

## Book Reviews

*Contested Classrooms: Education, Globalization, and Democracy in Alberta.* Trevor Harrison and Jerrold Kachur (Eds.). Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press and Parkland Institute, 1999, 191 pages.

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In recent years much educational reform has been imposed on Alberta by the Progressive Conservative government. Most reforms have been made in swift and deep strokes, attacking all areas of public education including governance, management, programming, and policy. Increased accountability and standards measures, privatization or elimination of educational support services, and excessive individualism have had, and continue to have, major implications on how schools proceed (Bruce & Schwartz, 1997). Some fragmentation of the public school system has become more apparent with the rise of charter schools, open boundary policies, and alternative educational initiatives (Fuller & Elmore, 1996). Success is often determined by market initiatives of "selling" the school's mandate and attracting potential desirable students (Chubb & Moe, 1990). Ineffective schools become entangled in a vicious circle of being unable to attract desirable students and receiving reduced funding because of declining enrollment (Labaree, 1997). In effect, collaboration and cooperation are muffled under the model of excessive individualism and competition fostered by the dominant economic and political discourse (Ball, 1994).

These neoliberal reforms have emerged in the last decade because of the increased political and economic global market forces that have been privileged in educational reform (Apple, 2000). Such tension and fragmentation, however, has not gone unnoticed. Taylor (1991) contends, "fragmentation arises when people come to see themselves more and more atomistically, otherwise put, as less and less bound to their fellow citizens in common projects and allegiances" (p. 113). In the face of heightened emphasis on individualism, the erosion of a public sphere may increase. Certainly this leads to the question of whether meaningful interconnections can be located at the school level in the context of globalization (Smith, 2000).

A dissenting voice in Alberta that contests this New Right agenda can be found in the publications and public projects of the Parkland Institute. Their mandate is straightforward: to conduct and disseminate research connected to the political economy in Alberta as well as in the greater Canadian context. Among some of their projects the Parkland Institute has challenged social policy issues such as fiscal accountability in Alberta (Taft, 1997) and the introduction of for-profit health care (Taft & Steward, 2000). In its latest publication the Parkland Institute attempts to create greater public awareness about recent

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developments in Alberta public education. *Contested Classrooms* challenges and engages in a feisty debate about the onslaught of reforms against public education in Alberta.

*Contested Classrooms* is divided into three parts: Globalization and Educational Change, The Politics of Educational Restructuring in Alberta, and Re-organizing Schools: Scenes from the Classroom. Part 1 provides the historical and political context that has contributed to the rise of New-Right reforms in Alberta. As Mazurek points out in chapter one, educational reform has not just been a "Klein" phenomenon. Rather, patterns of change can be recorded over a longer period of time led by social forces and the agents of institutions who control them. Although schools have been used to instill the existing dominant influences of the day, public education is nonetheless a contested terrain. How the provincial goals, pedagogical practices, and curriculum are delivered is often entangled with the local experiences of the schools and their inhabitants. Mazurek outlines the social forces that influence and shape how public education is taken up. In chapter 2, Easton takes this further by adding that change has been exacerbated with the integration of technology into education. This has added yet another consideration in the debate about the notion of power and control with possible reductions of public space into an individualized private sphere. Part 1 challenges the lack of educational investment in public education by the Alberta Progressive Conservative government and illustrates how this has manifested itself in growing corporate influences on universities.

Part 2 examines the massive educational restructuring with which public education has had to contend. Chapters 5, 8, and 9 provide narratives on the consultation process that has been orchestrated by the government. Token committees and select individuals were brought together to discuss and support reform initiatives. Such reforms included severe funding cuts to all levels of public education from reducing the number of school boards to teachers taking a 5% salary cut, the effects of which are explicated in chapters 6 and 7. Other plans to implement New Right measures also included increased funding to private schools and the formation of charter schools in Alberta. Despite the attempts of public awareness campaigns made by the Alberta Teachers' Association to challenge these changes, this book documents how the government has continued pressure to the public education system.

