ACCESS △

BOOK REVIEW

Disabling Policies? A Comparative Approach to Education Policy and Disability, by G. Fulcher, Falmer Press, 1989, 287pp

Disabling Policies is an ambitious enterprise which draws on the experience the author gained as the main policy analyst for the controversial 1984 Victoria Ministerial Review of Educational Services for the Disabled. Within the contours of the book Fulcher seeks to address some serious shortcomings in both the special education and policy literature by: providing a comprehensive comparison of policies on special education across several countries; examining these policies using a sophisticated theoretical framework; and ultimately, highlighting the political nature of integration. Given the range and complexity of these tasks it is not surprising that they are met with varying degrees of success.

The backbone and strength of the book is the collation and finely textured analysis of policy statements on the education of students with disabilities in Scandinavia, Australia, America and Britain. A wealth of information on legislation, recent major reports, education department policy statements and other related literature is provided, which special educators will find particularly useful. Also of interest is the analysis of this information. Fulcher dismisses standard practices like disputing the dominant medical model on disability and arguing for a relocation within an educational model, or, wielding the American Public Law 94-142 or the British Warnock Report as the measure of all things integrational. Instead she argues that 'disability' is both a socially constructed and a disputed category, and suggests five main discourses which inform its construction - namely medical, lay, charity, rights, and corporate discourses. This provides a powerful tool indeed for interrogating and comparing policy statements. We find, for example, that PL942-142 is shaped by the conflicting discourses of a medical model, the political theme of needs-charity, a submerged theme of professionalism, and an overt discourse of rights. On the other hand, Scandinavian educational policy tends to reflect more consensus and is informed by a dominant pedagogical discourse. Not only does this analysis make meaningful sense of policy documents but, as Fulcher points out, it has clear implications for the way policy implementation proceeds.

Unfortunately these strengths are weakened greatly by the way that 'policy' itself is conceived and theorised within the introduction. Within this critical first section of the book the reader is taken on an excursion through the policy literature and recent sociological theory. Here some insightful comments are certainly made - such as misleading dichotomies between theory /practice and policy formulation/policy implementation, and domination by a wieldy model of policy as something that happens from the top-down. Yet the way power is then conceived is incredibly difficult to actually pin down. According to Fulcher policy is, for example, both written and enacted, made at all levels of the educational sphere, and something which is 'inserted into the educational apparatus'. Although the reader is left with the overwhelming impression that policy is important and that it is not simply about written documents, there are few other connecting clues as to exactly what it might be. More disappointing than this conceptual messiness is that in the final analysis education policy becomes anything that has to do with educational endeavour, and, the power relations involved in policy are rendered invisible.

This problematic theorising of policy is exacerbated further in the comparative analyses. Here policy largely becomes an analysis of written legislation and recent reports. Instead of challenging and reconceptualising the policy formulation/policy implementation dichotomy (and although using the Foucauldian notion of 'discourse' which challenges duality), Fulcher ends up reinforcing

It. This is indeed a shame, because the book has some important and useful comments to make about the effects of written policy as one form of contested educational practice on other educational practice.

The book has other problems as well. Firstly, although disability and its discourses are theorised very lucidly, additional discourses like 'pedagogy' crop up suddenly and inexplicably within the analysis. Secondly, assessment of policy implementation is based almost exclusively on the available published literature for each country. While we might sympathise with the pragmatic difficulties in gaining access to a vast array of other sources, much of the information on which analysis is not 'matched'. Although comparative educationists may find the thrust of the book exciting and interesting, they will undoubtedly have some reservations about the data used. Related to this is a third point. If the reader expects to find an array of detailed statistical information within the various countries they will be disappointed. Statistics are provided, but both they and the ensuing analysis focus on one or two 'states' within each country. Hence Scandinavia is represented by Denmark and Norway, America by California, Britain by England, and Australia by Victoria. Although Fulcher takes some pains to explain that these are not representative, there is still an irritating tendency for generalisations to be made about each country on the basis of one or two arguably unusual states. Finally, selectivity has also occurred in respect of the sources used - a selectivity that goes beyond pragmatics. Given the importance of recent special education reports to the book, and being familiar with the Australian literature, I was greatly surprised that Fulcher failed to even mention the most recent major report which examined integration policy and practice in every state in that country (the 1987 Report to the Commonwealth Schools Commission on Integration in Australia). This is a serious omission indeed, which casts a dubious pall over the other sources used.

Despite these problems, Disabling Policies nonetheless makes some innovative and provocative insights into both special education and the policy process. At the very least it elaborates and supports Fulcher's earlier argument that the policy process itself can disable 'special' students. Overall there can be no doubt that this is a fitting publication for the end of a decade in which strong sociological critiques of special education began to emerge. It provides some exciting beacons for new directions while showing that we still have some way to go.

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