

***Education and social justice: the changing composition of schools and its implications* by Stephen Gorard, University of Wales Press, Cardiff (2000) 242pp, price £35.00 (hardback), ISBN 0-7083-1619-0**

Review by Martin Thrupp

This book is concerned with different and narrower themes than the excellent journal *Education and Social Justice* or Bob Connell's *Schools and Social Justice* (Connell 1993). Rather it makes the claim that 'social justice in British education is growing as divisions between the home nations, between school sectors, between schools and between students is declining' (p.180). The book sets out to debunk what Gorard refers to as the 'crisis account' perpetuated by media commentators, policymakers, politicians and researchers - myself included- who are accused of not letting facts get in the way of a good argument.

Gorard makes the case for his alternative 'good news' through critiquing the limitations of existing, largely quantitative research and presenting his own statistical analyses of various datasets, mostly national ones. Given that my work is more qualitative in nature, I thought someone with a statistical background should consider its empirical claims (and indeed Harvey Goldstein is reviewing this book for the *British Journal of Educational Studies*). Nevertheless I found the book also made a lot of generally problematic claims around research methodology and the politics of research and it is these I shall mostly focus on here.

The book begins with a discussion of the crisis account in education (pp.1-5) but this tends to lump together everyone who has major concerns about educational provision in Britain. Yet clearly the 'discourses of derision' (Ball 1990) and the current panics around failing schools and slipping national standards are very different from the crises indicated by those who are concerned about the social polarisation of schools or an increasingly prescriptive curriculum. For instance neo-liberals would generally be unconcerned about increasing polarisation because it would be seen as a sign the market is working well. It seems odd not to discriminate between what are really very different kinds of 'crisis accounts'.

Methodologically this book is 'intended to be a contribution to the discussion on what precisely constitutes the evidence base for educational policy in Britain' (p.15) and here Gorard describes the book as 'a plea for a middle way in education research: balanced, rational and *numerate*' (p.13, his emphasis). Nevertheless the text often implies more weight to 'numbers' than 'narratives'. Consider the following:

...the very distinction between the two supposed paradigms of research is perhaps overused and seemingly an excuse for some to evade the limitations of generalization, transparency, replicability and so on that are the hallmark of convincing and cumulating social science. (p.13)

Once...constraints of testability are removed, 'researchers' can write pretty much what they want (and on the evidence presented in this book, at least some may be already doing so). (p.185)

If research is to be cumulative, we should start with the basics, get the simple things correctly set down and move on from there. This is clearly going to involve numbers, but not necessarily difficult calculations. Of course social process such as education are complex, and the findings of research based on them are also often complex but this should not be used as a practical justification for starting where the complexity is greatest – rather the reverse. (p.187)

The majority of British researchers seem to use what they term a qualitative approach (although ironically it is clear from some methodological writings that this is still seen as a radical and minority stance). (p. 184)

The last of these comments ignores the particular problem that qualitative work *is* marginalised because policy makers prefer the ‘objectivity’ of statistics. This privileging of quantitative findings of course ignores the reality that quantitative methodologies rest on decisions about measures and approaches to analysis which are often quite subjective. But quantitative research can trade on its apparent neutrality nevertheless and it is this political advantage which Gorard’s book exemplifies. Moreover while Gorard makes some rather pointed comments on p.13 about those who do ‘labour-intensive evidence-based work’ and those who don’t, it is worth pointing out that qualitative researchers, especially those involved in ethnographic research, typically get much closer to the action than quantitative researchers ever do (and this gives qualitative work its explanatory value).

Gorard also argues that researchers should aim to be impartial in their analysis of research evidence and in its dissemination. He expresses concern about researchers’ political stances being reflected in their research findings and arguments:

... their justified concerns for justice may lead [researchers] to take sides *before* collecting the necessary empirical evidence, as actually advocated by some ‘researchers’ (e.g. Griffiths 1998). I reject absolutely Griffiths’s principles for researching social justice in education. The researcher cannot afford to take sides with anything but the truth. (p. 12)

Words may be powerful things but surely as social scientists we cannot be scared of saying anything if it is true? The main political argument used in the field of social justice is that we must not publish findings that suggest good news in case they are used as a justification to make things worse again. (p. 187)

My own work gets criticised along the same lines:

