

Book Reviews

School Leadership and Education System Reform

Edited by Peter Earley and Toby Greany, 2017

London: Bloomsbury Academic

+263 pp.

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Scanning through the list of contributors to this book it is easy to get the impression that it is parochial, highly Anglo-centric and of little relevance beyond London and the south-east of England. Of the thirty-two contributors, at least twenty-seven have current links with the University College London Institute of Education. There are at least six former head teachers, two sirs and a dame. The list of abbreviations (p. xxii) reflects the terminology of education policy in England and there are many references to initiatives such as The London Challenge, the various incarnations of the National College, the diverse microcosm of Tower Hamlets and the increasingly complex, continually moving education system in England, including a helpful insight into the strengths and weaknesses of multi-academy trusts (p. 51). However, to dismiss this book as having only regional or national relevance in England would be a mistake.

The wide international research experience of Earley and Greany, drawing on the sector-leading abilities of colleagues at the IOE, has brought together a series of chapters that will be of relevance to national and local policy-makers, education leaders, researchers, academics, students and practitioners. The relatively short chapters communicate key issues in a readable, accessible way, and the book will be extremely useful to those looking for reliable overviews of current thinking in system reform and educational leadership. The paradoxes referred to by Greany and Earley in their introduction (p. 1) surface frequently throughout the book, and it is helpful for those outside the English system to peer through the window at the different ways in which system reform can be interpreted in policy and practice and decide whether or not to follow the models explored in these chapters. Two paradoxes are immediately apparent: that 'it is the

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quality of teachers and teaching – followed by the quality of leadership – that is critical [in creating effective schools]’, yet ‘quasi-market policies can make it harder for schools to create these environments’ (p. 3) and that schools need to learn with and from each other, yet the competitive single-system market often militates against this. One of the strengths of the book is that it gives voice to leaders and policy-makers who have tackled the paradoxes, built networks and created effective learning communities in social justice contexts.

The book is in three parts. Part 1 focuses on policy in system reform and the first chapter by Collins and Coleman critically examines the trend towards ‘evidence-informed’ policy and practice and highlights the challenges for leadership in an evidence-rich system. By providing short, focused chapters such as this the reader is taken to the core of the issue, but this brevity also means that complex issues are not developed and the practice of recapping what the chapter has just told us takes away even more valuable word-space for drilling down into key ideas. This was one of the many interesting chapters that would have benefitted from being longer. Frustratingly, there are no references at the end of chapters (we have to flip to the general list of references at the end of the book) and this removes an immediate visual link to literature that has informed the authors’ views. The chapter by Gibton on regulation and governance of education also raises some interesting points, in this case relating to autonomy. He argues that ‘similar to energy, autonomy has a finite amount ... in the world of education. Thus, adding or subtracting autonomy from one level, group or institution ... necessarily shifts, redefines and retransforms the autonomy of all its other components’ (p. 43). The significance of inspection and accountability in emerging autonomous, ‘self-improving’ systems is considered by Matthews and Ehren and the coherence of this section continues in the next chapter by Greany, who looks at collaboration and partnership across schools and the concept of system leadership, which may or may not prove effective in transferring expertise between schools. In this fascinating chapter, he discusses the growth of different collaborative models and the tensions of leadership within academy chains to choose between competition and collaboration in deregulated contexts.

Part 2 of the book looks more closely at school leadership and, in a more practice-oriented style which will be of use to serving and aspiring school leaders, the chapters highlight specific aspects such as setting direction through vision, values and culture (chapter 8) and leading the learning

(chapter 9). At the heart of teacher effectiveness is the creation of sustainable cultures of professional learning and development. The chapter by Porritt, Spence-Thomas and Taylor usefully maps out the definitions of PLD and gives an insight into the strategic approaches leaders may take in developing collaborative models of PLD which impact on learners. Of particular importance is the chapter by Wood on the role of school business leaders (pp. 158–69). The significance of SBLs is too often understated and the complexity of their evolving role is expertly laid out here. The ‘Implications’ section which concludes the chapter consists of a series of questions. Every school leader should ask these questions of their own institutions and re-evaluate the importance of SBLs to the organisation.

