



Pluralist publics in market driven education: Towards more democracy in educational reform

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career provides a very vivid and plastic picture of the German education system and inequalities shaping individual lives and careers.

Overall, Blossfeld manages to capture several important positive trends in this book: a diminishing exclusivity of the academic track with many more children joining; an impressive catching-up of previously disadvantaged girls in transition probabilities in West Germany; a significant process of gradual integration between the vocational and academic pathways in vocational and post-secondary educational system due to reforms introduced. However, her findings also show some contradictory developments: associations between social origin and probability of transition to the academic track persist also in situations, which many inequality-reducing reforms aimed to address (for example, many new alternative pathways between vocational, post-secondary and tertiary educational systems). Blossfeld's research shows that it is mostly young people from privileged families (especially those with highly educated parents) who move up in the system more frequently and move down less often, and thus benefit from these newly introduced options and permeability between tracks more. Thus, the educational policies in these cases reinforce the already existing inequalities.

Some of the findings (especially if followed by policy implications) also open new questions for further research, which could explain the described trends. One example could be a relatively rare mobility between tracks in the secondary school despite some school reforms aimed at this problem. Is it because, as Blossfeld suggests, of the major knowledge gap between the academic and non-academic track (given by curricular differences), that becomes larger over the years? Or could there be also other factors at play – for example, different aspirations and learning atmosphere in classes, different cultural code in different tracks, or students and families' calculating with similarly open options in the post-secondary education?

The book is highly recommended to all those interested in the sociology of education, education systems, and educational inequalities, specifically in a long-term social, cultural and political context. It is suggested also to those who are interested in educational reforms and their manifold effects on different social groups. The detailed description of the German educational system and its historical context can be interesting to all those who would like to compare their own country's strengths and challenges in reducing inequalities with another one.

Reference

Blossfeld, P. N. (2018). *Changes in inequality of educational opportunity: The long-term development in Germany*. Springer VS.

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Pluralist publics in market driven education: Towards more democracy in educational reform, by Ruth Boyask, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, 178 pp., \$108 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-3500-5450-9

Ruth Boyask is a Senior Lecturer of Higher Education at the Auckland University of Technology. Her work focuses on public education and associated principles of participation, equality and social justice. In 2020, Boyask consolidated her recent works in her monograph, 'Pluralist Publics in Market Driven Education'. Drawing from solid empirical research in various educational contexts, the book reconceptualises publicness in the educational sphere and seeks to promote socially democratic (as opposed to individualistic neoliberal) ideals in public education.

Boyask courteously accepted my request to interview her about her book and ideas on public education and educational research. Our interview is presented in this article and has been edited for brevity and conciseness.

I interpret your book as a reconceptualisation of pluralist publics based on findings from your previous works – case studies and surveys of schools on alternative and counterpublic spheres in education. What has motivated you to finally consolidate all these in a single collection?

I think you're right, and they have been works that I have done over quite a period of time now, starting in the early 2000s. What has motivated this particular book is recognising that there were commonalities and themes developing across quite a wide span of my research work. And these are things and ideas that may not have been immediately apparent at the time and have become apparent over a consolidated period of time.

Over this period, I had become increasingly disillusioned with the representation of educational policy, in particular public education, as being represented as degrading over time. Degrading as a result of market forces, authoritarian approaches to education drawing on neotraditionalist ideas, and conservative ideas that were degrading the public education that so many people have seemed to love and value.

And I think one of the things that I have recommitted to my work as an academic is teaching at the interface between research and practice. And so, for quite a long time now most of my teaching has been with education professionals, practitioners, and education leaders. It is working with those people that motivated me to think about public education differently partly because they themselves have this desire and hope to be doing education differently. Many of them still kind of carry that kind of aspiration for a more equitable and a more socially just education. But also, because when they come to my class – if I offer them some hope, they end up quite despondent. And so, it is about thinking – okay, we can see that there has been all these negative consequences of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in education. But there's something else there as well. And that's what I was looking for in all these different case studies and these different research projects in order to write this book: to go back to them and think about, well yes there's a kind of a developing and emergent thread in all these studies where I am trying to find some element of hope within fairly inclement conditions of education.

