School improvement and subtle apologism

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This article is concerned not so much with school improvement issues *per se* as with the messages about school improvement provided by academic texts. School improvement texts are important because they can be expected to reflect the current state of play of intellectual thinking about school improvement and because they also clearly have some impact on policy and practice, that is, to some extent they frame up school improvement issues for practitioners and policymakers. Yet academics holding socially critical perspectives have sometimes been dismissive of school improvement and other education management texts because of their perception of a 'problem-solving' tendency which is socially and politically decontextualised. Thus when Jenny Ozga provided a review of education management texts in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* in 1992 she didn't actually review any books because she didn't think they were worth it (Ozga, 1992).

Nevertheless a decade later the extraordinary proliferation of education management texts – including school improvement texts – is harder to ignore. It means that reviewing the arguments of such texts needs to become a key agenda for those who want to address critical concerns about education. Or put another way, while academics may often find it hard to exert direct influence on education policy, we can and should at least engage with the way the academic 'community' sends out distinctly mixed messages about policy and how practitioners should best respond to it. Along these lines, this article introduces a book we have recently written to provide a critical response to the education management literature of the last decade. It then focuses more specifically on textual apologism in school improvement literature and within that, looks at David Hopkins's recent book *School Improvement for Real* (Hopkins, 2001) in particular.

'Education Management in Managerialist Times'

Our new book *Education Management in Managerialist Times: Beyond the Textual Apologists* (Thrupp and Archer, 2003) is intended to respond to both problem-solving education management texts and more 'serious' texts whose writers would no doubt distance themselves from any simple 'how to' approach. The book begins by outlining what we believe are well-founded social, political and educational con-

cerns about the kind of post-welfarist education reforms seen over the last decade or so, especially in England, since these kind of market, managerial, performative and prescriptive policies clearly have many harmful effects (see also Wrigley, 2002). Drawing mostly on policy sociology literature we have argued that the main problems include:

- increasingly polarised schools and communities
- a narrowed educational focus in schools and the loss of authenticity in the teaching and learning process
- a reduction in the sociability of schools and communities
- the commodification and marginalisation of children
- the distraction of existing teachers and school leaders from educational matters
- the discouragement of potential teachers and school leaders
- and the undermining of more progressive policies

(e.g. Gewirtz, 2002, Gillborn and Youdell, 2000, Gleeson and Husbands, 2001, Lauder *et al.*, 1999). On the other hand we have argued that the claimed benefits of the new order like greater autonomy for schools, reduced student and school failure, better employment prospects and reduced social exclusion are often overplayed because there is a considerable mismatch between the rhetoric and what seems to be really going on (Thrupp, 2001, Wolf, 2002).

In the second part of the book we go on to illustrate that the education management literature generally fails to adequately reflect or respond to these concerns but rather, in overt or more subtle ways, acts to prop up recent managerialist reform. To do this we draw both on our own fresh reading of education management texts as well as the arguments of writers like Lawrence Angus, Stephen Ball, Jill Blackmore and Gerald Grace.[1] Of course not all education management texts are the same and to structure our discussion we refer to three broad categories of texts which reflect varying kinds and degrees of apologism – primarily problem-solving, overt apologism and subtle apologism. These categories of apologism are extremely broad and not in any sense rigidly bounded or intended to portray perspectives which are fixed or static. Within the same category will be writers with somewhat varying perspectives and writers may often write differently for different audiences or move between perspectives even for the same audience, or just write in equivocal ways which are hard to pin down. Individual outlooks can also change markedly, perhaps as a result of some incident which prompts a rethink or sometimes just a dawning realisation that something different needs to be done. All of this means that our categories should be regarded as a useful starting point, a way of getting some initial purchase on the educational management literature – but always needing to be further informed by specific arguments about the work of particular writers.

