

## CEPaLS 05:

### Thrupp and Willmott's book: *Education Management in Managerialist Times.*

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In 2004 I was invited by Martin Thrupp to give a paper as part of a symposium at the BELMAS conference focused on the book by Martin Thrupp and Robert Willmott (2003) *Education Management in Managerialist Times, Beyond the Textual Apologists*, Maidenhead: Open University Press. This is my review essay from that conference.

#### Introduction

I have cried many times watching a film or reading a novel but I have only cried once while reading an education monograph. The account given by Greenfield of his experiences after his 1974 paper at the Bristol stage of the International Intervisitation Programme (IIP) in 1974 is incredible, because it not only shows the struggle over ideas but also how a field responds to those ideas. It is an account that all members of the field should read and engage in dialogue about. In reviewing Thrupp and Willmott's critique of the field I have the Greenfield experience in my mind, because it will shape how I approach my task.

In an interview with Peter Ribbins (Greenfield and Ribbins 1993) Greenfield describes his journey from "arcane knowledge" (233) towards how best we can "understand the social world" (241), and how in his 1974 paper he argued that "organisations come into existence when we talk and act with others" (53). In developing this epistemology he challenged the foundations of the field in North America. In the Theory Movement the field had worked on trying to find a scientific and unified approach to the organisation through the separation of facts and values, and what Greenfield did was to think himself out of the paradigm by arguing that organisations exist in the subjective phenomenology of the individual and are an invented social reality. Greenfield tells us what happened:

"The room was full but it was a moderate sized classroom, with about sixty present. Immediately after the meeting people came to talk to me. Griffiths was seething with anger, telling me 'You are poorly informed' I remember those words. He then turned on his heel

and left after advising me to read more. I tried to talk to him later, but it was difficult. I felt I had betrayed something, stabbed Caesar. I had always stood in admiration of him – in awe even. It was painful. I felt alone and isolated. There seemed no community of scholars, no camaraderie. If there was support, it came from individuals who didn't count, people from places on the periphery of the great world of theory and accepted thinking about it. Four years later when IIP'78 was held in Canada, my colleagues ensured there would be no echo of the Bristol error. I was not invited to attend or make a presentation. I watched the IIP caravanserai as it passed briefly through Toronto" (245).

Greenfield tells us what he learned from this experience: first, he was intellectually paralysed for a while as he had not gone into the seminar room to be deliberately oppositional and it took him time to see how intellectual work is related to the person and their identity; and second, he learned about the limitations of the field as a field:

"The paper began to be talked about in unscholarly ways. I discovered something about my field: its pettiness, its calcified and limited vision, its conventionality, its hostility to dissenting opinion, its vituperativeness... The attack was personalised, it was by second-hand statement, innuendo – people who had not read the paper but claimed they knew what it was about" (247).

These are important lessons for all of us involved in knowledge production. When we engage in questions of epistemology we are not only dealing with ideas but with people: their investment of time and identities. Being open about his "intellectual pilgrimage" (Gronn 1985) meant that Greenfield was able to productively raise questions but in doing so he faced a field that did not seem to have a mature sense of itself or the dynamics of knowledge production. Bourdieu (1988) helps us to understand:

"It is well known that no groups love an 'informer', especially perhaps when the transgressor or traitor can claim to share in their own highest values. The same people who would not hesitate to acclaim the work of objectification as 'courageous' or 'lucid' if it is applied to alien, hostile groups will be likely to question the credentials of the special lucidity claimed by anyone who seeks to analyse his own group. The sorcerer's apprentice who takes the risk of looking into native sorcery and its fetishes, instead of departing to seek in tropical climes the comforting charms of exotic magic, must expect to see turned against him the violence he has unleashed" (5).

