Education Reform in Context

Introduction

Educators have spent immense amounts of time and energy grappling with the issue of reform. Certainly, there is no shortage of literature on the intricacy surrounding the process of education reform (Havelock 1974, Fullan 1982, Berman and McLauglin 1975, and Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). However, a major shortcoming of this literature is its failure to elaborate the relationship between education reform and the social context and hence the possibility of social critique. My concern is to argue that schools are historically determined by the social formation (mode of production) and therefore, are a product of a particular system of production, class domination and class conflict (Camoy and Levin 1985, 34). Thus, any discussion of education reform which ignores the basic imperatives of its context is overly simplistic. This article argues that the imperatives of contradiction, struggle and legitimation illuminate the possibility of seeing (Tyack 1976, 35) education reform in a more coherent and realistic manner than existing technical-rational models of reform.

Erosion of the Social-Democratic Settlement

Since the 1960s most education reforms have been premised on the assumption that Australia is moving towards a more egalitarian society. The prevailing perception guiding social policy is that increased state planning and the provision of more education will create social mobility and equal opportunity. In this scenario, inequality and injustice are viewed as temporary aberrations which can be overcome within the parameters of capitalism. This logic suggests that education reform is the vehicle for fine-tuning an otherwise sound education system and, at the same time, justifying to the clients of our schools that progress is being made. In good faith, it is assumed that somewhere down the track, the rhetoric of democratic education reform will be realised.

Meanwhile, belief in the social-democratic settlement is eroding. Despite the provision of mass schooling for a greater number of children, evidence indicates that the rhetoric of social mobility and equal opportunity is not materialising (Western 1983). Disillusionment with social-democratic reform is further complicated by the shadow of the economic crisis of the 1980s and the subsequent persuasiveness of economic rationalism. Current education reform is geared toward linking education more closely with the economic imperatives of industry and business. This agenda is masked in the language of national priorities and efficiency. In this context, technical rationality is held out as the cure for the problems facing the education system. Technical rationality emerged with the scientific management movement of the post-war era and is grounded on the assumption that human problems can be reduced to empirically testable propositions which are subject to deductive investigations using the 'objectivity' of the scientific method. The basis of technical rationality is the separation of theory and practice, therefore education problems are viewed as technical problems which require technical solutions (Prunty 1984, 31). The effect of technical rationality is to 'see' the education system as a neutral instrument - working for the efficient organisation of the economic, political and legal-administrative structures of society (Pusey 1988, 28). As a consequence, the education system becomes a general sanction of the social relations of a society based on inequalities of class, age, race and gender. But more importantly, technical rationality serves a 'ritualistic' and 'cleansing' function in re-establishing the credibility of the education system (Popkewitz 1982). In this situation, education reform has the added benefit of appearing responsive and progressive.
Contradiction, Struggle and Legitimation

A full explanation of the relationship between education reform and the wider social context requires detailed historical and sociological studies of particular social formations. My concern here is limited to providing some general insights into the nature of education reform through an understanding of the notions of contradiction, struggle and legitimation.

**Contradiction** suggests that education reform is torn between two basic and contradictory functions: accumulation and legitimation. In short, this means that education reform will be caught between fulfilling the needs of capitalism and at the same time legitimising its unequal social relations (O'Connor 1973, Carnoy 1982, Bowles and Gintis 1981, and Habermas 1976). For instance, schools have traditionally reproduced the appropriate cognitive skills, behaviour and values of the unequal hierarchical relations of the workplace and at the same time have attempted to provide each child with an equal opportunity. Education reform will therefore oscillate between the needs of capitalism and the demands of minorities and subordinate groups in society for an expansion of economic opportunity and human rights (Carnoy and Levin 1985, 14). This is not to suggest that education reform simply mirrors or ‘corresponds’ to the needs of capital. On the contrary, the history of schooling is one of breaks and reversals, stagnation and advances, crises and settlements (Baron et al 1981, 247). What emerges are education policies permeated with contradiction, inconsistency and tension.

This more dynamic interpretation of education reform is further enhanced by the notion of struggle (resistance) which is the process whereby individuals and groups negotiate, resist or accept the dominant ideology of schools (Giroux 1983, 83). The emphasis on human agency suggests that schools are ‘cultural sites that embody conflicting political values, histories and practices’ (ibid, 33). Willis explains:

> In my view there has to be some kind of dialectical relation – not between free subjects (knowing and centred) and determining structure (external and objective) – but between subjects formed in struggle and resistance to structures in domination and structures formed in and reproduced by struggle and resistance against domination. The key link and common ground between the two terms, ‘subjects’ and ‘structure’ is struggle (1983, 135).

The notion of struggle adds a significant dimension to any analysis of education reform. Struggle highlights the active side of culture and ‘sees’ people as social agents rather than passive subjects. However, struggle should not simply be interpreted as a conflict between the experience of the working class and the dominant ideology of schools. Rather, the process of subjectivity is negotiated in everyday life (Donald 1985, 246), through a process of ‘cultural production’ which explains:

> ... the process of the collective, creative use of discourses, meanings, materials, practices and group processes to explore, understand and creatively occupy particular positional relations and sets of material possibilities (Willis 1983, 14).

It is in times of economic recession that the contradictory functions of education reform produce ‘unsettling and publicizing effects’ (Habermas 1976, 72). Increasingly, the education system faces difficulty in legitimatising the inequalities of the economic system (Offe 1981, 57-62). Education reform is therefore ‘ politicised’ and must attempt to compensate for its loss of credibility. In this context, there can be little doubt that education reform plays a significant role in elaborating, inculcating and legitimising the dominant ideology (Poulantzas 1978, 28).

In schools, students are immersed in the dominant class world view (hegemony) and therefore, taught the necessary ‘know-how’ and respect for the socio-technical division of labour (Althusser 1971, 128 and Gramsci 1971, 34). Yet, schools are also responsible for representing the social demands of democracy such as increased equality of opportunity and the extension of human rights. It is the increased deployment of the liberal discourse of democracy (eg equal opportunity) and human rights which provides the potential for change and makes the process of legitimisation more difficult (Bowles and Gintis 1986, 159). It is the inherent contradiction between schooling as a source of social democracy and as a reproducer of the conditions of capitalist production that provides the underlying dynamic of school expansion and reform (Carnoy and Levin 1985, 80).
Conclusion

In conclusion, technical-rational analysis of education results in a non-reflective, uncritical perspective which has politically conservative effects. Failure to elaborate the relationship between education reform and wider social processes causes inadvertent subscription to the seemingly 'natural order' of society. This article emphasises that the underlying dynamic of education reform is the tension between the needs of capital and the demands of subordinate groups in society for a more ‘just’ and ‘democratic’ society. The notions of contradiction, struggle and legitimation suggest using a different and more powerful starting point for elaborating a critical and dynamic account of education reform in a capitalist society than the one employed by the proponents of systems theory. Herein, lie future hopes for schooling contributing to a more just society.

References


Author

Barry Down is a Lecturer in Social Science Education at the Bunbury Institute of Advanced Education (a branch of the WACAE).