

CEPaLS Paper 02:

Foster's Paradigms and Promises revisited.

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In 1986 William Foster published *Paradigms and Promises*, a 218 page book that set out to challenge accepted orthodoxies in the field of educational administration, and to present alternative ways of thinking and doing. It was recognised at the time as presenting professional concerns and strategies that were different from the orthodoxy, but was nevertheless a welcome contribution to supporting the realities of practice (Anderson 1987). More recently, and following his death, *Educational Administration Quarterly* published a special issue engaging in his contribution to the field, whereby it was recognised that "Foster's message was not a dismal one" because "he returned repeatedly to the word *promise*, and a careful reading of his work reveals hopeful ideas for scholarship and the profession" (Lindle 2004: 173).

Foster is one of a range of thinkers and writers in the field of educational administration that have challenged the orthodoxies presented as prescriptive practice for educational professionals. Like Greenfield he spoke out against the positivism of the field and in particular what had been called 'The Theory Movement' and its objective to identify the one best way of running an educational organisation:

"An administrator must deal with technical issues, of course, but these can be learned adequately and possibly more effectively on the job, through hands-on experience, working with other administrators, and attending in-service sessions. The meat of the administrator's work is not the technical aspect of management; rather, it involves the establishment of a community and a culture within an organization and the development of an organization's self-reflective ability to analyse its purposes and goals" (Foster 1986 p10).

While a US scholar, Foster had spent some time at Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia), and as Lindle (2004) notes had benefited from being embedded in a socially critical and values driven research culture including Richard Bates, Jill Blackmore, Fazal Rizvi, and John Smyth. Importantly he has a chapter in Smyth's landmark *Critical Perspectives on Educational Leadership* (1989) where he presented leadership as a shared resource rather than the property of someone in a hierarchically superior job. See CEPaLS 03.

Here (and in other CEPaLS papers) I want to pick up on the issue of knowledge production within and for the field as a strong theme in my work (see CEPaLS 01). The enduring question for me is why Foster's important work has not been adopted as the globalised approach to educational administration as a practice? On a personal note, I came late in my career to Foster's work and it was not until around the middle of the 2000s that I was fortunate to learn about the book from Richard Bates. I had many questions, but importantly I asked: why was this book not in the reading list for the MSc in Educational Management that I studied part time while working as a teacher 1987-1990? The answer to this lies in the context in which Foster was researching and I was studying, and the power structures that rendered his work (like others) to be marginal and irrelevant.

The 1970s and 1980s was a time of emboldened right-wing attacks on the idea and reality of public services education, where in 1990 Chubb and Moe codified the pro-market arguments that were being used to justify the brutal dismantling of a universal and free at the point of access service for all. Reforms by right-wing governments (Pinochet, Reagan, Thatcher) were turning schools into businesses with education as a product to be sold, parents into consumers demanding a good school place for *their* child, and professionals as deliverers of standardised and marketized student achievement. This is evident in the design and popularisation of site-based management as a corporatised version of the 'The Theory Movement' where technical instrumental management of planning, monitoring and evaluating dominated the case for professional skills and knowledge. The headteacher/principal as a corporatised managing director and then as entrepreneurial leader known as the CEO is what has dominated the field from the 1980s. In this context visioning replaced values and activism, and the word 'transformation' was harnessed to leadership through the promotion of charismatic change agents who would drive forward reforms. This is what I described as Jurassic Management (Gunter 1997), where I argued that schools were being turned into theme parks based on structural and cultural 'system' control, and where the knowledge requirements for professional practice rendered the teacher and headteacher as tactical deliverers of corporate visions that would fail but no one could say that.

Foster's book, like many others, continues to speak to the profession because it raises the possibility that professionals can and do deal with educational purposes and strategy, and so are not just corporate tacticians and performers. Furthermore, it implies that answers to questions about what is to be done

are ones that are not knee-jerk reactions and/or intuitive, or scripted by external school owners (or governors or trustees), but are moral and humane. In other words, “Leadership lies not in the position *given*, but in the position *taken*” (Foster 1986: 15, original emphasis). What I would like to take from his book is the notion of ‘promises’ because taking a position demonstrates that the educational professional’s contribution has promise for the profession, for children, parents and communities, and for the wider ideal of public service education. In addition, it enables professionals to engage with critical thinking about the underlying purposes of education, whereby professionals are political activists for change that is rooted in social justice rather than corporate profit. As I have argued elsewhere reading the work of writers such as Foster helps educational professionals to think and take action politically, and I have identified the notion of ‘promise’ because it speaks to Arendtian scholarship (Gunter 2018). What Arendt (1958) identified was that the public realm required stabilisation through the promises made and kept. Promising is necessary because holding pro-public values on their own will not stop anti-public reforms, and so political activism is necessary in order to practice morality rather than espouse it in vision statements.

Putting Foster’s critique of the field into the wider context of 35 years of reforms it is the case that professionals and children are not actually allowed to promise and/or to show promise, but only produce compliance performance data. Indeed, professionals and children are in receipt of deceitful promises about corporate schooling, not least the instability of opening and closing schools, parents changing providers, product obsolescence and the disposability of professionals and children does not actually provide education. There are accounts that offer inspiring cases of promise (e.g. Winkley 2002), and in the face of government serial lying the profession is answering back by exposing the impact of austerity cuts, supporting children as climate change activists, and/or exposing the failed governing of public education at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. While Foster’s book may not be on reading lists, those who seek to censor professional development cannot actually prevent the ideas and practices from remaining resilient and vital.

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