Membership of a field entails responsibility to ask questions about knowledge, knowing and knowers so that claims to the truth are open to reflexive analysis and development. It is very easy to characterise this as unproductive paradigm wars that entertain academics, particularly by those who are in Greenfield's words "tidyminded" (Greenfield 1978: 90). Reading a book and undertaking a review of it could be a place where the confident tell the author that they have got it

wrong, and for the scurrilous to engage in a whispering campaign. While I cannot claim to have made the ground breaking contribution that Greenfield has done for our thinking in the field I have engaged in analysis of knowledge production, and as such I have faced personal attacks and private abuse as well as productive critical review. I have taken heart from Greenfield's experience:

"I have watched with surprise and fascination the furore which began with the presentation of my paper at the IIP in 1974. A Thursday, I think it was, in Bristol. People ask me if the reaction bothers me. No it doesn't. The slings and arrows of academic warfare are not unpleasant. Somewhat like St Sebastian, I suppose, I'd rather be in pain as long as the crowd understands what the ceremony is about. But it is hard just to be written off, ignored or buried" (1978: 86-87).

I advise Thrupp and Willmott to read Greenfield's account so that their experiences of how this book is received is recorded and reflected upon. Indeed, they are open about the debates they have had so far and how these have shaped this book. Their task is different to the one that Greenfield set himself but they are challenging knowledge production within a field and so are raising questions about purpose and practice. In reviewing this book my approach is informed by Bourdieu's (2000) identification of the dangers of scholastic illusion by bestowing on "canonical texts the false eternization of ritual embalming" (48), and as a self-confessed heretic who is included in the text I need to avoid both collaboration with the authors and unreflexive opposition arising from the characterisation of my work.

Thrupp and Willmott base their extensive and detailed analysis of texts in the field of education management on the argument "that this literature is harmful because of the way it fails to challenge existing social inequalities and the way it chimes with managerialist policies that will only further intensify existing inequality" (3). Through an analysis of selected texts and authors, areas such as marketing, improvement, development planning, leadership and change are analysed and located in one of four categories:

- ❑ *Primarily problem solving*: texts that are "apolitical" and are about delivering a technical agenda.
- ❑ *Overt apologists*: texts that include context but are "uncritically supportive" and are concerned to enable reform rather than contest it.
- ❑ *Subtle apologetics*: texts that show concern and seek to sit outside of the mainstream apologists but still support managerialism through the lack of rigorous critique or analysis.

- *Textual dissenters*: texts that critique the apologists and provide alternative analysis of context and development (60-61).

In undertaking this analysis of knowledge production Thrupp and Willmott are very clear that they are building on other's work. They lay out the process they have gone through, and are concerned not only to critique, but to suggest how the field might engage with the contradictions that are faced everyday within practice. In doing this they have produced an important book that provides an interesting and valuable analysis of how knowledge production interplays with context, and in particular with education policy. In developing a position on the book I am mindful that I once set out to do a similar task (Gunter 1997), I am positioned in this book as a textual dissenter, but not a pure or fully acceptable one. Hence in producing this review I and you need to be mindful that my reading is located within my own journey, that Thrupp and Willmott regard as "admirable" (174) but whom they also see as "at risk of having her arguments co-opted by those who bring much less critical meanings to these ideas" (179).

With this in mind and within the space available I would like to raise a number of issues by adopting the approach taken by Thrupp and Willmott where they show how, through their reading, they are interested in the silences within a text. One silence is that a theory of knowledge production is under-developed. While the positioning of texts and writers in relation to the unfolding post-welfare policy context is clear, and through analysis we can identify why choices are made to label work in particular ways, the reader is not provided with an explanation for the writing of such texts. A similar critique could have been made about *Rethinking Education* (Gunter 1997) and to my knowledge never was. I began working on this in 2001 when I did a review of knowledge production underpinning the emerging field of educational leadership (Gunter 2001). In this task I was helped by Bourdieu's (1990) thinking tools because he provides an understanding of field as an arena of struggle in the drawing of boundaries, and how knowledge actors seek entry or distinctiveness based on the position taken. The habitus that is revealed within the field through the texts is one that can be characterised as rooted in an academic-practitioner habitus where those within the field show association with field members in schools through their own biographies and their disposition to support practice (Gunter 2001).

