This book by three authors who collaborated during their time together at University of California, Los Angeles combines theoretical and empirical work. It is very much a study about the pedagogy of the oppressed in action, featuring the presence of Paulo Freire himself. It focuses not only on Paulo Freire’s actual work as education secretary in the city of São Paulo but also on his legacy in this regard.¹

This is a well-researched book that provides a very detailed and in-depth analysis of the efforts of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) government in democratizing the system of education in the municipality of this Brazilian megalopolis through a concerted effort to improve the quality of public schools, democratize access, and most important, democratize in a concrete way the social relations of education and the knowledge content of what is taught in these schools. Furthermore, the process of democratization was extended to the administrative setup in schools, involving the revival of the school councils that had a pivotal role to play in the school’s regeneration. It also involved efforts to encourage the active participation of all the potential and actual stakeholders in the public education sector, including teachers, students, parents, educational administrators, and community representatives. This massive reform of the previously neglected and largely underfunded public sector (the emphasis then was on privatization for those who aspired to a good-quality and materially rewarding education) also included improving the conditions and financial situation of the hitherto underpaid teachers in this sector, with better pay being reserved for those electing to teach in the less popular areas of the city. The improvement in the teachers’ conditions of work² was also intended to be matched by greater teacher resourcefulness and by a qualitative change in the nature of teaching that
is conceived of no longer as an isolated activity but as an activity involving teamwork, research, and ongoing reflection on action. Importance was attached in this context to ongoing teacher formation through the setting up of Grupos de Formação. These reforms in the public education sector were complemented by a strong adult and youth literacy program that, as already indicated, involved efforts to forge a partnership between the state, as reflected in the PT municipal government, and social movements.3

The adult literacy program naturally and as expected was to comprise many of the elements one has come to associate with Freire-inspired popular education. However, the same can be said of the public school system that the secretariat sought to develop, a system that was to take on board many aspects of popular education.

The foregoing points strike me as being the main features of the reforms to emerge from this account. The book also provides the reader with excellent background material consisting of a historical and sociological analysis of Latin American and specifically Brazilian education. It indicates the landmarks in the development of public education in Brazil and provides a discussion concerning Freire and popular education as well as a concise and succinct historical account of the development of the PT. It provides a brief overview of the educational achievements of the PT administration in São Paulo and goes on to provide a brief account of the neoliberal turn after the PT was defeated in the 1992 municipal elections. The book also provides a fine discussion regarding theories of the state and then dwells at considerable length on the role of social movements in the struggle for power, with specific reference to Latin American social movements.4 The authors also provide a highly illuminating account of state-social movement relationships in Brazil and the kind of relationships the Freire secretariat sought to establish with respect to the process of educational reform in São Paulo. I consider this to be one of the most important discussions in the book, a discussion that dwells on transformative education being carried out in the context of broader social movements. The study also conveys the idea that those engaged in the desired process of curriculum reform would constitute a social movement.

Most of the salient features of the process of educational reform in São Paulo, provided at the outset of this review, and the idea of a curriculum reform movement are described and expounded on in the chapter “Creating the Popular Public School,” which is followed by an equally in-depth discussion on the interdisciplinary curriculum project, based on generative themes derived from the pupils’ own social environment, developed within the participating schools. A number of documents and other sources normally used in the context of policy studies are availed of here.

The longest and arguably the most revealing section is the almost 100-page-long chapter consisting of a qualitative research study that exposes us to the realities experienced inside a number of participating São Paulo schools. Many are located in poor communities. Others are located in areas characterized by crime and murder, whereas one school is characterized by the presence of a middle-class
residential area on one side and a favela on the other. The voices of people involved in this reform process also emerge from this account, which is characterized, as with most ethnographic work, by the presence of numerous quotes from interviews with key actors in the project, tables outlining school subjects and generative themes, and the occasional thick description of teacher-student dialogic interactions.

The interviews mainly privilege teachers’ voices, and perhaps the study could have been enhanced by a greater presence of voices deriving from other important stakeholders, notably students and parents. It would have also been enhanced with more thick descriptions from fieldnotes of the type mentioned earlier. Furthermore, it would have been interesting to see some revealing disclosures by teachers and other personnel regarding not only the handling of social themes emerging from the pupils’ immediate surroundings but also the learning process occurring with respect to those subjects and their content areas that somehow relate to the dominant culture.

Whenever discussions revolve around Freire and his ideas, the focus with regard to content is often on the popular, and these schools are no exception; they are after all designated popular public schools. This is as it should be given the need to strengthen the school’s link with the pupils’ immediate culture, as a result of which these pupils can experience a sense of ownership of the school and identify with the culture it fosters. And yet, Freire has always insisted that the popular constitutes only the starting point of the educational process.