The key point about the first category, '*primarily problem-solving*' texts, is that one would barely know from them that schooling occurs in the context of post-welfarist education reform and structural inequality as they contain little reference to either. In this sense these texts are 'apolitical' but then avoiding a concern with politics or the social context is itself a highly political position, one which fits easily within a

technicist and managerialist approach. Compared to texts which are primarily problem-solving, texts which are examples of overt apologism bring post-welfarist education reform into the frame more but their stance is uncritically supportive and they barely acknowledge the social justice concerns associated with it. For *overt apologists* the problem is generally how to restructure the school so that it fits with the ideologies and technologies of neo-liberal and managerial reform, it is certainly not how to contest that reform. These texts rarely examine the issue of structural inequality in relation to schooling in any depth, although authors of these kinds of texts would no doubt often argue that they regard post-welfarist education reform as working towards social justice as well as effectiveness and efficiency. In contrast, *subtle apologism* involves texts which indicate more concern about the context of post-welfarist education reform and about social inequality – and indeed they may include elements of textual dissent – see below. However they still provide support to market and managerialist models of education either because their critique is insufficiently critical or because their dissenting element is not emphasised enough within their overall account to provide any serious challenge.

The limitations of primarily problem-solving accounts are fairly obvious and although it is the overt apologists to which we most object, there are relatively few of them. The group which gets most attention in the book are the subtle apologists, the biggest group and the one most likely to argue that their work is already critical enough.

The school improvement literature and textual apologism

Turning now to school improvement more specifically, it is noteworthy that there has been much less previous critique of textual apologism in this area than, say, the school effectiveness area.[2] At the same time, there are good reasons why we might expect school improvement texts to fit readily with a managerialist model of school management since in recent years the school improvement movement, particular in England, has been marked by an extraordinarily close interrelationship with government policy. Official school improvement builds on the school improvement literature and the previous and present heads of the DfES's Standards and Effectiveness Unit (Michael Barber and David Hopkins respectively) have both come to the role from professorial posts specialising in school improvement.

One critique of textual apologism in the school improvement literature was provided by a review in an earlier book by one of us *Schools Making a Difference* (Thrupp, 1999). That review found that while writers vary quite widely in their sensitivity to possible social class and market constraints on low socio-economic status (low SES) schools, most of the work in this area was unclear about either the social limits of reform or the likely impact of market policies in education. It found that issues of social class were often marginalised because school improvement research tends to concentrate on organisational or instructional concerns and only gives limited weight to the social dimensions of schooling. Improvement literature has tended to favour generalised rather than context specific discussion. This is seldom made explicit – it is more the case that the literature is vague about what sort of students, classrooms or schools are actually under discussion. Another identified problem was the use of notions of school culture which neglect the culture of students and the

community, for instance the idea of schools 'moving' 'cruising,' 'strolling', 'struggling' and 'sinking' (Stoll and Fink, 1998). What was not discussed was the way these various models of school culture related to middle class schools and working class schools, white schools and minority/indigenous schools and so on. School improvement studies were also found to be uncritical in their use of generic school effectiveness findings that take little account of school context. Finally, the review suggested that school improvement writers tended to be subtle apologists, more often not taking enough account of the difficulties inherent in post-welfarist reforms than overtly promoting them.

Now compared to that earlier review of school improvement literature, in *Education Management in Managerialist Times* we note a welcome increase in emphasis on the impact of social and political context over the last few years (e.g. Harris, 2001, Maden, 2001). Yet we have also argued that in most school improvement texts readers are still given an insufficiently critical perspective on post-welfarist reform and are encouraged to go along with policy, rather than contest it. Despite close links to policy, school improvement remains an area with some primarily problem-solving texts (e.g. Horne and Browne, 1997, Perez *et al.*, 1999, Reynes *et al.*, 1999, Walsh, 1999) and there are also a few recent texts which might be regarded as more overtly apologist in the way they actively 'sell' recent official school improvement policy (e.g. Brighouse and Woods, 1999). However most school improvement texts exemplify more subtle apologism by indicating concern with wider social and political context but still offering predominantly decontextualised analyses (eg Harris, 2001, Gray, 2001, Hopkins, 2001). It seems that that even leading school improvement writers have yet to find ways of breaking out of the generic discourses which have dominated school effectiveness and improvement for so long.