Thrupp, like Griffiths (Chapter 1), is taking a political stance by stating: ‘Research issues such as these are important but we should not lose sight... of the urgent social justice concerns which are at stake’. (Thrupp, 1998, p. 223). In fact he goes on to suggest that Nash should not say what he does about there being no school effect, *not* because it may be wrong, but in case it leads to increasing polarisation in schools. (Gorard 2000: 187)

Yet this argument provides a good example of Gorard’s tendency to set up a straw man in order to have something to argue against. I went back to the article in question which is a reply to Nash’s criticism of my work and found that I was clearly *not* arguing that Nash was right but shouldn’t be

publicising his findings because it will lead to polarisation. Rather I was arguing that Nash was wrong, as I had been throughout the article, and was pointing out that suggesting to the media that the kind of school one goes to doesn't matter merely serves to hide the problem that the effects of school mix *do* matter. (Thrupp, 1998: 234). Gorard got the wrong end of the stick completely. Moreover what are we supposed to make of the unnamed academic, described as 'one of the most influential sociologists of education in Britain' who apparently told a conference audience in 1996 that 'he was not overly concerned with the truth of his claims since they were made primarily to get a point across and perhaps shock readers out of their complacency' (p.13). I'm willing to bet that the masked man in this instance was Stephen Ball telling a BERA conference audience that in times like this good educational research doesn't act to support the political status quo, it acts to disrupt it. Or that's how I remember his comments at the time.

Also relevant is Gorard's own illustration of how he was misinterpreted when his findings showing increasing comprehensivisation were given the newspaper headline 'Divisions Not Very Deep' (see p.188). The risk is that Gorard's 'good news' will make him a textual apologist for managerial and neo-liberal policies in education because his work will be read as supporting the status quo. And indeed one of the most prominent neo-liberals in British education has already made use of Gorard's arguments in an attempt to undermine research which illustrates why markets in education don't work (Tooley 1999). Gorard might not want his work used in this way but as illustrated by the overclaiming problems created by school effectiveness and school improvement research, emphasis is all important in the presentation of findings. The sheer weight of Gorard's discussion given over to showing that inequalities are not increasing will serve to hide his wider point that this supposed improvement is occurring only at the margins – huge inequalities remain.

Gorard criticises statistical analysis undertaken by Sietske Waslander and I (Waslander and Thrupp 1995) showing the social polarisation of New Zealand schools as a result of market policies and goes on to dismiss the wider findings of the Smithfield Project (Lauder et al. 1999) of which our analysis was a part: 'The Smithfield conclusions of increasing segregation since 1990 are simply incorrect' (p. 200). Yet Gorard's dismissal of the Smithfield findings is apparently based on personal communication with a policy analyst at New Zealand's Ministry of Education (p.200). Gorard was hardly likely to be told otherwise because until recently the National coalition government in New Zealand was doing all it could to refute the findings of the Smithfield project because of its well-publicised critiques of government policy. With a Labour coalition government now in power, the official stance has changed and it is well accepted that markets *have* had a polarising effect on schools and indeed in July 2000 legislation intended to reduce polarisation was passed. What's more, Ministry of Education data has itself been used by Nash and Harker (1998) to show the polarisation of New Zealand school intakes and more recent unpublished analyses by Dick Harker has confirmed this trend. Those left in any doubt about what has been happening in New Zealand should look at a very readable American account (Fiske and Ladd 2000). The title - *When Schools Compete: A Cautionary Tale* - speaks for itself.

One point in favour of Gorard's argument is that he rejects the populist 'problem-solving' view that schools hold the answers to social inequalities in achievement and instead takes the more sociological line that educational inequalities are related to wider social and economic disparities which have to be dealt with if educational outcomes for working class students are to improve. Furthermore, as already noted, Gorard's analysis does illustrate the huge inequalities which exist in British education. The

unfortunate thing about this book is that because Gorard has chosen not to emphasise them, these strengths will probably be overlooked.

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A summary response to the review, by Martin Thrupp, of 'Education and Social Justice'

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by Stephen Gorard

In his review Thrupp makes a number of criticisms of my book. These criticisms are not supported by even a superficial reading of the whole book, and are largely gainsaid by the very quotations Thrupp uses to try and support his case. I have responded fully to each of these points elsewhere. For interested readers, the review, the responses and the ensuing discussion are available on my web site (www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/markets) or via email attachment (gorard@cardiff.ac.uk). Here, I shall concentrate on a small number of defects in the review that exemplify the lack of scholarly rigour in Thrupp's approach to research evidence.

