



Reframing education as a public and common good: enhancing democratic governance

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BOOK REVIEW

Reframing education as public and common good: enhancing democratic governance, by Rita Locatelli, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, 192 pp., £64.99 (hardback), ISBN: 978-3-030-24801-7

Like many developed and developing countries around the globe, England's education system consists of non-fee-paying, publicly funded schools and fee-paying independent and private schools. While publicly funded schools in England have contractual obligations to meet certain legal requirements and statutory guidelines, which include an inclusive admissions policy and teaching a balanced curriculum, private schools can choose which curriculum to teach and which children to admit to their school. Yet, like independent and private schools, publicly funded schools called academies are run by a self-appointed board of trustees and therefore subject to forms of private control. Moreover, these schools typically adopt business management approaches to administration to satisfy certain performance and corporate measures of accountability, and therefore import techniques from the private sector. On this account, the public-private distinction sometimes fails to capture the messy realities of the development of modern education systems.

In her new book *Reframing Education as a Public and Common Good: Enhancing Democratic Governance*, Locatelli takes up these and other important related issues to explain the impact of education policy and law on the configuration of schools as organisations. Locatelli's key argument is that fundamental changes to the management, funding, delivery, monitoring, governance and regulation of education have rendered the public-private distinction problematic in lots of ways. However, despite Locatelli's early reservations in the book about the conceptual utility of the public-private distinction (see 34), it is a distinction deserving of rehabilitation and repurposing, at least for Locatelli.

Throughout the book, Locatelli presents evidence to show why education can no longer be made comfortably divisible within a public-private distinction. Yet Locatelli also appears adamant on preserving some notion of 'public education' or 'public interest' through law and regulation for the purpose of strengthening equity and social justice as the principle drivers of education. According to Locatelli, 'some form of state intervention is required' (29) as a bulwark against excessive privatisation and competition and therefore '[school] freedom should be limited by the regulatory functions of the state' (62). Locatelli goes on to argue that 'the State should maintain the primary responsibility for education financing, delivery, monitoring and regulation' (81). Yet my impression of the book was that Locatelli wants to simultaneously limit and empower the state and therefore favours a mixed economy approach to education governance rather than one delimited by the remit of the state.

The book is arguably divided into two sections, the conceptual and the normative. The first part of the book, the conceptual, makes excellent use of some important philosophical, sociology and education literature to trace the ways in which notions of the public and the private are socially constructed. But rather than do away with these terms, Locatelli appears to want to retain their differences or at least repurpose some of this language to satisfy a notion of the 'common good' (124). The second part of the book, the normative, builds on this notion of the common good to reveal Locatelli's vision for a reformed education system. In what follows I engage with some of the possibilities and limits of Locatelli's normative prescriptions for education reform.

Like most people who are not in favour of education marketisation and privatisation, the default position is often to argue for more state regulation and democratic decision-making in schools. In this vein, Locatelli argues for greater transparency and community and stakeholder involvement in education, with the state providing a ‘fundamental role in ensuring that an effective democratic process is accomplished, and all actors take part in this process to an equal degree’ (106). Yet this vision of schools as communicative spaces in which all participating are little Habermasians fails to grapple with some of the realities and constraints of democratic participation. It is no doubt a socially just and noble ideal to strive for democratic education. But it requires more than just legislation to force such a situation, if indeed force is what is required.

Later in the book Locatelli introduces the idea of ‘methods of participated management’ (125) but isn’t it precisely because participation is always a process of perpetual negotiation and emergence that any form of prescriptive participation is likely to curtail the dynamic production on which such participation rests? There is also the suggestion that ‘community participation’ (131) is a way ‘to improve monitoring and accountability of schools to the schools they serve’ (132). But how do you avoid a disproportion and over-representation of middle-class people when aiming to improve community participation in such processes? How practical is it to encourage participation from the poorest members of the community who are typically time- and money-poor?

In the final chapter of the book, Locatelli argues for improved alliances and collaborative efforts among national governments and non-governmental organisations to promote democratic governance of education at the global level. The problem here, again, is how does a global vision of education fit with a conception of culture and of publics as dynamic and bound to local politics and projects; that is, what kind of global vision of education satisfies Locatelli’s own approach to the public as situated, contingent, socially constructed? Surely there is a danger in rulers too detached from the everyday lives of people trying to mandate or legislate the conditions for democratic participation?

This book is an engaging, stimulating read that addresses some of the fundamental challenges, both logistical and conceptual, to the realisation of democracy in education. Locatelli should be commended for wading through what is some very muddy discourse to present a conceptually rich, provocative and accessible text on the importance of rethinking education through a democratic imaginary.

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