'School Improvement for Real'

In the limited space available here, we want to illustrate the problem of subtle apologism by referring to just one book, David Hopkin's *School Improvement for Real* (Hopkins, 2001). It might be argued that given the way, soon after its publication, Hopkins took over leadership of the DfES's Standards and Effectiveness Unit from Barber, it would be hardly surprising to find his work supportive of managerial reform in education. Certainly the 'Let's be Realistic' review located Hopkins work (ie his school improvement work up to the mid 1990s) next to Barber at the most uncritical end of the school improvement spectrum examined (see Thrupp, 1999, pp. 160-181) . Yet the fact is that Hopkins work has continued to be well received in the UK school improvement arena and he is one of those whose work has undoubtedly shifted over time to indicate a growing concern with the social and political context of schooling. For instance in 1998 he noted 'a failure to embed school improvement initiatives within a contextual and diagnostic analysis' and went on to indicate the importance of SES and market contexts, amongst others (Hopkins, 1998: 1048). Reflecting this shift *School Improvement for Real* is much more searching than Hopkins earlier work. Nevertheless, as we illustrate here, from a critical perspective it contains numerous contradictions, tensions and silences.

A key problem in School Improvement for Real stems from Hopkins' view of policy. This book says much more about policy than his previous ones (which is good), but it is clear that, following Milbrey McLaughlin, Hopkins primarily sees national

policy in managerialist times as ineffectual rather than damaging: 'policy cannot mandate what matters' (McLaughlin, 1990:12, cited in Hopkins, 2001, p 5.) This is variously because reform is not proximal enough to the classroom, because there is not enough attention to the way school organisation supports learning and because most reforms do not adopt a systemic perspective which has depth as well as width (p.5). Hopkins therefore stresses the need for school improvement to 'drive down to the learning level', in other words to concentrate on teaching and learning in schools rather than assuming changes at other levels will bring changes in the classroom. He is also keen to differentiate his approach of 'real' or 'authentic' improvement which supports teaching and learning from what he describes as the 'quick fix and short term responses which characterise many current school improvement efforts' (p. xi). He says that 'Governments whose policies emphasise accountability and managerial change fail to realise that if teachers knew how to teach more effectively they would themselves have done so decades ago' (p. 1).

This is important but only goes part of the way because what is not here is a recognition that policy may often reach its goal but in a negative sense, that is be damaging rather than just ineffectual (for instance the way OfSTED inspections and target setting lead to fabrication, teaching to the test and loss of creativity, or the negative impact of the market on childrens' self-concepts). This helps to explain why Hopkins can appear critical of reform on the one hand but is able to lead the DfES's school improvement programme on the other. It is because he fundamentally agrees with the direction of New Labour's reforms[3] but just doesn't think they will work without the more proximal and sophisticated approach to school reform taken by school improvement. Indeed, his framework for school improvement actually builds in OfSTED, LMS, the National Literacy Strategy and the National Curriculum on the assumption that these could be a force for good, that is that the 'national reform agenda' could pull in the same direction and be reciprocal with other elements of authentic school improvement and this would allow it more chance of success (see pp. 68-9).

This perception of policy is developed further in Hopkins final chapter 'The policy context for school improvement'. This begins with a critique of 'performance based' approaches to large scale reform as being ineffective because they do not focus on teaching, learning and capacity building at the school level. However there is no discussion of such policies being inequitable as well. The chapter continues with lessons for policy from the research on authentic school improvement, discussion of local infrastructures and networks, a policy framework for authentic school improvement and ways that governments can move this agenda forward (Hopkins, 2001: 184). This is all interesting and there are many points on which we could agree, at least in part. But most of Hopkins recommendations (pp. 182-200) are also problematic or raise difficult questions in one way or another. Here are his recommendations, with our comments/reflections/musings in brackets:

- Keep an unrelenting focus on student achievement and learning. (This is intended to be wider than test scores but agreeing the focus of schooling is not simple – there is a whole politics of curriculum 'basics' and frills to contend with.)

