

Aubry, Carla; Westberg, Johannes (Hrsg.): *History of Schooling. Politics and Local Practice*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang/Frankfurt am Main 2012. ISBN: 978-3-631-63367-0; 276 S.

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The History of Schooling. Politics and Local Practice, edited by Carla Aubry (University of Zurich, Switzerland) and Johannes Westberg (Uppsala University, Sweden), offers a collection of studies on the history of schooling from local and regional perspectives. Rather than seeing the practice of schooling as a mere deduction of what is captured in school laws and policy, the authors and editors take into the account the great variety and complexity involved in understanding schools in their local or regional contexts. This variety and complexity is addressed in the book with respect to three themes, namely, finance, school reform, and media. Each theme is a section in the book containing four chapters. Although the book does not have an explicit geographical focus, ten of the twelve chapters deal with Sweden, Switzerland and Luxembourg. Most of the chapters concentrate on the nineteenth century.

In the section on finance, the chapters of Westberg, Madeleine Michaëlsson, and Aubry deal with the funding of schools. The main point these chapters make is that the funding of schools in the nineteenth century cannot be understood as a national, uniform system. Westberg shows that there were significant regional differences, especially between rural and urban areas. Michaëlsson and Aubry argue that schools were part of a local community and depended on many local factors for their financing, such as the local economy. Ingrid Brühwiler connects with this in her chapter on teachers' salaries in the Helvetic Republic, which, as she demonstrates, were dependent on an amalgam of economic, cultural, and political factors.

In the section on reform, the chapters of Anne Rohstock and Thomas Lenz, Esbjörn Larsson, Johan Prytz, and Peter Bernhardsson illustrate that educational policy and plans on a higher level are being refracted in the

process of implementation, since they have to be adjusted to local, regional or national peculiarities. Rohstock and Lenz, for instance, argue that in contrast to the theory of international standardization of educational policy after 1945, the educational reform that took place in Luxembourg, although an internationally-orientated country, remained highly nationally motivated and kept its national characteristics.

The section on media as a whole does not bring anything new to the table. The chapters of Stefan Rimm, and Markus Gippert and Joachim Scholz connect best with the previous sections. Rimm argues that there existed a national policy for text book supply in Sweden, but that on the level of local schooling, it was difficult and expensive to obtain such resources. This sometimes resulted in pupils having to copy a book in order to get it. Gippert and Scholz write about how the national process of democratization in West German schools was reflected in the school journals of two local secondary school.

By demonstrating the deconstructed nature of schooling in each of these domains, the book is making one overall point. This is important to note, since a common criticism of edited books is that they lack coherency. However, the book is not coherent in every aspect. In the first place, two chapters do seem discordant in comparison to the rest of the book. In the second place, the editors could have put more effort into making the book read like one complete entity.

Of the two detached chapters, the first is Peter Voss's treatment of the *Luxemburger Schulbote* between 1844 and 1942. Voss describes how the journal functioned as the medium of the educational authorities to convey their rules and instructions to teachers. The existence of such a journal positively influenced the sense of professionalism amongst teachers, but the top-down disciplining character of the journal gave the teachers grounds to develop their own educational journals. In these journals, the teachers were able to freely discuss educational questions. Although this insight is valuable, it does not connect with the overarching aim of the book. A point of critique more directly relating to the content of Voss' chapter is that, although

he announces it in his introduction, nowhere does he relate his findings to existing historical educational research.

The second is Claudia Gerdenitsch's chapter in the section on media. She analyses the arguments used in an article in the educational journal *Paedagogium*, published by the Austrian Germanist Johann Willibald Nagl (1856–1918) in 1883. As Gerdenitsch points out, Nagl tries to convince teachers to give popular education to peasants by calling on their professional responsibility towards the uneducated. Nagl also argues that teaching peasants would benefit their teaching of children. Although these insights are important for understanding the perception of the teaching profession, the chapter does not go into the discrepancy between (inter)national and local educational policy, which is the topic of the rest of the book. Furthermore, the only reason her chapter is in the media section seems to be that Nagl wrote in an educational journal, although that is irrespective of the actual subject matter of Gerdenitsch's chapter.

Considering the efforts of the editors to make the volume a cohesive unit, there is only a five-page introduction to the book, two of which contain a summary. The editors do give an overview of the debate on the understanding of schooling as a national or as a decentralized phenomenon, but they do so with dated references (more than half are from the 1980s) and without going into details. The editors state that their book helps to understand how schooling works in its local context, but what do we actually learn from this book that we did not know before? Have previous studies insufficiently made clear how schooling works in a local context? Or is this book just another heap on the pile? The editors do acknowledge that their aim is not to come up with a new grand theory since, so they claim, many researchers have grown tired of grand theories. However, a smaller theory would also have been welcome. In fact, the whole idea of the deconstructed nature of schooling is already something of a new theory; why not elaborate on that?

A final point to raise in this context is that the editors in their introduction argue for the importance of making comparisons in historical research. On this we can agree, but the

only comparison in the book is in the chapters themselves; a comparison, or another type of analysis, between the chapters remains absent. This gap could have been filled by making the comparison in a concluding chapter. Admittedly, edited books rarely have concluding chapters, but why this is so is not clear. One can argue that edited books, because of their often lesser degree of coherency, are more in need of conclusive chapters than monographs, which do always have a concluding chapter.

In short, most of the chapters of the *History of Schooling* are valuable in themselves and help to gain a better understanding of the deconstructed nature of schooling. However, not all the chapters connect with this general aim, and the editors could have done more to put the shared idea of the chapters in the context of the debate about schooling as a local or national phenomenon.

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