**The socially just school: making space for youth to speak back**, by John Smyth, Barry Down and Peter McInerney, New York, London, Springer, 2014, 195 pp., £90 (hardback), ISBN 978-94-017-9059-8

John Smyth’s work has, for over four decades, offered a powerful critique of neoliberal policy and practice, and its consequences for teachers, learners and communities more broadly - especially the most marginalized and disadvantaged. Smyth’s research is broad-ranging and multi-faceted, although perhaps the best term to describe his work is *policy ethnography* - for one of the key strengths of John Smyth’s approach is the way he is able to connect the local, the particular and the peculiar to broader policy discourses, especially those rooted in the excesses of the neoliberal project. In this book, Smyth and long-term collaborators, Barry Down and Peter McInerney, draw on his extensive body of work and that of other leading critical researchers to provide far-reaching insight into how schools are increasingly implicated in producing and reproducing social and educational inequality. Many readers of *Journal of Education Policy* will be familiar with this story but where this book goes further than most critiques of contemporary education policy is that it also shows what more critically-informed schools might look like instead. Its defining theme is that schools ought to be institutions which advance the life chances of all young people, especially the most marginalized - rather than serving economic, corporate, or other interest groups.

*The Socially Just School* consists of nine chapters including sections on the curriculum, pedagogy, educational leadership and school-community relations, and needs to read in full in order to appreciate the depth of analysis offered. But the way the book is structured also allows the reader to ‘dip into’ different chapters to engage with questions which they may be particularly concerned. Chapter 1 introduces the book’s intellectual touchstone – the socially just school. Here the authors vividly describe how schools are increasingly corrupted and distorted under neoliberal regimes, and begin to sketch how more socially just alternatives might be constructed, introducing themes explored in depth later in the book. Chapter 2 mobilises the notion of the *Socially Critical Student Voice*. This, it is argued, needs to focus both on reforming schools and the broader social and political context in which they are located; but, at the same time, needs to be ‘action oriented’. Or, in other words, it needs to generate a commitment to change amongst young people themselves. This, it is acknowledged, presents educators with dilemmas, particularly associated with relinquishing control and allowing young people to experiment with their own learning. But schools, as Smyth remind us, are not simply be annexes of the economy. They should, it is argued, aim to foster co-operation, compassion and consciousness among young people – attitudes and dispositions Cammarota and Romero (2006) notably described as a ‘critically compassionate intellectualism’.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on how schools can build a dialogue with the communities they serve, and create a ‘horizon of possibility’ (Simon 1988) whereby students, teachers and community activists can work together to promote social justice. Chapter 5 critiques the assault on teachers’ work and students’ learning, the various forms of performativity associated with neoliberalism which corrupt teaching and learning. Here Smyth et al draw, amongst others, on Freire (1998) and Giroux (1988) to argue for a socially critical pedagogy based upon critical enquiry, respect for others, and concern for the collective good. Chapter 6 begins by reminding us that the form and content of the curriculum sends out powerful messages about what is valued and what is worth knowing; and, whilst the authors recognise the constraints under which teachers work, Smyth and colleagues draw on Freire (1972) and other proponents of critical pedagogy to provide examples of a socially-critical curriculum in action.

Chapter 7 deals with educational leadership. Though Smyth et al recognise that educational leadership takes place within a ‘restrictive framework of possibilities and constraints’ (Ball 1994); they argue for alternative models of emancipatory, distributive and pedagogical leadership which challenge the corrosive effects of neoliberalism. Chapter 8 examines the relationship between education and employment. Here, particular criticism is aimed at the false promises offered by the vocational training movement, and the increasing trend towards a narrow and instrumentalist curriculum – at least for those deemed ‘good with their hands’ rather than their minds. Smyth et al argue instead for a counter-hegemonic curriculum which enables young people to be able to navigate and critique the complex social and economic matrix in which they are placed.

The final chapter uses the notion of ‘critical hope’ (Freire 1998b) to explore what schools might look like where teachers act and are treated as intellectuals; students are positioned as social activists; and communities are politically active and engaged. There is a need to be more adept, it is argued, at developing educational responses to the corrosive effects on neoliberalism. For John Smyth, this requires combining indignation at injustice with the courage to work for a more socially just world.

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