- Develop curriculum and teaching programmes that are based on what is known abut learning. (It is all very well developing curriculum and teaching programmes as a menu for teachers but this is a top down model and may not lead to the best classroom practices.)
- Pay attention to context – one size does not fit all – develop knowledge about what works and where. (It is good to see attention to social as well as performance contexts and we shall come back to this. Hopkins also indicates the need for a range of curriculum and instructional programmes suited to the contexts of different schools. But how far would he take this? Taken to its logical end this is a call for curricular justice, a fundamental shift in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment to suit groups other than just the white middle class (Connell, 1994). However, this goes against the historic trend of school curricula being determined by dominant social groups. It would face enormous political resistance but there is nothing to indicate that Hopkins realises the profound implications of what he is proposing.)
- Build capacity and strengthen known capacity-creating components (Hopkins indicates that teacher and leadership training and schemes for inspection would be part of capacity building. Yet these activities are themselves currently infected by reductionist managerial and prescriptive approaches to education so that exposure to such courses is often likely to compound poor teaching and management rather than improve it.)
- Nurture professional learning communities and provide incentives for teacher and school enquiry. (It is all very well nurturing professional learning communities through workshops and through reorganising schools as Hopkins suggests but managerialism is working against this because of the intensification of work and the divisive effects of performance related pay which result in the declining sociability of teaching.)
- Improve research and dissemination and make it practitioner-relevant. (The notion of evidence-based policy has become fashionable. But governments have a knack of discounting evidence they find unpalatable; it is a real, if unfortunate, part of the political process – see Elliott, 2001b.)
- Create a commitment to, and allow time for, effective implementation. ('Implementation' is a term we have a problem with because policies are rarely simply implemented, they are changed, struggled with, modified, subverted and so on. What is clear however is that this process is rarely of interest to politicians because of its lengthy timeline. As Levin, 2001 points out, announcing new policies has much more political mileage.)
- Link pressure and support at all levels of the system. (Here, we would simply want to point out that 'pressure' has important costs and is in tension with nurturing professional learning communities. It reflects a low-trust view of teachers and fails to tap into virtue ethics – making sure people are well trained then leaving them to get on with the job.)
- Establish local infrastructures and networks, supported by quality external facilitation. (We have no problem with local infrastructures and networks. But Hopkins also argues of LEAs or school districts that apart from their school im-

provement role 'it may well be that many – if not all – of these organisations have reached their 'sell-by date". This chimes with the neo-liberal attack on bureaucracy but the strengths of bureaucracy are often bypassed or played down by neo-liberals, and they also tend to neglect the disadvantages of privatisation – see Thrupp and Archer, 2003.).

- Ensure policy coherence. (This sounds great, but as discussed below, there are many reasons why policy is not nicely coherent.)

Hopkins policy framework for authentic school improvement involves:

- clear targets. (The problem with targets is they encourage more concern with outcomes than process and this leads to fabrication and a hollowing out of authenticity.)
- the development and piloting of curriculum and instructional programmes that directly address the government and school targets. (We agree with the point about schools not having to re-invent the wheel but as above have concerns about creating top-down models and working towards highly specified targets.)
- a menu of programme options of different kinds for schools. (The problem here is that the contextual specificity of schools will always severely limit the usefulness of 'off the shelf' programmes.)
- funding targeted to those in greatest need. (We agree with a redistributive approach to policy but a good level of universal provision also needs to be maintained.)

This would require a 'fundamentally new and radical way of thinking about education reform'. Governments can move this agenda forward by

- regarding the principles Hopkins outlines as an integrated approach to school improvement policy. (As we have indicated here, the principles also present many difficulties – to regard them as 'an integrated set of research-based criteria against which policies can be formulated and evaluated' would be to discount research that raises different patterns and trends.)
- having a clear link between resources and outcomes and avoiding having schools manage multiple bids and getting involved in a set of programmes which are not coherent. (One of the problems with educational processes is that often there is no very clear link between resources and outcomes. We agree that the bidding process encouraged by the managerial funder/provider split is burdensome and counterproductive.)
- having policies which are aligned both horizontally and vertically. (This sounds great, but again, as discussed below there are many reasons why policy is not nicely aligned.)
- regarding the building of local capacity as being as important as a coherent national policy. (We have no problem with this as a genuine project but not where local arrangements are simply used to relay problematic national policy. We would also be uneasy about the use of initial teacher training to disseminate teach 'key improvement strategies and skills'(p.199). The focus of ITT has to remain on good teaching in the first instance.)

- insisting that schools be thoughtful in their approach to change and improvement but not require everyone to do the same thing at the same time. (If schools are to be thoughtful in their approach to change and improvement, their staff need to be exposed to critical perspectives but this is typically not the case in government-sponsored courses and materials. Also, in this section Hopkins says that 'Governments could continue to focus, if they wish, on matters of achievement, standards and accountability, but they would now do so with more confidence that their policies are likely to bring about the conditions they say they desire'. (p.200) This hardly suggest a clear critique of the market, managerialism or performativity.)

