the debate on educational reform away from a narrowly conceived "educational science," to questions about the relationship of schools to neo-liberal globalisation, the changing nature of teachers' and administrators' work, and the politics of educational reform itself. These issues are either neglected or completely marginalized in much of the literature.

Another absence in the literature, and something that is not adequately addressed in any of the texts reviewed above, is a concerted attempt to connect contemporary developments in policy and practice with any kind of historical analysis. If reference is made to this, it is most often construed as history as a context for the reforms being discussed. Yet educational reform is as much a historical as a social process that not only connects the past with the present, but where much of what is happening now will almost certainly prefigure the future. It seems to us that while school effectiveness researchers have much to gain from sociologists of education, the same sociologists have equally as much to learn from historians, particularly historical sociologists, working on education (Corrigan & Corrigan, 1979; Corrigan et al., 1980; Corrigan & Sayer, 1985; Curtis 1995). However, it should be recognized that broadening the analysis of educational reform in this way will likely pose more difficult questions about the nature of the contemporary reform process.

As we noted above, early nineteenth century reformers who pioneered systems of publicly provided education viewed their activities emerging from the enlightenment tradition of progress, improvement and modernization. However, they were also very conscious of the fact that their work was intimately connected to the fabrication of an emerging bourgeois society that required new forms of moral regulation aimed at "civilizing" subaltern groups e.g. the emerging working class, women, ethnic minorities etc (Cor-

rigan et al., 1987; Paterson, 1988; Paterson, 1989; Paterson, 1991). Whether as the classed and gendered curriculum of the "English tradition" in elementary schools (Bailey 1990), or the devastating impact that residential schools have had on aboriginal communities (Milloy 1999), schooling has been closely connected with State power, colonization, and social control. Yet despite this legacy and the present climate of neo-liberal globalization that appears to be reinvigorating these processes, research on contemporary educational reform has not engaged with these issues. When it does, we may witness a profound reconceptualization of not only the literature on educational reform but also the very assumptions, values, and practices on which the educational project is presently founded.

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