The final segment of the book portrays some of the effects these policies have had at the local level. For example, Young demonstrates that there has been an increased trend of hiring part-time teachers who cost less because they are not included in health-care and other benefit plans, can contribute to extra "optional" activities and duties, and do not have the same voice or power in staff negotiations. Principals have also received much of the burden to maintain and ensure quality education. Vanitski and Pysyk show the overwhelming responsibilities that principals must now assume, from being financial wizards to social workers and arbitrators. Many have left the profession burned out and unable to withstand these pressures. Finally, Evans alludes to how school boards have had to develop new strategies to provide adequate funding for their respective schools. The final chapter of *Contested Classrooms* challenges the government as well as the public to make a renewed commitment to public education.

This book is politically motivated. The editors are overt in this purpose: to interrupt the continued New Right domination of the conversation about educational policies in Alberta. It is a wake-up call to the public asking them to speak and question the actions of this government. This book does not apologize for or hide its agenda to challenge the Alberta Progressive Conservative government and is written in an advocacy style. The claims are large and the charges are deep. This may also be its weakness.

The Parkland Institute instructed each of the authors to write with a stylistic ease intended for a general public, leaving out much academic research and evidence as noted in the introduction. The editors have taken a bold step in naming things and issues as they are and have not been burdened with lofty and often severed ideas of academic scholarship. Yet this is a difficult line to tread. I believe that the book would have carried more weight and influence had the editors included more extensive references and evidence to support their claims. Further, much of the literature used is still of an academic leaning, requiring the reader to have some familiarity with the educational and political terminology often used in academic writing. If the intention was to target a general audience, I believe that this goal was not fully reached. Unfortunately, this book sits somewhere between being an academic work and a general interest book, hitting neither target group totally effectively.

Nonetheless, it is topical and offers a timely discussion. The frenetic pace at which educational reforms have occurred in Alberta has often disrupted the possibility of stopping to ask why we are doing what we are doing. Educators and the public at large require a political voice and a platform from which to address the educational issues facing Albertans. To this Albertan who has lived through these times of transition, it is a breath of fresh air to see that someone has taken up the call to question recent Alberta educational policies and assumptions. Often the language used in educational reform literature creates a monologue, inhibiting access to understanding. On the surface educational reform is seductive and powerful, yet what remains suppressed might prove to be more complex than we imagined. This discussion of the “contested classroom” is a necessary step in envisaging how we might live together in schools and beyond.

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*Values and Educational Leadership*. Paul T. Begley (Ed.). Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999, 341 pages.

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One of the continuing banes of the Canadian professoriate is the lack of suitable graduate-level texts written from a Canadian perspective. This is especially the case in the field of educational administration, leadership, and policy studies, where Canadian voices are few and far between. The situation does appear to be changing a little. In a recent issue of *ajer*, Levin (1999) reviewed a Canadian book on education finance. And in *Values and Educational Leadership*, 11 of the 20 contributors are Canadian. Through this text Paul Begley has provided another welcome addition to the Canadian canon.

Canada is a unique society. Officially multicultural in nature, the population is enriched by great ethnocultural diversity, which is evident in our communities and our schools. It is no longer realistic for school administrators to assume that their personal beliefs, values, and cultural mores are similar to those of the students, parents, or staff with whom they work. This diversity has, as Begley concludes, "a profound impact on schools and leadership practices.... Administrators are discovering that some of our most cherished ethical foundations, especially those derived from a Western JudeoChristian tradition, must be carefully re-examined in terms of their appropriateness to changing social circumstances" (p. 318).

Although one strives against ethnocentric nationalism, there is nonetheless a need for texts that are grounded in the cultural context of Canada. This is especially true when one is discussing issues related to ethics and values in educational leadership. Without falling back to a relativist position, I would suggest that a discussion grounded wholly in the moral environment of another society is of limited utility to a Canadian audience. At the same time, it might be argued that a discussion restricted in its entirety to one cultural context is similarly limited. In this case, one could suggest that what is needed is a predominantly Canadian discussion influenced and informed by multiple *other* voices. With the majority representation of Canadian academics here, interwoven with commentaries from those in the United States, Australia, Hong Kong, and Sweden, this book begins to achieve such a balance.

The book is in three parts, each consisting of five chapters introduced by a short commentary from the editor and a concluding chapter. We are informed that "most of the chapters that make up this book began as papers delivered at the October 1996 Toronto conference on Values and Educational Leadership"

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