What also strikes me as missing from this book is some discussion concerning the tensions, contradictions, and obstacles arising from having different systems operating within the same sector, the public sector in this case, and across sectors (a reformed and nonselective public sector system coexisting with a competitive and elitist private sector system). This would have enabled the discussion to resonate with the experiences of a wider international readership, especially from the many contexts worldwide that are characterized by the presence of a segmented educational system involving state, religious, and private schools.

The detailed accounts of life within schools are honest. They capture the complexities with which the secretariat had to deal. This process of reform met with all sorts of responses ranging from approval, especially by teachers such as Francisco who had shared the pupils’ poverty earlier on in life, to resistance and suspicion, especially in the latter case by teachers who do not support the PT and therefore regard the generative themes focusing on social issues as vehicles for the promotion of “PT propaganda.” Teachers who misconstrued the reforms’ underlying philosophy often applauded them for the wrong reasons. Then there are those who were attracted to the project of the popular public school by the extra pecuniary remuneration, and some of them went so far as to disclose that they were determined to keep on teaching the way they liked in the privacy of the classroom. Others complained that participation in the project entailed an increase in the amount of work in which they needed to engage. I have encountered similar remarks by teachers in my own country, especially in reaction to the new
demands placed on them as a result of an impending nationwide curriculum reform.

Equally honest and disheartening are the revelations that despite the secretariat’s intentions to create a nonselective public sector system, internal tracking is carried out by teachers within the privacy of their classrooms. This once again is not unique to the São Paulo experience. It seems that certain teachers might find it extremely hard to break away from the selectivity and what can be called the streaming (tracking) mindset. Others also fear the freedom to experiment, create their own teaching resources, and engage in preliminary research.5

The foregoing indicates that the discussion throughout this book is grounded in the realities of practice at different levels. This book should be a key source of reference for any account of Freire’s later work, one that dwells not only on theory but also on the relationship between this theory and the realities of administering education within a specific municipality’s public sector. It also serves as a lucid and revealing account of curriculum reform within a specific context, with due attention attached not only to the process of developing curricular guidelines and their underlying philosophy but also and most important to the way the reform is interpreted/mediated by and reinvented through the multiple realities of school and classroom practice.

The book should attract interest from an international readership and not simply one with a special interest in matters concerning Brazilian society. The idea of “bringing education closer to home” and therefore closer to the community is increasingly becoming popular these days. It is found in such important international documents as the European Union’s (EU) Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (CEC, 2000) where this idea emerges clearly in the last of the Memorandum’s six key messages. The book by O’Cadiz, Wong, and Torres becomes even more relevant in an age when we are witnessing the emergence of a variety of projects connected with the concept of “learning cities” and “learning regions” in several parts of the world (see Walters, Borg, Mayo, & Foley, 2004, with respect to South Africa), including once again the EU. A number of European regions are participating in the EU’s Regional Networks for Life-Long Learning (R3L) pilot initiative (CEC, 2002). In my home country (Malta), one of the main ideas being floated around in connection with a recently revamped national minimum curriculum document is that of developing schools as community learning centers. I argue in a forthcoming book that the São Paulo experience can serve as an important source of international reference in this context (Mayo, in press), although my statements in this regard carry with them the important proviso, underlined in Freire’s work, that experiments cannot be transplanted but must be reinvented.

The notion of making education and other public goods the concerns of communities has become quite popular in various parts of the world. There is the danger, however, that this notion can translate into a process through which the responsibility for quality provision in education and other public goods is shifted from the state onto individuals and communities, in keeping with the neoliberal
ideology. This is certainly not what the São Paulo secretariat sought to accomplish. The state, represented in this specific context by the educational secretariat, had an important part to play in the entire process of public education reform. In forging links with grassroots movements, the state was not abdicating its responsibilities in providing the quality education to which all paulistanos/paulistas were entitled. On the contrary, these links were intended to render the state’s provision in this regard more meaningful and accessible, on the basis of equity, to the oppressed of São Paulo.

This book ought to be recommended to policy makers and curriculum specialists as well as to prospective and present educational administrators. It offers a refreshingly southern perspective and a welcome respite from the onslaught of imported ideas in educational administration, emanating from northern contexts that often favor an unmistakably technical-rational approach.

Notes

1. This particular development is no doubt reflected in the term (popular public) allotted to the public sector schools that elected to join the project (schools were allowed the democratic right to choose either to join or stay out of the project).

2. This is a recurring theme in Freire’s later work (see Freire, 1998a, 1998b).

3. This book should be read alongside Paulo Freire’s (1993) Pedagogy of the City. One can also listen to a 1991 AERA audiotape on this aspect of Freire’s work (see Freire, 1991).

4. The authors provide important details regarding the nature and amount of social organizations and movements available in Brazil.

5. In the São Paulo case, they would fear the freedom to team up with others, work across traditional disciplines, research the community, and explore generative themes.

References


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