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BOOK REVIEWS

Roads to freedom, or the chimera of choice

Politics and Policy-Making in Education: Explorations in Policy Sociology, by Stephen J. Ball, Routledge, London, 1990

Parental Choice and Educational Policy, by Michael Adler, Alison Petch, Jack Tweedie, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1989)

These two books have a great deal more in common than would immediately meet the eye. In many respects they reflect sharply contrasting styles and approaches in educational policy studies. Stephen Ball is wide-ranging in his concerns, and is strongly theoretical and discursive. His treatment of government policies and the role of the State is openly critical and often hostile. He operates essentially from a qualitative data base, including some tantalising glimpses of interview transcriptions with some of the key players in the field. Adler and his colleagues, on the other hand, present a narrow and detailed local study, as succinct and cautious as Ball is forcefully loquacious. They are understated in their assessment of official policies, drawing their conclusions from a mass of quantitative data and extensive survey material. And yet, in their very different ways, these works both reveal the contradictions and unresolved dilemmas that surround British education policies in the early 1990s. In particular, they pose major questions about the problematic and even dangerous connotations of such apparently blameless goals as 'choice' and 'freedom'.

In Politics And Policy Making in Education, Ball is concerned to develop a 'policy sociology' that will comprehend the education policies of the Thatcherite (and presumably now the post-Thatcherite) era. This, he make clear, will be a theoretically informed area of study that will illuminate both the ideological character of state involvement in schooling and the contestation that goes on within the State itself. He defines the 'educational state' as 'that conglomeration of sites and agencies concerned with the regulation of the education system' (p.20). These sites and agencies 'contain and represent contesting interests in policy formation and policy debate' (p.20). It is these competing interests above all that engage his attention, leading him to emphasise 'conflict and incoherence within the state and within and across the various sites which make up the state' (p.21). According to Ball, such conflicts take the form of 'general and particular disputes over and struggles for the control of the meaning and definition of education' (p.21). In interpreting these struggles he also emphasises the role of discourses in a strongly Foucauldian sense, to help explain the ways in which political agendas are constructed, and how specific possibilities are included or excluded. He goes on to explore several theatres of conflict in and around the educational state. First, he highlights important contradictions between the 'neo-liberal' and 'neo-conservative' elements of the 'New Right' in education. He then looks at tensions between different versions of vocationalism, and the values and interests these have represented, lingering on the notion of 'vocational progressivism' to help interpret such initiatives as the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative and the potential characteristics of the 'post-Fordist' school. Lastly, he examines the struggles involved in the origins and construction of the National Curriculum. Much of his most interesting material, interspersed through the book, is taken from personal interviews with local and national policy makers. The often lengthy excerpts from these interviews help to bring the discussion down to earth, to sharpen the issues raised by the theoretical analysis.

The implications of the major Education Reform Act of 1988 provide a major point of reference in Ball's work. He is consistently critical of the Act itself and of what it represents. The Act, he argues,

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'contains a number of "shots in the dark", policies without pedigree' (p.3), amounting to a massive 'social experiment'. Ball interprets it as essentially a document of the neo-liberal 'New Right', designed to establish the basis of an education market: 'The key provisions of the Act replace the principle of equal access to education for all with the principle of differentiation in the market place' (pp.60-61). It contains an internal dualism between 'centralism' and 'market forces' which creates the need for a National Curriculum and national testing provisions at the same time that it reduces the planning and budgetary powers of local education authorities (p.69). It will contribute to the 'proletarianisation' of the teaching force and lead to schools being run like businesses. In sum, 'what we have is a massive interconnected policy ensemble, a complex of projects, initiatives, schemes, agencies, imperatives and legislation, which is pushing education in new directions and is affecting the way teachers work, the way schools are run and organised, and the nature and delivery of the school curriculum.' (p.98). In the end, he affirms, it is all about control, not only over what counts as school knowledge but also over teachers and teachers' work. All of these tendencies are anathema to Ball, and he makes no attempt to disguise his hostility. Even, so, he remains sensitive to complexities and nuances within the wider picture and indeed concludes that, in spite of everything, 'The struggles over interpretation and accommodation go on'. (p.214). The penetrating insights, the interplay between grand theory and practical wisdom, and the vivid personalised style combine to make this book a fascinating and rewarding quarry for students of education policy to dig into.