And I like that you went back to traditional theorists such as John Dewey who talked about democratic ideals in education. Was this something that formulated over time and became reinforced over the course of several research projects?

One of the earliest studies I referred to in my book is the study at Discovery 1 School in Christchurch, New Zealand. That was a really instrumental study for me. I was part of the study – I was a research assistant for my PhD supervisor Dr. Jean McPhail. And actually, it's been so much more influential than my own work in the end in terms of my thinking. Dewey comes from her because for her, Dewey and William James – that strand of thinking in American education – represented the aspiration and the hope for what education might be. And in terms of my thinking about of democracy, it's something that comes from Dewey, but I refer to it again and again when I'm assessing the quality and nature of publicness within educational settings. It's the idea from Dewey's 'Democracy in Education' that what we might aspire to (achieve) is an education that is democratic in that it represents equality within social groups but also is concerned with the kind of interplay within social groups and how through democratic relations they might come to grow, change, and adapt in response to diversity in different circumstances.

And this is where most recent works like Arash Abizadeh (2012) and Nancy Fraser (1990, 2010, 2014) and their notion of counterpublics come in to provide a different angle to reassess democracy – because Dewey obviously came up with a rather different notion of democracy back then. And as you mentioned in the book, we have to reassess what democracy is in this current day and age. I think this is an important point that the book is trying to make.

In relation to a more contemporary concept of democracy, Nancy Fraser has been quite instrumental in my more recent thinking around democracy, and the challenges that she has tackled within critical theory especially in terms of thinking about the shift from the all-affected to the all-subjected principle (in transnational democratic theory).

The research projects you discuss in your book adopt different methods for collecting and analysing data, yet they are all underpinned by a pragmatist orientation – one that views educational policy as practice. For a book that delves into the politics and the publics of education, what do you think are the strengths of a pragmatist approach to the study of alternative or counterpublic education settings?

If we focus on the notion of policy as practice, I find that a really useful concept to think about policy in use. That is informed originally by work of Stephen Ball (1993; 2006) – whom I referred to in the book – on policy cycle in terms of intended, actual, and policy in use, a different way of conceptualising policy. And what really interested me about policy in use is the way that it emphasises interpretation and translation of policy: that policies aren't these static kinds of things. They are things that are open to interpretation and contestation. And also, drawing on ideas from Basil Bernstein (1971) and its

reinterpretation through Parlo Singh's (2014) work of recontextualisation. For me that's where the hope is for my educational practitioners and educational leaders: thinking about the role they potentially have as people who can interpret, translate, and recontextualise policy, ideally in a more intentional way, in a way that fosters more equitable rather than inequitable relations.

And so, in talking about methodology: it is very much conceptually informed and driven but is related to thinking about policy as practice in the same ways as thinking about all the other forms of practices and practices within the book, hence the focus on governance practices and policies in use.

It's also about making a sort of strategic and timely use of resources that we have at our disposal as researchers, I guess. Because policy and politics in education are quite sensitive topics and schools may be hesitant to do collaborative work. So, from a pragmatist approach we need to be strategic about dealing with schools – how to work with them, and what kinds of resources and materials they can share with us. For instance, you had different types of methods of data collection like recruiting student researchers – do you think that this ties in with a pragmatist approach to your methodology?

This is something that I have been doing again recently. And this has arisen almost entirely as a pragmatic response to the situation that I was in, which was a school that prioritised students' participation and active, deliberate redistribution of power to students. And being in that environment the most obvious thing for me to do as a researcher was to extend that to my methodological approach.

