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Changing Schools. Alternative ways to make a world of difference

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Reviews (II)

Wringley, T., Thomson, P. and Lingard, B. (2012). *Changing Schools. Alternative ways to make a world of difference*. Abingdon: Routledge.
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Changing schools is about changing lives of students and their surrounding communities. The different experiences outlined have purposefulness of education as a common feature interweaving their realities. Although the social conditions of students and school communities depicted in the 14 case study chapters analysed are very diverse in terms of socio-economic and educational backgrounds, all of them describe communities committed to education for improving both the personal conditions of its agents as well as the social surrounding environment. All the analysed alternatives stem from the understanding that despite existing structural inequalities, education remains a political matter that can make a significant difference in the lives of the students. Whether through Philosophy (Chapter 2), Mathematics (Chapter 15), Environmental Education (Chapter 10) or Creative learning (Chapter 11), critical thinking remains at the core of the different alternative practices as the seed that will be introduced among students, to be harvested throughout life. In some of the explored cases, the context in which the alternative arises is both part of the problem and much of the solution particularly in the hands of its social agents empowered through an education where subjects, in words of Freire (1970), “name the world in order to transform it”. This is the case of Cherbourg State School (Chapter 6) where a strengths-based approach is the key to indigenous children’s success. High expectations and supportive environments are also at work in both Australian and English schools

(Chapter 5) that clearly advocate for the right of all young people to have free access to a high-quality education. The awakening of the sense of belonging through education is also at work among the landless in Brasil (Chapter 7) who become empowered through training and working for the community, as a critical part of their political struggle.

Yet in other cases, education is not political in the sense of claiming one's right to be and to belong while being highly educated. It becomes a question of understanding education as a tool to interpret the world, where questioning and investigating becomes the key for the transformation of the schools and the very learning process through an ongoing dialogue between participants and research (Chapters 3, 12 and 13). All along the journey that this books takes us to, through the lives and successful stories of school communities that have indeed made a difference, we are faced with experiences where school is achieving results that go from personal welfare and emotional growth to sheer academic performance. We have also learned about the successful cases of youths that are trained through experience in the social context, from real life, to develop useful strategies as a way to promote the lifelong learning project (Chapter 9) in which we all find ourselves. Whether this is obtained by focusing on one's own context and place (Chapter 8) as a frame to trigger integral educational development or rather promoting a socio-cultural sense of learning through cooperation within students' groups around thematic projects (Chapter 4); at the end of the day, it is all about providing successful experiences of learning to a great diversity of students.

The stories that these young boys and girls, their schools' staff as well as their communities are bringing us through this collection of case studies, remind us of the existing gap between the successful students who get the scores in international surveys, and the rest of students, among which we find the most vulnerable groups. This reminds us that educational systems are failing to meet efficiency goals, particularly if we understand them as efficient only when they cater for high-quality education for all. Alternative proposals such as the cases brought to light here, are more and more necessary. In some cases their presence and action have been critical to reverse the extreme situation of exclusion of many (Chapter 14), and still we are recalled that by maintaining and expanding "different" schools for those at the margins only, mainstream schools might remain oblivious of the needs of a few.

Changing schools is telling teachers, practitioners, policy-makers and other educational agents that quality education taking place at the margins of mainstream society is becoming a question of social justice in a convulsed era of critical societal challenges.

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