

Christy Kulz (2017) *Factories for Learning*, University of Manchester Press. Pb ISBN 978 1 5261 1619 2

As noted by Heidi Mirza in the preface, this book sits in a long standing UK tradition of school ethnographies which stretches back to Colin Lacey's *Hightown Grammar*, published by Manchester University Press like this book. The *Hightown Grammar* [Lacey, 1970 #204] study was undertaken in what was then the Manchester Department of Sociology and Anthropology, alongside a secondary modern study by David Hargreaves – *Social Relations in a Secondary School* [Hargreaves, 1967 #203] and a girls' grammar study by Audrey Lambart [Lambart, 2010 #2811]. My own *Beachside Comprehensive* [Ball, 1981 #6] sought to extend this tradition, and was an attempt to follow up Lacey and Hargreaves' work on social class inequalities in a comprehensive school setting. The studies in this tradition explore in different ways the various institutional processes of discrimination and exclusion that have impacts on the wellbeing, opportunities and subjectivities of some students over and against the rewards and re-affirmation experienced by others, with a particular focus on the dividing practices and classifications that work to disadvantage working class students. These ethnographies were to various extents influenced by the methods and commitments of the Chicago School of Sociology, and traces of this are also evident in Kulz' book in the way in which Dreamfields Academy, the school in question, is carefully located in its urban setting and in its policy context, as a solution to the problems of student underperformance and concomitant social inequality in education. But *Factories for Learning* is set in a broader landscape of race and gender inequalities as well as those of social class. The engaging style of the book and the presence of the author in the text is also reminiscent of some recent Chicago school ethnographies like [Pattillo-McCoy, 2000 #2812] *Black Picket Fences*.

Part of the point of the *Beachside* study was to explore in practice of comprehensive education as a successor policy – limply supported by the Labour Party – to the social divisive Grammar school/secondary

modern school system. *Factories for Learning* explores in practice the successor policy to comprehensive schooling, the Academies programme (loosely based on US Charter schools) – enthusiastically initiated by New Labour in 2000 and supported and extended by both the Coalition and Conservative governments. Over and against the ‘bog standard’ comprehensive schools (as Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair’s press secretary called them in 2001), Academies were presented as a mechanism for ‘driving up’ the standards of an underperforming system, by replacing underperforming schools with new, sponsored, autonomous, innovative institutions of learning, which would at the same time close ‘achievement gaps’ between students from different social backgrounds.

Drawing on the National Pupil Database a 2017 Education Policy Institute research report [Andrews, 2017 #2786] notes that 16 years into the Academies programme:

pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds – defined as children who had been eligible for free school meals at any point in the previous six years – were on average 18.9 months behind the rest of their peers at the end of secondary school, in terms of their relative progress.

The gap between children from disadvantaged background and their peers had narrow slightly but the report goes on to say: “At this rate it would take 50 years to close the attainment gap between England’s most disadvantaged pupils and their wealthier peers”.

In practice the academies programme is very diverse , some of the schools are new build showcase schools, others are take-overs of ‘failing’ schools. However, as it turns out it is not always easy to find sponsors for ‘failing’ schools, especially in the north of England. Some sponsors prefer not to take on schools that are too challenging. Some of these take overs are enforced, sometimes in the face of opposition from parents; some schools self-academise, attracted by the supposed financial benefits of autonomy from the local authority; some are free-standing; some part of MATS (Multi-Academy Trusts).

The test and examination performance of academies is also diverse. Some MATS have been 'paused' from taking on new schools because of the poor performance, low inspection rankings and dubious or ineffective management practices of some of their existing schools. Some sponsoring organisations have collapsed and some have faced investigations into financial malpractice. Kulz offers a useful potted history and analysis of the background to the programme.

Nonetheless, in the 2016 Budget statement, the Conservative government indicated their intention to require the *academisation* of all schools. Chancellor George Osborne announced a forced *academisation* plan, under which all schools in England would either have to convert to academies by 2020 or be committed to converting by 2022. This would have, in effect, ended entirely the link between local authorities and schools that began in 1902 but the proposal was quickly abandoned in the face of widespread opposition, including from Conservative MPs and councillors. Ministers indicated that the "goal" of *academising* all schools remains but attention will now focus on schools that are "clearly failing".