Ball is especially trenchant on the themes of 'choice' and 'freedom', the much-vaunted discoveries of education policy in the 1980s. He points out that these terms have a particular meaning and assume a special authority in the discourse of the 'New Right'. The 'social-subject' of the 'concerned parent', and of the 'parent as consumer of education', have established a key polarity of 'professional control versus accountability' (p.33). As part of a wider discourse of possessive individualism and personal initiative, in which freedom of choice, market forces, and quality by competition are sacred, it becomes almost literally unanswerable to argue that 'the parent's duty is to ensure that they choose the best education for their child, even if that means the children of others will have less than the best education'. (p.33). Ball singles out the Local Management of Schools provisions of the Education Reform Act as pursuing this logic to its furthest extreme. Open enrolment will encourage competition between schools for pupils, and per capita funding will heighten this tendency: 'Schools which have relatively more pupils will gain a cash bonus, and subsequent changes in numbers, as schools are more or less successful in keeping or increasing their numbers, up to their 1979 standard number, will gain or lose cash . accordingly. In some areas schooling will become a cut-throat business as schools with spare capacity attempt to market their services in direct competition with one another.' (p.65). In this situation it is likely that some schools will be forced to close - they will call in the receivers and go 'bankrupt'. The strong will survive, and standards will supposedly rise -

> But some areas may find themselves denuded of schools altogether, and most vulnerable are those poorer inner-city areas with older schools and poorer facilities. Those parents with the money and time and ability to move their children to schools in the leafy suburbs will do so. Those parents who work long hours, who do not own cars, who don't want their children undertaking long journeys on costly, dwindling, unsafe public transport will be left with the choice of declining schools until they have no choice at all. (p.66).

Ball suggests several other uncomfortable realities behind the chimera of 'choice'. The influx of extra pupils into schools seen as effective, he points out, may well reduce rather than enhance their effectiveness. Allocating resources efficiently may become impossible. Tests may become the focal point of schooling as a crude means of comparing schools and pupils. Schools themselves may become businesses, operating to make a profit rather than for the good of the pupils. The supposed road to freedom is the venue for a rat-race.

These dangers are underlined most effectively in Parental Choice And Educational Policy by Adler, Petch and Tweedie. They suggest a continuing tension between the claims of individual clients and the benefits of collective policy goals, that is, 'between the parents' focus on the

admission of their child to a school of their choice and the authority's concern with the overall pattern of decision making' (p.20). Their detailed study of the effects of the 1981 Education Act in Scotland leads them to conclude that in this instance the balance has tilted too far in the direction of 'parental rights'. In 'Burns district', for example, parents' school requests were given 'almost absolute priority' despite the possibility of substantial damage' for many of the schools in the region. In other words, 'In Burns, the 1981 Act strongly shifted the balance in school admissions towards parents' choice of school and away from the Region's efforts to maintain balanced rolls and neighbourhood schools.' (p.80). The end result in this case is a small number of highly sought-after schools and a similar number of very unpopular schools, the latter usually being those that serve the least prosperous areas of housing. Licence for parental choice therefore leads to increased inequalities in educational provision, sharpening the dilemma involved in reconciling individual wishes and aggregate outcomes: 'The 1981 Act gave individual parents the opportunity to choose the schools they wished their children to attend. However, the aggregate of such choices may well not represent outcomes which individual parents would have chosen.' (p.221). They also puncture the assumptions of 'exponents of a market ideology' by showing that parental choice is less concerned with 'measurable criteria of product' than with 'the creation of an atmosphere supportive to the child's well-being', and is generally based on limited and possibly inadequate information (p.134).

All of this is thoroughly documented through analysis of the legal provisions, statistical evidence on placing requests and their impact on schools, and detailed surveys of parental choice behaviour. The authors also point out the wider significance of their findings in that the Education Reform Act of 1988 echoes the provisions of the 1981 Act in Scotland, and may well lead to similar results. It might be suggested that the polarity between the 'authority-wide approach' and the 'child-centred approach' which is at the heart of the book leaves the aspirations of individual schools out of the account, except where they happen to coincide with either view. But the book as a whole constitutes a measured and sober challenge to the supporters of 'choice' and 'freedom' that must be taken seriously and deserves widespread attention.

It is difficult not to be conscious of the parallels between New Zealand educational policies of the past few years and those developed in England and Scotland. Here the thrust for reform has been in the direction of parental choice, leading to the provisions of the Education Acts of 1989 and 1990, devolution to schools, and a transformation and reduction of secondary school zoning. These studies should serve as a warning of what such policies represent and where they can lead. It is imperative that their message should be heeded in New Zealand today. More research is needed in this country too, to test the validity of the assumptions underlying the policies of choice. In the meantime, the claims that support them should be accorded scepticism tempered only with suspicion.

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