The notion of pluralist publics is a widely discussed and hotly debated topic in education research. But what I find the most fascinating about your book is your focus on the notion of 'unboundedness' from democratic political theory, which encourages us to move beyond binary conceptualisations of the 'private' and 'public' in education settings. The next two questions focus on your reconceptualisations of pluralist publics and unboundedness. In Chapter 4, you identify four categories of governance in educational entities schools that 'strive towards social justice and equality in different ways' (p. 82) and you have done this by mapping the governance structures of these entities. How do these categories challenge or reify your notion of unboundedness in education?

I'm not sure that I'm going to answer it in quite the way you were looking for. Because I think the categories are not really 'categories' in the sense of bounded categories. What the categories are intended to be are a heuristic [for unravelling the different kinds of governance in educational entities]. The thing that I was particularly interested in, was that even there was all these different kinds of structures, and that some of them even have quite different intents, they have similar kinds of practices underlying them. For example, the first category that talks about corporations: even very traditional kinds of corporations are set up with the assumption that what they do is to be of benefit to

members, in the same way as a cooperative ... [in other words] a corporate entity is intended to be of benefit for its members. But then there's different kinds of value structures that underpin both of those: one is concerned with benefit to members at the exclusion of accepting responsibility or risk to anyone else, whereas the other is concerned primarily with the benefit of members in more equal relations within a stakeholder group. And so, they have a kind of different ethos but in some ways their publicness and practices fall out the same. I think that's why they are useful to me as a way of grouping things to cover a really large field [of research] which is expanding all the time because the categories talk about these sort of for-profit public benefit corporations and social enterprises (which have even more complex relations between what we might traditionally think about as 'public' and 'private'). But you know the configurations show the real complexities of publicness within them and the limits of publicness particularly when it comes into contact with both market and state.

And this ties in with your discussion on structural isomorphism, where there is a large variety of governance structures but most of them kind of function in similar ways with similar goals. As for Chapter 8, you propose three principles for reconceptualising public education: pluralism or collectivist individualism, unboundedness, and paying attention to the strength and quality of relations within unbounded, pluralist publics. I know that your book does not talk about this, but might you proffer ideas on how these principles might mean for schools in non-Anglophone contexts? To what extent do these principles fit within a culturalist view of education?

The schooling structures that I am most familiar with that are non-Anglophone are within New Zealand and represented through the bicultural [educational context]. It would be useful to give some history to the New Zealand context in terms of the foundational Treaty of Waitangi, the foundational document for the formation of New Zealand, which is fundamentally a power-sharing agreement, although a very highly contested and problematic power-sharing agreement. One of the more positive outcomes for the indigenous Māori population as a result of contestations over the Treaty has been a bicultural approach to schooling. There are two parallel pathways to schooling: one, in the English language immersion education and another in te reo Māori immersion education. And so, that's the context I'm most familiar with in terms of thinking about non-Anglophone context.

What made me think about this was some public debate that I got involved in at the end of last year [2020]. There was a very vocal and very prolific debate that I think shocked and surprised a lot of people around a school that was called Green School New Zealand. Now this may not seem like an obvious way to answer this question, but I will get to your point. This school is a private school that was very committed to the idea of sustainability in education. The school was offered money by the government as part of their pandemic relief package. It was for supporting jobs in the regional economy. It was highly criticised by educationists on the grounds that the government is giving public funds to a private school when it should be giving funds to public education. At that point I got involved in the debate talking about how even though the school is within the private sector, potentially it still may provide some means of addressing the public good. And that we cannot necessarily assume just because it's in the private

sector that it's not contributing in some way through its privateness. Particularly if the state-sector schools are not addressing issues of environmentalism and sustainability.

