

School Lessons for Higher Education

Review of Maguire M., Wooldridge T. & Pratt-Adams S. (2006) *The Urban Primary School*. Open University Press: Maidenhead (ISBN 0 335 20177 6)

'The Urban Primary School' is the fourth book in a series entitled 'Education in an Urban Society'. It aims to refashion attitudes towards urban primary schooling, and to champion initiatives with regard to diversity and difference found at primary level. The brief of this review is to consider some of the implications for teaching and learning in Higher Education that this book reveals.

The phrase 'inner city' can evoke feelings of negativity, thoughts of deficiency, and poverty-related problems. Maguire, Wooldridge & Pratt-Adams have been careful in their choice of title, preferring the positive connotations derived from the term 'urban'. Throughout the book they seek to challenge semi-articulated preconceptions.

'In a rapidly changing society, our future prosperity will lie in our capacity to recognise and respect diversity and difference, something that the best urban primary schools manage successfully – but something that does not seem to 'count' for much in a time when formal academic attainment seems to be the main indicator of 'good' education.'
(introduction xii)

This is a splendid book for a number of reasons. Firstly, it tackles discrete areas of topical relevance and weight, identifying within each features distinctive to urban settings, making specific points about specific issues, and thus making the book easy to navigate. Secondly, it takes a holistic approach to these areas within the life of urban schools not only from the perspective of diverse stakeholders (teachers, head teachers, parents) which has been done before, but also from global perspectives (a rarer approach - contextualising the urban, class, social justice and policy dimensions, with a particularly interesting chapter exploring and comparing urban school reforms in the USA). Thirdly, each chapter begins with an abstract, which again greatly increases the book's accessibility. Finally, it is written in a comfortable style – it maintains academic integrity but does so in a way that draws the reader along. One does not have to grapple with this book, but it is intensely thought provoking.

'The Urban Primary School' asks, and attempts to answer, many urban-specific questions, some of which are huge. Is there a need for a 'culturally relevant curriculum'? Does the existing curriculum marginalise some or many groups? Although inclusion is currently celebrated in schools, what are the causes of exclusion? What do we mean by social justice in a learning environment? Are the criteria labelling 'failing schools' fair? Is the language and motivation of government urban policymaking couched in 'deficit' vocabulary? Have there been so many urban leadership initiatives in recent years that even helpful ones are no longer welcome?

But for the purposes of this review brief, what can a book concerning primary education possibly have to say to inform learning and teaching in a Higher Education institution? Three themes stand out.

The first is the issue of supporting diversity. Those of us who work in a large academic institution know the effort happily engendered by the positive needs of equality. Transparency in dealing with students is a priority, especially in the areas of assessment and curriculum access. Maguire et al. remind us that the opposite can be true. 'Socially just practice in the classroom is not always a matter of treating everyone the same. There are times when the recognition of difference is essential to good practice ... Classroom practices that rely on non-verbal and non-individualised routines might not offer speakers of other languages a optimum context for learning' (p91). This certainly resonates against much Higher Education common practice. Consider for example the homogenous nature of assessment on most university courses because of universally and immovably prescriptive success criteria. We at London Metropolitan University welcome students of many cultures, but although our recruitment procedures enthusiastically embrace multiculturalism, can the same be said for our assessment, teaching and learning strategies? The aspirations to embrace both equality and diversity are explored realistically and sensitively by Maguire et al..

The second theme is the parallel that exists regarding the dichotomy between head teachers' perception of what constitutes best practice for the children, and the demands of central government. Those for whom the existing curriculum is challenging at best, and irrelevant at worst most keenly feel the target-driven nature of education. The relentless call for change is shown to be one of the most serious causes of stress to teachers and head teachers alike. The same is true for Higher Education.

The third theme concerns the role of the urban teacher, including reasons why teachers choose to teach in urban environments. In a most cheering chapter Maguire et al. have researched teachers' motivation for so doing, and find a professional workforce who are not working 'in spite' of their urban setting, but 'because of it'. Chapter 3 of this book is a celebration of the urban ideal. Urban school settings are championed for the way they enrich the lives of their constituent members (both children and teachers) beyond the confines of the curriculum and school fabric. This third chapter explodes the image of urban teaching environments being primarily areas of structural disadvantage, poverty, and oppression, and amplifies the positive aspects. The need for specific training is highlighted, but the opportunities for growth and development both personally and socially ring out loud and clear. London Metropolitan University shares a similar educational vision. The mission statement of the University shows a desire to contribute to the socio-economic development of our urban communities. 'Individual development and social justice go hand in hand, and just as the partnership between learner and teacher needs careful defining and managing, so does the partnership between the University and its wider stakeholders' (University Vision: Educational Character and Mission, para 2.6).

Maguire et al.'s book constitutes a fresh and stimulating view of urban primary schools. I have three small criticisms however. The first is that each chapter finishes with suggested questions, inviting the reader, in a prescribed manner, to reflect further upon what has been read. In every case, however, the suggested questions were not the areas I had been prompted to reflect upon, neither did they induce unexpected insight. It is the nature of reading that one relates what has been read to one's own experience, not the anticipated experience of the writer. Secondly, throughout the book there is not sufficient emphasis

on Early Years. It is true this book's stated focus is on primary settings, and indeed the introduction acknowledges that any single book cannot cover everything; but it would have been fruitful to demonstrate the way urban contexts apply beyond Key Stages 1 and 2. Thirdly, the text itself is very small and closely spaced - a publishing issue rather than an academic one, but a feature that does have a bearing on a reader's ability to keep up.

Such is my enthusiasm for this book I have recommended it for the pre-reading list of our Primary PGCE course. Anyone seeking to consider and reflect upon the peculiar nature of learning and teaching in an urban environment would benefit from reading it. Maguire, Wooldridge & Pratt-Adams are to be congratulated on producing a book that both informs and inspires.

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