



Review: Envisioning New Possibilities for the Reform of Urban Schools

Reviewed Work(s):

Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures: Lessons in School Reform from the United States and Great Britain by Sarah Warshauer Freedman

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BOOK REVIEWS

Envisioning New Possibilities for the Reform of Urban Schools

Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures: Lessons in School Reform From the United States and Great Britain. Sarah Warshauer Freedman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994. 270 pp., \$45.00. ISBN No. 0-674-27393-1.

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During the summers of 1994 and 1995, I had the opportunity to travel to South Africa with the expressed goals of exploring similarities and differences between South African and American educational practices and learning more about educational reform, language policy, and literacy education currently being practiced in that newly emerging democracy. During my preparations for these travels I read Sarah Warshauer Freedman's book, *Exchanging Writing, Exchanging Cultures*. Although few cross-national studies engage seriously with data other than that obtained by questionnaire, the study described in this book used a variety of methods to study school reform efforts and their effects on writing in the United States and Great Britain. Particularly remarkable about this study, aside from its use of a rich and diverse database, is its ability to situate reform within a historical context, its attention to issues of reform in urban schools, and its depiction of the cross-Atlantic collaboration between Freedman and Alex McLeod of the University of London. The collaborative nature of this work emerges in many ways throughout the book and illustrates the value of engaging an insider as coresearcher in any site—whether it be at the level of national reform or at the classroom level. Freed-

man very graciously acknowledges the value of their collaboration.

Freedman's motivation for writing the book was a conviction that "a careful examination of the classrooms of well-respected British teacher-leaders could help U.S. educators think anew about literacy instruction" (p. 3). Drawing on her long history of experiences with writing teachers as director of the National Center for Writing and Literacy, Freedman conceptualized the writing exchange as a possible vehicle for permeating and studying cultural boundaries. Freedman realized that a cross-national comparison could stimulate the imagination for new possibilities for American instruction. Freedman hopes that the discoveries from such an exchange would help U.S. teachers, researchers, and students to "expand our world views and broaden our vision as we rethink how students in our classrooms learn to write" (p. 228).

In conceptualizing the project, research teams in the United States and Great Britain worked from a theoretical base that holds that written language is acquired through a process of social interaction. This emphasis on the centrality of social interactions in language and thought was based on the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978), Wertsch (1991), and Bakhtin (1986). With this theoretical base in mind, Freedman selected teachers whose practices were consistent with these theories to highlight how theory is applied to practice.

Freedman follows a plan that used questionnaire data and students' writing exchanges to make up the substance of the book. Following an introductory chapter that situates the research, chapters 2 and 3 of the book present the findings from the national

surveys conducted to investigate school structures that shape and influence classroom practice. The questionnaire data came from a U.S.-based sample of 560 primary and secondary teachers and 715 secondary students and a British sample of 135 primary and secondary teachers and 187 secondary students. Although attempts were made to select parallel samples in all phases of the study, different cultural contexts, different networks to identify and select participants, and different age and ability grouping of students resulted in different samples, thus causing limitations to the research findings. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 examine the details of the writing exchange and issues, such as assessment, that influence schools and classroom practices. In addition to teachers' interviews and journals, the writing exchange data included students' essays, letters, autobiographies, fiction, poetry, books, and opinion pieces about important and often controversial issues. These rich and diverse sets of data provide the basis for comparing learning to write in these two nations. The final chapter of the book summarizes the research findings and discusses theories that guide participating teachers' practice.

Central to the study is the writing exchange between English classes from four middle and high schools in the San Francisco Bay area—Grades 6 through 9—and four counterparts in London—Forms 1 through 4. All eight classes were from urban multicultural schools that served mostly lower- and working-class students. Over a one-year period, students exchanged writing within a frame that allowed the researchers to observe interactions among and between students engaged in parallel writing activities. Teachers

were paired by similarities in the age level of their students. Each pair of teachers, together with their students, planned a number of writing activities that they exchanged with the partner class in the other country. Freedman reports that the settings that led to the most highly involved interactions were those in which students "participated in curriculum making" and those in which students "felt that they were an integral part of a close-knit community" (p. 225).

This exchange in each country takes place against the backdrop of school reform in both countries. One of two major findings concerning the differences between the teachers was that the British teachers focused their attention mainly on understanding their students' development, whereas the U.S. teachers were more inclined to focus on creating innovative activities for the curriculum. The other was that British teachers' primary reason for teaching writing was to "allow students to use their imagination" whereas U.S. teachers' primary reason was "to force students to think for themselves and to connect what they learned to their personal experiences" (p. 220). Realizing that these purposes for teaching writing can certainly be overlapping, Freedman argues that "regardless of form, to write really well students need to learn to use their 'critical imagination.'" She further argues that "Although writing that involves the critical imagination takes varied forms, it always connects the writer with the world beyond" (p. 221). After discussing the impact of issues like high-stakes national examinations in Britain and differing practices of tracking students in the United States and mixed-ability grouping in Britain, Freedman concludes that, though U.S. teachers had greater concern for curricula and mechanics that exemplified itself in the students' academic analytical writing, British teachers had greater concern for the development of students' imaginative writing over time.