Most of these issues relate to the general problem with Hopkins approach to policy – the fact that it essentially comes out of a 'policy science' rather than 'policy scholarship' approach to policy. Grace (1995: 2-3) describes policy science as

> a form of social and educational analysis which attempts to extract a social phenomena from its relational context in order to subject it to close analysis. Following the models of natural science from which it is derived, it is relatively uninterested in the history or cultural antecedents of the phenomena under investigation. The concern of a policy science approach is to understand present phenomena (especially present crisis phenomena) in order to formulate a rational and scientific prescription for action and future policy.

Grace goes on to note that what tends to be excluded from the policy science perspective is the relation of surface social phenomenon to the deep structure of historical, cultural, political, ideological, and value issues and the analysis of power relations within which policy questions are located (p.3). This is exemplified in the way Hopkins approach to policy is not linked back to its neo-liberal and managerialist roots (indeed Hopkins hardly uses such terms) and in the way history and social structure have such a thin presence in his writing. Nor is there any substantial critique or reference to critical literature on the national or international policy context. The result of Hopkins policy science approach is that just as Ball (1994:68) has described his account of development planning as a case of 'management in the best of all possible schools', his is a vision of policymaking at its unrealistic best. To Hopkins it is only the 'cynic' who thinks devolution along with accountability at the local level is a case of government's trying to have their cake and eat it too. (p.3).

In contrast to policy science, policy scholarship (or critical policy analysis, policy sociology) resists the tendency of policy science to abstract problems from their relational setting by insisting that the problem can only be understood in the complexity of those relations (Grace, 1995). As Ben Levin well illustrates, the problem with policymaking is that party politics, civil service politics, economic and electoral considerations all probably get more influence in the policy process than educational considerations *per se* (Levin, 2001). Indeed Levin suggests that 'an adequate account' of policymaking should take account of the following:

- Political decisions are shaped by many considerations, including the requirements of staying in office and the vicissitudes of the moment as well as the beliefs and commitments of policymakers and their advisors.
- Politics is substantially shaped by symbolic considerations that may have little to do with the real effects of policies.

- Human abilities to understand problems and generate appropriate solutions are limited and often inadequate to the complexity of the problems. The entire process of policy development and implementation takes place in a context that is constantly changing, multi-faceted and very difficult to read.
- Strategies for reform may focus on elements that are politically salient but that cannot produce the kinds of changes we really want, or, to put it another way, the focus may be on what can be done instead of on what might really make a difference. [This is Hopkins major point too.]
- Institutions such as schools or governments possess considerable ability to resist or alter policies to fit their own dynamics.
- History and culture are very powerful influences on policy and practice. (Levin, 2001: 23)

Ball goes further:

> National policy making is inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of idea from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that look as though it might work. (Ball, 1998a: 126)

Against such views of policy, Hopkins view of what is feasible is far too technical and rational. Many of his proposals simply would not work as intended and could be expected to have all kinds of unintended effects. Nevertheless it is his view of policy which colours his stance on the role of school improvement:

> Strategies for authentic school improvement are needed because externally imposed changes are not capable of directly enhancing the learning and achievement of students If, as McLaughlin argues (1990) policy does not mandate what matters and local implementation determines outcomes, then some form of linkage to mediate between policy and outcome is required. (Hopkins, 2001:58)

Here we can see that school improvement is intended to fill the void left by ineffectual policy. In this respect there are echoes of the 1996 stance noted earlier, that schools can do well despite policy[4]. As Hopkins points out, the IQEA project – an example of authentic school improvement – encouraged schools to see the potential in adapting external change to internal purpose. However because Hopkins has no particular problem with recent postwelfarist policy (except that he sees it having too little impact) there is no sense in this book that school improvement might actually mean *resisting* damaging reforms. Nor is there any searching discussion of school improvement's political and ideological use in the current political environment.[5] Instead practitioners are being asked to embrace change:

> ... school improvement strategies [need] to evolve and become more authentic, in order to meet the challenge of external change. At the start of a new century it is not sufficient for school improvement to develop on its own terms, it also needs to be responsive to the changing demands of the external educational environment. (p.57)

This signals another problem with Hopkins account , the uncritical way it views other education management literatures. There is a chapter on school change and school effectiveness and we are told 'the field of school improvement ...lags behind

both of these areas of research and practice, and has much to learn from them' (pp.34-35). But in fact these are both deeply problematic literatures (see Thrupp, 2001, Archer, 1999, 2002a, Morley and Rassool, 1999 for the school effectiveness literature, chapter 9 of our book for the school change literature). We are told (p.18) that authentic school improvement is interventionist and strategic, influenced by the contemporary emphasis on development planning. But again both strategic HRM and the SDP literatures are deeply problematic (see chapter 7 of our book).