In all of this Dreamfields is a highly 'successful' Academy, many times oversubscribed in terms of applications for places at the school. It is unlike many other academies but at the same time represents a particular form of corporate, even militaristic schooling, as Kulz suggests that is well represented in the academies programme. We get to know little about its sponsor, presumably to maintain the anonymity of the school, but it is led by Mr Culford, an authoritative manager with a vision of 'radical' leadership, 'structure' and traditional practices based on his own experience in similar schools. He looms large in the day-to-day life of the school, the epitome of the modern executive leader. Students and staff are dealt with by him in similar terms. He is a hands-on Head teacher, who wears a pinstriped suit and prowls the corridors – a pantomime villain. He believes that the 'urban children' (minority ethnic and working class), who make up most of the school intake, need 'structure' and routines to deliver success and happiness and to make up for the deficiencies of working class homes and parenting. The approach is to 'keep things tight and

remain vigilant' (p. 38). His task as he sees it is to make these children more like their middle class peers and to maximise their performance outputs and those of the school as a whole. Dreamfields, Kulz suggests, is playing out a form of 19th century, colonial government, civilizing 'urban natives' and at the same time holding out the promise of fantasy futures based on hardwork, discipline and deferred gratification. The school is literally cut off from its immediate environment, behind locked gates – 'you could be anywhere, really' (p. 45) one student says. It is a 'well oiled machine to combat urban chaos' (p. 37) and neoliberal and neoconservative concerns and practices meld and mix to ensure, as Foucault puts it, a workforce that is both docile and productive.

One of the key strengths of the book is that it takes neoliberalism and its affects very seriously. There is no superficial rhetorical critique here. Rather Kulz carefully considers why the school is so attractive to parents and why it obtains the commitment of many of its pupils – the 'rightness' of neoliberalism. The fantasies and desires on which it feeds and that it feeds into cannot be dismissed out of hand. It trades on and reproduces the embodied neo-liberal subject and daily life in the school plays out a very particular 'political anatomy of the body' - business bodies, as Kulz calls them. The individual, the institution, and social relations become modeled on, microcosms of, the business, organized upon 'the individual's function, as a molecular fraction of capital' [Lazzarato, 2009 #2429] p. 121). Those who cannot function effectively as such a fraction are quickly dispensed with – students and teachers, and there are several mentions in the book of the mystery of 'disappearing teachers'.

Kulz writes well and engagingly and the book offers an intelligent and sensitive reflexivity, - the student researcher could learn a lot here about good writing, and the possibilities of a diverse and lively form of presentation 'which seeks to blend theory with rich pictures of the social world' (p. 33). Interviews, observations, pictures and other data are set alongside one another to produce a vibrant sense of what Dreamfields is like and how it is experienced by the students and teachers. A blend of fear, revulsion and desire infuses their

accounts. Dreamfields is not a nice place to be but it may be a necessary place to be. The analytical commentary employs a heady mix of Foucault, Bourdieu and Stuart Hall and other theoretical resources – Berlant is well used. These ideas and possibilities for analysis are managed well and woven together to construct a very telling deconstruction and critique of Dreamfields as a site of neoliberal education. There is a lot going on in the book in terms and occasionally perhaps too much in terms of the complexities and intersections of selfhood and value that are examined. But this is a writerly book in which the reader can become engaged by following its many theoretical lines of flight. But perhaps also that complexity is also necessary 'at Dreamfields we have a mixed raced man [Mr Culford] of working class origins and teachers from a range of backgrounds saving both working class and ethnic minority students' (p. 168).

This book is the most exciting and engaging example of sociology of education that I have read for a long time. It works on a variety of levels. Its blend of traditional methods and contemporary problems, its historical sensibilities and theoretical sophistication make it a very satisfying, provocative and pertinent read.

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