Thrupp starts the review by contradicting himself. He claims he does not wish to consider the 'empirical claims' of the book since, as he rightly states, his own work is 'more qualitative in nature', and he is unable to make appropriate methodological judgements about my own work. It is peculiar that having made this admission Thrupp then feels able to review a book that is in his own words 'largely quantitative' and that he does not, and can not, understand. It is rather more peculiar that he then goes on to say in the second paragraph that his review will 'mostly focus' on my 'generally problematic claims around research methodology'.

In the third paragraph Thrupp claims that 'neo-liberals would generally be unconcerned about increasing polarisation because it would be seen as a sign the market is working well'. This claim contradicts the actual statements of liberal commentators presented in pages 21-24 of the book, for example, who suggest that social segregation in schools is chiefly a result of residential segregation, and that choice policies will therefore lead to better social mixes in schools. These commentators may be proved wrong empirically, but none of them suggest that increased polarisation is an end, or even an acceptable by-product, of choice programmes.

In constructing his argument about the politics of research in paragraphs 4 to 15 of the review I feel that Thrupp uses sufficient quotations from my book to allow the reader to see that what I say and what he says I say do not match. For example, he quotes my statement 'the very distinction between the two supposed paradigms is perhaps overused...' (p.13) as evidence that I give 'more weight to numbers than narratives'. This does not follow from the quotation at all. For the record, I have published more articles based on narratives than Thrupp has in every year since I have been an academic. I may be peculiar in also publishing a large number of articles based on numbers, or both narratives and numbers at the same time, but other commentators might see this as a virtue rather than a weakness. It is not worth re-hashing the argument between Nash and Thrupp about which I am described as getting 'the wrong end of the stick'. Both of the papers in question are in print, and the interested reader can judge for themselves. In my opinion, Thrupp was clearly arguing that Nash should not release his findings not because they were wrong or right, but because they may do damage irrespective of their validity.

Thrupp's argument that he does not want to censor research is then contradicted in his paragraph 16 where he talks of the risk that my work will make me a 'textual apologist for managerial and neo-liberal

policies'. He is clearly worrying here not about the truth status of my research (which we will recall he started by saying he could not comment on), but the uses to which it might be put by others. His ogre here is Tooley who has cited the findings (and more accurately than Thrupp be it noted) in one his books. Those same findings using the same data and methods from the same project have been used quite justifiably both nationally and internationally by a bewildering variety of people for whom I can also take no responsibility. These include Labour MPs arguing against selection, Conservative MPs arguing against specialist schools, the British Humanist Society arguing against church schools, the US 'Reagan pages' arguing in favour of increased choice, the UK Campaign for State Education arguing to preserve LEA allocation procedures for community schools, and so on. The findings have been used by the Institute for Public Policy Research, LEA executives, school governors, headteachers, and even some parents. The findings have also been used by academics other than Tooley, but not by Thrupp who, at time of writing this, continues to ignore the evidence from the largest study of its kind in the main area of his own research.

By the final paragraph Thrupp addresses my criticisms of his own work – and it is worth noting that my book contains several passages about a piece of influential published work by Thrupp (pp. 25-30 and pp.197-200 for example). He claims 'Gorard's dismissal of the Smithfield findings is apparently based on personal communication with a policy analyst at New Zealand's Ministry of Education'. This is quite simply untrue. As Thrupp knows, my criticism of his paper pre-dated any contact with the Ministry. Rather, someone at the Ministry contacted me after seeing my 1998 paper on the Smithfield project. All of this evades the issue I first raised in 1997. The tables presented in evidence for his Smithfield paper do not support the claims he made in the text. Although he is one of only two authors on the paper, Thrupp now seems unable to defend anything other than the interview part of the project, preferring to leave explanation for the 'rogue' tables to the project leaders. In 1998 these leaders told John Fitz and myself that the 1995 Waslander and Thrupp paper contained typographical errors in the tables. This, apparently, was why the tables contradicted the text. The errors were clearly not spotted when the paper was prepared as a chapter for the 1997 book 'Education: culture, economy, society' since the tables are the same there (or perhaps the same type-setting errors were repeated). These figures have never been corrected, but it is interesting that the 1999 book 'Trading in Futures' continues to reproduce the claims of the 1995 paper but does not even reproduce, much less correct, the contradictory tables. This simply means that the reader is no longer able to judge the truth of this issue for themselves. I feel, in the circumstances, that Thrupp may be better advised to help his colleagues sort this muddle out rather than making misleading comments about the origin of my criticisms.