Furthermore, an analysis of how, for example, texts that draw on theories and models developed in North American capitalism are used by particular field members could have been explained by inter-relationships between position in the field and dispositions within the meta-field of power. This could have allowed for the development of scope: is this a UK problem and/or international? Is it a problem that is getting worse or better? Are knowledge entrepreneurs located in higher education, institutions of governance, or private business? Are dissenters only located in higher education or are there examples of dissenters who are headteachers or principals or Vice Chancellors? Of particular interest is the changing role of the university as a site of knowledge production and entrepreneurial practice. This is an aspect that needs analysis because we are all implicated in these practices, and how we respond and position ourselves within them is vital to how we understand the structures of knowledge production.

Writing a book involves staking symbolic capital and is about "...glory, honour, credit, reputation, fame", and is a form of domination "... which imply dependence on those who can be dominated by it, since it only exists through the esteem, recognition, belief, credit, confidence of others, and can only be perpetuated so long as it succeeds in obtaining belief in its existence" (Bourdieu 2000 p166). Bourdieu goes on to argue that all capital has "symbolic effects" through a predisposition to give worth and worthiness to the person and practices that own and use it, and so "symbolic capital rescues agents from insignificance, the absence of importance and of meaning" (Bourdieu 2000 p242). We might also ask if others have done the job before, why then have Thrupp and Willmott replicated the task? I suspect that the situation is worse than in the early and mid 1990s when many of the critical reviews were done and so there is a need to keep restating the obvious. However, Bourdieu helps field members to see the problematics since having put these texts and authors onto the agenda again they gain new importance, and credentials that can be used to their advantage. Managerialist products (books and courses) sell and in their own terms of submission to the market they are successful. It is very easy, as has happened to textual dissenters such as myself, to marginalise critical work as being esoteric and irrelevant to practice. For example, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) web site

is a place where symbolic capital is staked and as such particular knowledge and knowing is consecrated. Here apologist texts and authors are recommended to practitioners and it will be of interest to see if as a result of this book they are located in a critical commentary or even removed. The textual dissenters are currently absent. If Thrupp and Willmott's book enjoys the imprimatur of the NCSL then they will have broken through a knowledge barrier and will be read by the people who need to read it and whom the authors want to read it.

Additional point: at the symposium a senior member of NCSL argued that professionals should not have access to critical work because it makes them feel guilty.

Bourdieu's work on field boundaries enables us to understand our own position and how we seek to position others. Thrupp and Willmott have drawn a boundary around knowledge production that they label education management, but there are two issues that need debating regarding this mapping: first, they draw on management in education writers who use non-educational language and models to increase the status of educational organisations, but they do not directly draw on those who locate their work in the tradition of educational administration which grew into educational management in the 1980s and 1990s. Acknowledgement of work such as Baron and Taylor (1969), Hughes, Ribbins and Thomas (1985) and Hall (1996) is therefore missing. This is not an opportunistic shot at the authors because in this type of text all kinds of cases can be made about inclusion and exclusion, and they quite sensibly have a cut-off date which may be stretched if necessary. The point I want to make is that recent analysis illustrates that management in education is at best a hybrid and at worst a mutation of the field, and needs to be put into the context of a field with an intellectual heritage located in the social sciences (Gunter 2004a). Second, Thrupp and Willmott's boundary includes knowledge workers who label their work as school improvement and school change. The boundaries could have been drawn differently. I select these two in particular because it could be argued that the book is a critique of school improvement because those who are self-professed members of the field of management in education could alternatively be mapped into the field of school improvement. Again, we could

identify a field of organisational change that could include school improvement and management in education.