Hopkins sees value in critical theory and is keen to locate school improvement within that philosophical tradition (p. 18). Nevertheless, this is a long reach since his book indicates little concern with fundamental social and political critique. The list of references in Hopkin's book also suggest that critical writing about education in relation to social structure or politics is mostly off the radar. And is school improvement really emancipatory in any fundamental sense? We are told (p. 18) that authentic school improvement is empowering in aspiration in the tradition of Dewey, Freire and Stenhouse. But if this were true, we would expect much more discussion in school improvement of the curriculum and of matching the curriculum to student interest.

The final issue we want to signal has to do with 'context'. There is a great deal of discussion of context in this book and it seen as a feature of authentic school improvement programmes – 'Context-specific – they pay attention to the unique features of the school situation and build strategies on the basis of an analysis of that particular context' (p.17). This seems a welcome shift from Hopkins earlier book and in the policy chapter late in the book the impact of poverty does get serious, if qualified, mention:

> Much also depends, of course, on what we mean by 'lower-performing' and 'higher- performing' schools. The social context of the school has a powerful effect both on achievement levels and on strategies to improve achievement. Problems of poverty, especially, are unlikely to be managed using a strategy that focuses only on curriculum and instruction (Levin, 1995, Mortimore and Whitty, 1997) The policy implications are two-fold. First make provision for contextual differences in policy prescriptions. Do not, however, allow this to be used as an excuse by underperforming schools. Poverty may explain a certain level of under-achievement, and this may provide an argument for additional support. It is not however a reason to accept failure on a continuing basis (Hopkins, 2001:186).

What is interesting here is the clear distinction made between schools affected by poverty and those 'underperforming' whereas we would argue that poverty is related to 'underperformance' through compositional effects on school processes (Thrupp, 1999). Surely too, if poverty has an impact on achievement, it is going to have a continuing impact until the poverty itself is addressed. But in any case, when Hopkins considers context he more often means differential capacity for improvement and this is generally discussed in a way which is not linked back to wider social context. So for instance his chapter on differential improvement talks about the strategies which can be employed to improve the 'failing or ineffective' school, the 'low achieving' school, the 'good or effective' school. But the reader gets very little sense of these different contexts being linked back to social structure which is generally missing from most of the book.[6] Instead Hopkins continues to put much weight on teacher expectations:

> My own experience of school improvement interventions in a wide range of settings suggests that all too often there is a powerful and insidious collusion at work in many social, urban and educational settings that create a hegemony which fundamentally depresses learning: 'the kids around here just can't learn' or 'that is a nice caring school, what a pity about the results!' The challenge therefore is to discover how an ethos of high expectations can be created in a context where many believe there is little cause for optimism. (p.xii)

Conclusion: towards a more 'dissenting' approach to school improvement

Although there have been some significant contextual shifts in the school improvement area over the last few years, important problems continue. As is well illustrated by Hopkin's work, critical scholarship on social inequality or the impact of post-welfarist educational reform is insufficiently taken up by school improvement writers. By providing only muted critiques, they too often end up providing support for current managerialist policy rather than explaining why heads and teachers who are concerned with genuine school improvement should contest it.

What is needed in the school improvement area are the kind of 'dissenting' texts found more often in other school management areas like school leadership. Textual dissenters either challenge the textual apologists directly by critique of textual apologism (for instance Ball, 1994; Thrupp, 1999) or more indirectly by providing an alternative account (for example Blackmore, 1999; Grace, 1995) but the key point about these accounts is that one is left in no doubt that the authors are concerned about challenging post-welfarist education reform and structural inequality. Dissenting analyses are not entirely absent within recent school improvement work, for instance Terry Wrigley's (2001) editorial in this journal asked fundamental questions about the aims and purposes of school improvement while Wrigley (2002) points to problems within official school improvement and highlights the neglected areas of class, culture and curriculum in 'mainstream' school improvement. There are also book-length case studies which suggest alternative, more progressive approaches to school improvement (e.g. Apple and Beane, 1999). Yet work which recasts school improvement as part of a wider political and educational project remains thin on the ground. Wrigley (2001) commented that his questioning of the conventional school improvement agenda was 'virtually heretical'.