Perhaps the most disappointing thing about this review is that it is not a review of the book, and gives the reader a very misleading picture of the contents. Because Thrupp does not deal with the evidence presented in Chapters 3 to 9 he does not realise that the book is not primarily about the role of markets in education. Issues covered include school effects, international tests, home international comparisons of performance, the apparent underachievement of boys, differences in outcomes between sectors of schools, and so on. None of this is portrayed because Thrupp has not read, since he can not understand, the book.

Selected references

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Date sent: Mon, 25 Jun 2001 11:15:09 -0700
To: "Stephen Gorard" <Gorard@Cardiff.ac.uk>
From: Martin Thrupp <martin.thrupp@kcl.ac.uk>
Subject: **Re: Book Review etc**

Dear Stephen

Well I hope JEP do allow a retort - or even open it up for discussion - as I think the issues are important ones. It seems a bit similar to the debate over the politics of educational research and whether it is possible to be neutral and objective seen in recent reviews of Martin Hammersley's new book, its in a recent issue (last year) of BJ of Soc of Ed - worth a look if you haven't seen it. But I'll also be quite happy to buy you a beer during /after such a debate, ie I don't take academic criticisms personally and hope you won't either.

Re your substantive points. First Smithfield. I've never pretended to be good or even adequate at stats and hence I made it clear at the outset of the review that I would be focussing on the politics of research. Basically I don't know enough to say whether you are right or wrong re the methodology - my contribution to the 1995 paper was the interviews part, not the stat analysis. So I'd stand by the interviews but don't feel any need to defend the stat analysis - I'll leave that to Sietske, or to Hugh and David as the project leaders. Rather it seemed to me - and it still seems to me - that what you were doing in the para of concern on p.200 was using other evidence to put the final nail in the coffin (as it were)Thats fair enough, but I was pointing out the problems with a 'personal communication' with Ministry officials with their own political agendas and that actually there is other evidence from NZ which appears to support Smithfield's conclusions.

Your second point re neo-libs. In the UK try Kenneth Baker - see the interview in Nick Davies book 'The school report'. Also Roger Douglas in NZ, the architect of its neo-liberal reforms (which were often called Rogernomics after him). The reason these people would see increasing polarisation as a 'sign the market is working well' is that they would just read it as people getting choice and so leading to better school quality, just part of the Darwinian process of bad schools being forced to shut down. They also don't see polarisation as a problem because they don't accept a link between school mix and student achievement. (eg see Baker in Davies bottom of p 43). Classic cases of what Ball (Ball, 1993 - Market as class strategy) calls 'systematic inattention to the plight of the losers in the market'. You say 'Don't debate the point' - if by that you mean by to give you a reference to someone being overtly racist or classist of course I can't but clearly that wouldn't be politically acceptable in the settings we are talking about, nor is it necessary to the argument.

Heres the references

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Best wishes

Martin

>Dear Martin,

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>Sorry not able to get back to you with a full response yet (and
>anyway have not heard whether JEP will allow a 'retort'), but am
>dealing with the Goldstein review first as it has implications not
>just for me, but for the School, and the field more generally. Thanks
>for pointing this one out to me. I owe you a beer!

>

>A brief point of fact. You know, and I know you know, that my
>publication and discussion of the erroneous/misprinted tables in your
>1995 paper preceded any contact I had with NZ Min of Ed. It was, of
>course, the ISSE article that led to them contacting me. I have no
>view of their view of events then or now, and it forms no part of my
>evidence base. I wonder why you say what you do ('Yet Gorard's
>dismissal of the Smithfield findings is apparently based on...'),
>when it is so clearly contradicted even by the short passage in the
>book that you refer to? Rather, would you not be better off simply
>dealing with the actual points about the tables and publishing a
>correction/retraction or counter-argument, because it was such an
>influential paper?

>

>Second minor point of fact. Can you send me a couple of references I
>can follow up to the 'neo-liberals' who would see increasing
>polarisation as a 'sign the market is working well'? Don't debate the
>point. Just convince me that they exist by pointing me to their
>writing (as although I thought I knew the literature well I am not
>big on neo-liberals).

>

>Hope this makes sense,

>

>Stephen