What I am not clear about is how the boundary of education management is conceptualised in relation to the historical development of knowledge production, and how it sits alongside other fields such as education policy sociology, school improvement, school effectiveness, and school change. Having done some work on this myself (Gunter 1999, Gunter 2001) and having analysed the knowledge claims of these fields in terms of origins, epistemic groups, and boundaries, it became clear from reading this book that we still have much work to do. Peter Ribbins and myself (Gunter 2004b, Ribbins and Gunter 2002, Gunter and Ribbins 2002, 2003) have also challenged the field to look at knowledge claims. It is out of the scope of this review to present the detail here but we have argued that there are different approaches to knowledge within the field of educational leadership that embrace the knowledge workers that Thrupp and Willmott analyse, and we label this knowledge as: conceptual, descriptive, humanistic, critical, evaluative and instrumental. Thrupp and Willmott are essentially positioning the different types of apologists as being engaged in evaluative and instrumental work, and the textual dissenters as being primarily critical. What our mapping of knowledge and knowing does is to enable the interplay between activity and action, problem posing and problem solving, to be located in an explanatory framework that crosses and challenges the interplay between boundaries produced and fortified by accumulations of symbolic capital such as educational management, school improvement, school effectiveness and school change. For example, humanistic knowledge claims generated through biography is drawn upon by both apologists and dissenters to justify their positions and to position others differently, and it would be interesting to have read some comparative analysis of how and why this happens and to what effect.

The way forward for those in practice is an endemic dilemma for the field. The instrumental and evaluative based texts and authors inscribe prescriptions of different kinds from outright direction to use this or that technique to more subtle concerns with creating conditions for effective change.

Textual dissenters have faced criticism that they are able to show educational professionals the situation that they are in, but find it difficult to enable those within that situation to work their way through it. After all, as many field members have said to me in interviews, schools have to be managed on a Monday morning, and while we might not like markets or OfSTED we still have to work within the world as it is, as well as hold on to the world we are working for. Thrupp and Willmott meet this head on by arguing for a particular approach to how problems are handled and debated. Overall, their advice is consistent with their position within the field and concerns honesty with selves, colleagues, and the community about the situation the school is in and how educational issues will shape responses and strategies. My sympathies lie with the arguments against delivering change, and in favour of working for change (Gunter 2004b), but I would like to know more about their advocacy of “anti-managerial leadership” (181). It seems that they are arguing for an “explicit reflection on wider issues of social structure and politics and their impact on schools...” and this is consistent with trends within the field (Gronn 2003, Woods 2003). What I would like to know more about, and the texts I read never seem to address this, is the difference between managerialism and bad management. I think that the former is the reworking of power relationships and the latter is the incompetent handling of relationships in general, but the two can often be conflated. Field members can only get to the actuality of managerialism through empirical work and theorising that is lacking in the apologists work. I would have liked to have seen examples of practitioners’ research (and there is lots of it) which exposes ways of working that are educational rather than managerial. Furthermore, Thrupp and Willmott are leaders in educational institutions, and while they script this into the text, the reader does not hear enough about how they are working in anti-managerial ways. We do need to know more about higher education, and how as knowledge workers we relocate our practice within a range of educational institutions over time.

Thrupp and Willmott have produced a very important book regarding knowledge claims around issues of policy and practice. Yet I remain restless about how busy and overworked practitioners are to learn about these ideas. I will be recommending my masters and doctoral students to read



the book so that as practitioners they may relish the opportunity to engage with issues of knowledge production. Nevertheless, the emphasis within current UK government policy for education in England is on short term training for the job-in-hand rather than the kind of longer term professional development that is educational and critical. Thrupp and Willmott's book is directly relevant to every day practice in teaching and learning across the educational system, and it should be required reading for all training programmes because it enables trainees to know and understand the knowledge structures that are being used to structure their work and identities. There are plenty of examples of books that are read and shared but are not officially endorsed, and there are practitioners who are prepared to develop a defensible model of practice that can resist managerialism and work for something different.

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