Any feasible alternative agenda has to begin with the market and performative environment within which those who lead and manage schools currently have to work. For instance doing no harm in response to the context of official school improvement in England would be a considerable challenge in itself. It will mean different things in advantaged and less advantaged school settings[7] but in all schools practitioners should refuse to engage in unfair practices such as 'educational triage' (where decisions are taken to put lots of energy into students on the borderline of passing at the expense of others who seem unlikely to contribute to school pass rates, see Gillborn and Youdell, 2000) and ensure that their own school's practices are the least selective or exclusionary possible. Heads and teachers should also make good use of the potential gulf between official policy and classroom practice in the service of their students. For instance, when schools are often being asked to impose

inappropriate or damaging curriculum or assessment innovations, paying only lip service to what is required or fabricating performance may be entirely justifiable.

A further goal involves all the teaching that good schools should do but often leave out because of performative pressures. This include teaching about social inequalities and political processes, teaching a culturally appropriate curriculum and teaching a wider and richer curriculum than that encouraged by official school improvement. Although we accept that stealing time and energy to do will be difficult, the key goal for practitioners is not only to be more searching about what constitutes good schooling than the reductionist targets encouraged by official school improvement, but to bring that wider perspective to the centre of school life. If the school improvement literature is going to play a role in this bigger agenda for school improvement, it needs to become clearer about the substantial tensions between the imperatives of government policy and what is best done on educational and social justice grounds, as well as more willing to prioritise the latter.

Notes

1 For instance Angus 1993, 1994; Ball 1994, 1998a; Blackmore, 1999; Grace 1995, 2002.

2 One reason for this may be that it is less easy to characterise school improvement from a critical perspective than school effectiveness because it is more diverse. For instance *Improving Schools* is a wide-ranging journal and there is growing interest in alternative perspectives on school improvement (Harris and Bennett 2001).

3 In a TES interview at the time of his appointment Hopkins commented that "My educational values are sympathetic to the Government's and I want to help implement policy."(Hendrie 2002).

4 Hopkins (1996:32-33) seemed to hold the view that school improvement could hold out in the face of neo-liberal ideologies and reform programs. He argued that 'schools which are developing [as a result of school improvement] are those which are able to "survive with integrity" in times of change....In other words the schools that are developing continue to keep abreast with innovation within the context of a pervasive political reform agenda, whilst remaining true to the educational futures they desire for their students.' Yet, as Hatcher points out, the research evidence on the impact of reform simply does not bear out this claim, rather he suggests that 'It is not so much that "school improvement" has enabled schools to resist the Conservative offensive, rather that 'school improvement' itself has tended to accommodate to it' (Hatcher 1998: 270).

5 Only the same concern with 'quick fixes': '....school improvement's time in the sun will be short unless it can persuade its new found friends that it is not a "quick fix" response to educational change' (p.2). Similarly Hopkins talks about policy-borrowing but not the role of education management academics as 'policy entrepreneurs' (Ball 1998b) in the way many proponents of school improvement and related areas tend to be.

6 For instance the section on 'Limits of current reform strategies' argues that 'one cannot be over optimistic about whether current reform initiatives will lead to dramatically enhanced levels of student learning and achievement' (p.7) because reform is not 'up close', 'system wide' and 'system deep'. But a more sociological interpretation is that reform is constrained by the deep effects of social structure and this is not mentioned . Similarly Hopkins is keen to redesign schools around learning (p.xiii) but does not demonstrate a sociological understanding that part of the reasons schools are as they are is because of their role in social control and social sorting, roles they carry out all too efficiently.

7 To give a few examples, staff in popular, high SES schools could be modest about the relative popularity of their schools, accepting that a school deemed to be of poor quality or failing may, in real terms, have teachers and senior staff who are working harder and smarter than themselves. They could also be honest in their public statements about the way in which their schools gain advantage from their high SES intakes and support any moves to provide additional resources to disadvantaged schools which need them most. On the other hand, staff in low SES schools could take heart from knowing that what they are doing is of genuine importance, and that they are probably doing it as well as can reasonably be expected given the circumstances. They could also commit themselves to improving the learning of the students currently at their school rather than targeting middle class families as a means of bringing about a change in the status of their schools.

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