Now I haven't done any research at the school, so I don't feel confident about saying much more about whether that school is meeting or not meeting their commitment. But what was very interesting was that once I got sort of involved in that debate, there were a pair of Māori lawyers who got in touch with me and they wanted to have a discussion with me around their concern that even the strand of schooling for indigenous Māori, the Kura Kaupapa Māori, wasn't going to be meeting the needs of them, their family, their friends – people who they knew within their community. And so, what was my view and what I would be prepared to support them [was] challenging the existing education provision and helping them establish whether it was within the private sector or the state sector to make more room for an education system that according to them would be able to meet the needs of their community. I found that quite interesting actually because that the work that I do is problematic in a non-Anglophone context. It certainly is problematic in a context that is not a part of the kind of Western philosophical tradition because the work that I do is very much informed by issues and ideas around democracy. And of course, democracy is an imperialising force in and of itself. But the way that I have been thinking about recently, is that there is scope within it to find commonalities with other people who are different from me, who have different conceptualisations of how the world should be, and that maybe there are alliances that can be established.

I really like how you've framed that. And that really ties in with basically the crux of the book which is to look for publics in places where we least expect them, such as private schools. And I think that's a really good addition to the ways we can reconceptualise publicness in education. Have you developed new ideas on unboundedness since the publication of your monograph, or have you had any new ideas or realisations?

The thing that interests me about the concept of unboundedness is that – again, and this comes back to the methodological question – it arises through the practice of self-rule. It's one of the challenges for us who are committed to some sense of equity and social justice in education. So, one of the challenges is as follows: how do you do this [practice of self-rule] in a non-totalising kind of way? because I think the alternative is a kind of an educational relativism where everything kind of goes. And I don't agree with that because everything doesn't go. We've seen the effects of that through the rise of new fundamentalisms in politics, religion, all sorts of different places – and in the ways that they are highly detrimental to social life and equality. So, thinking about unboundedness provides a way of holding in mind an ideal of equity at the same time as recognising its limitations. And it's that duality that I think is important. The recognition that – yes – there is a difference between public and private, but there's also not. To be able to hold both in mind at the same time.

At the same time co-existing and taking up the same space in the educational sphere.

Like Green School New Zealand. I mean, yes, it's a private school, charges NZD 40,000 fees for some of its students. It's certainly not ideal in terms of its intake, but at the same time it holds these very strong values and commitments and raises awareness of the environment in a way that perhaps other schools don't. So, it's about how these things co-exist: what about that can we accept and what about can't we? And for me I guess the 40,000 fees is too much; it's not something I can accept as co-existing. So, I don't want to be a kind of an apologist for these kinds of schools. But on the other hand, we need to kind of recognise what is good within them because once you recognise what is good then you can kind of build on that, and you can make a decision about what the good parts are and what we want to emphasise. And that's where the hope lies for me in working with educational practitioners and leaders. It's helping them to identify where the good is so they can work with that.

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Europe in the classroom: world culture and nation-building in post-socialist Romania, by Simona Szakács, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, 280 pp., 103,99 Euro (hardcover), 85,59 Euro (eBook), ISBN: 978-3-319-60257-8

In her thorough multi-scalar study of how Europe has entered and changed Romanian education, Szakács offers an intriguing analysis of the continuities and ruptures in Romanian education history and present. The book provides a thought-provoking read for sociologists of education interested in Eastern Europe and Post-Socialism, Citizenship and Global Citizenship Education, and the Europeanization of Education through its ambitious methodological design, its interesting findings on the relationship between Europeanization and ethnic exclusion, and theoretical contribution. Szakács' main argument is that against common post-socialist theories, the Romanian education system has come ever closer to global education scripts since 1989. This becomes especially apparent in the way Europe has entered education as a discursive strategy against which the idea of the new post-socialist Romanian nation is measured and gains legitimacy. She presents the story of an unlikely and unrecognized cultural transformation in post-socialist Romania by criticizing dichotomies that have dominated the study of post-socialism to advance an argument highlighting transitions, gray areas, and paradoxes in policy and everyday classroom interactions.

Szakács and I sat down to discuss these themes during a brief interview. The edited version of our conversation can be found below.