Part 3 takes a forward-facing look at the future through the challenges and opportunities of leadership. This section is possibly less coherent than the first two but still of use to those interested in styles of leadership and models of system change. The chapter by Craig on toxic leadership is both readable and important and highlights the damages that may be caused through poor or destructive leadership which emphasises short-term goals and fails to recognise the worth and experience of staff. Craig argues that neoliberalism ‘has probably been developed further in England than anywhere else in the world’ (p. 183) and this point makes a book such as this even more valuable to readers outside England because they will be able to take a detached look at policy impact and form judgements on the benefits or otherwise of policy borrowing. The chapter by Berwick and John on the successful and effective implementation of The London Challenge shows that collaborative change can work in practice, but it would have been even more interesting if there had been a postscript acknowledging that the model had been adopted elsewhere, including in Wales, with mixed outcomes.

Earley and Greany have the final word by looking into the future of leadership. Contained in this short conclusion are the key questions that school leaders and policy-makers need to ask if their schools are to produce sustainable and effective learning cultures. A student of educational leadership could even start here and then go back to dip into the wealth of ideas contained in the earlier chapters of this very readable compendium of current thinking on the policy and practice of system reform.

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Ken Jones 143

Teaching Creative Thinking

Bill Lucas and Ellen Spencer, 2017

Carmarthen: Crown House

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This is one of a series of planned books on the theme ‘The Pedagogy for a Changing World’. The authors aim to provide primary and secondary teachers and school leaders with practical suggestions on how to develop learners’ ‘key capabilities’. This book focuses on creative thinking with future subjects including developing tenacity and curiosity.

This is a very welcome and timely book. Creative thinking is likely to feature in the 2021 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The authors, based in the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester, are well placed to discuss the subject. Bill Lucas co-chairs the OECD’s advisory group charged with drawing up a model to define creativity and to explore the feasibility of a creativity assessment. If this goes ahead and current trends continue, the book should hold relevance in Wales given the poor performance of its students in PISA over recent years. A few schools in Wales feature among those from eleven other countries currently undertaking research for the OECD to find out more about the thorny question of assessing creativity.

The book is organised into seven chapters. The first three chapters introduce the concept of creative thinking and teaching for capability. The authors see creativity as a matter of nurturing five capabilities or habits of mind: being inquisitive, persistent, collaborative, disciplined and imaginative. Each of these is broken down further into sub-habits. Persistence, for example, includes tolerating uncertainty, sticking with difficulty and daring to be different. In a field characterised by complex terminology, the refreshing simplicity of language makes the book very readable.

This is not to suggest that the book is superficial. Appropriate academic references are provided and the contributions of various researchers noted. The authors particularly draw on the work of Lee Shulman in setting out teaching and learning methods (‘signature pedagogies’) which they regard as the unique DNA of creative thinking. These include problem-based learning, where teachers use real-world problems and rigorous enquiry to enable learners to conduct research and apply their knowledge and skills to

develop potential solutions. Chapters 4 to 7 provide extended examples of how schools have embedded creative thinking across and beyond the curriculum, including engaging parents, arranging work placements, school trips and the professional development of staff. The case studies will appeal to teachers and school leaders eager to read about examples of how the teaching of creative thinking works in practice. The A–Z of teaching and learning methods for developing creative thinkers, which features in the appendix, is also likely to prove popular. An index would also have been beneficial.

Chapter 7 is particularly helpful in addressing some of the common doubts and criticisms associated with the teaching of creative thinking. Curriculum constraints, tight budgets, examination pressures and initiative fatigue are familiar cries. The authors respond well to these and present a convincing argument for schools to take creative thinking more seriously. They gently challenge widely held preconceptions e.g. ‘school inspectors won’t be interested’ and ‘It’s another one of those fads that will be forgotten when the pressure mounts’, leaving the reader reassured and in a reflective, upbeat mood. The authors are essentially challenging readers to think about the purpose and values of education. This is topical given the recent UK parliamentary inquiry on the subject and, in Wales, Graham Donaldson’s vision for creativity to be central to young people’s experience at school. Teachers in Wales who now face the challenge of implementing the renaissance of creativity in the new curriculum would be well advised to dip into this book as a starting point.

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