Just as interesting as the many differences that Freedman documents are the similarities. Generally speaking, teachers who treated seriously interactions with the writing from abroad also had students who treated the writing most seriously. Freedman concludes that "it is clear that successful teachers in the study . . . considered writing to be more a way of gaining

deeper understandings than a skill to be transmitted or a vehicle for learning." For these teachers, "the real issues did not focus on the discourse type promoted (story, essay) but on how these varied discourse types function in the ebb and flow of teaching and learning" (p. 35).

The teachers' very different ways of conceptualizing their purposes for teaching writing, their learning environments, and the effects of school reform form a major portion of the book. Freedman makes it clear that the context for policy reforms certainly must always include the national character of self-perception by the major players or agents who must carry out the reform policies. At the time of this study, major reform efforts were under way in both countries. Within the United States—the country had moved toward accountability and "basic" education. Also at the time of this study the New Standards Project was calling for a national system of performance-based examinations. Freedman suggests, however, that before moving forward with such plans, educational leaders promoting such moves should first look critically at the ways even instructionally sensitive exams can inadvertently diminish instructional opportunities. Within Great Britain, there had been a strong movement against tracking and at that time all classes were of mixed ability. Shortages of funds and emerging government policies were, however, eroding past reforms that had previously been moving schools toward democratization. Funding for community schools was on the decline and portfolio-based examinations were in the process of changing. In both countries, teachers and researchers were moving toward the writing process and a growing interest in the sociocultural contexts of writing.

Although this study used a variety of methods to study school reform efforts and their effects on writing in two English-speaking nations with a long tradition of concern about literacy, the reader must remain cautious about the generalizability of the findings. This note of caution is offered in light of the realization that studies of school reform inevitably reflect the context and timing in which they were written.

Any research study is a reflection of the historical context in which it was carried out. Political upheavals and

serious questions about classroom management and the links between instruction and assessment marked both Great Britain and the United States at the time of this study. Events since the study's completion have in each nation carried forward certain aspects of school reform efforts. Great Britain has increasingly felt the impact of a national curriculum, while the United States has continued to struggle with links between instruction and assessment and power struggles between state-level committees and what have often been interpreted as national mandates. What is learned from this book is the power of individual teachers and students in the unique mixes that show up in every classroom around the world to sidestep, expand upon, and create or be controlled and stymied by reform efforts. Which one of these occurs depends, as we now see from Freedman's book, far more on the "national character" of the culture of teaching English than we might have ever realized before. Margaret Mathieson, who wrote *Preachers of Culture* in 1975, characterized English teachers as primary carriers of what was most esteemed within British "high" culture. No such book could be written for the United States, for surely there is little agreement that it is within the English language arts classroom that a substantial flow of the most valued aspects of American culture are carried. As many social historians have pointed out, Americans have strong views about the culture of teaching and the language used to describe it, but they generally have strong hesitations about spelling out the precise guidelines they want "preached." The extent of engagement with reading literature by teachers and students in Great Britain provides a background for them that stands in sharp contrast to the background most important for teachers and students of the United States. While Mathieson tells of references to British teachers' solidarity of purpose and loyalty to the great tradition of English literature (p. 198), Freedman notes that the U.S. teachers do not adhere to a consistent approach and exhibit substantial variety in their interpretations of how theory enters practice (p. 8). The attention that Freedman gives to differences in teachers' perceptions of themselves as professionals is but one of the issues Freedman discusses as she challenges

her readers to imagine new possibilities for school organizations, classroom structures, and ideologies as they "strive to reform our urban schools into institutions able to offer a high quality education to all our students" (p. 2).

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prejudices in order to look more reflectively or thoughtfully at existing practices. Perhaps we should not be asking such simple questions such as whether direct or discovery learning, whole language or phonics, or independent or social learning are right or best. Instead, we should strive to determine what aspects of each have merit or value and the conditions under which that value is best utilized.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this commentary, we have attempted to forward to communities of educational researchers and practitioners what we perceive as two possible responses to the question of why educational innovations come and go. Indeed, we have offered these responses with abandon in hopes of sparking the kind of dialogue and debate that has long been needed on this very question. We suspect that there are those whose positions on this matter are not only oppositional to those we have posited, but also as strongly

and passionately held as our own conjectures. That is as it should be. It is not the opposition on this question that concerns us, only the silence.

Notes

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