



***Challenging the System? A Dramatic Tale of Neoliberal Reform in an Australian High School.* Martin Forsey. Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2007. 191 pp.**

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Since the mid 1980s, the Education Department of Western Australia (EDWA) had been engaged in policy discourses around devolution. Forsey (2007) explains that by 1998 Grace, the principal of Ravina High School, a government school in Perth, "reached a point where she wanted to move beyond the rhetoric of change to something more concrete" (p. 2). In so doing, Forsey posits, "Grace took on the 'system' as she construed it to be and, as this book shows, she lost" (p. 2).

Drawing heavily on the complexity and dynamism of practice theory, and his experiences during 15 months of fieldwork, Forsey (2007) narrates the story of Ravina High during a contentious year. In that year, Grace attempted to implement her vision of devolution in ways that both concurred and conflicted with the school community and the larger educational system-actions which eventually led to her dismissal from the school. Forsey situates this story within both the contexts of devolutionary policy reform in Western Australia and of the "global ideals of neoliberalism" (p. 14).

Two elements of the book make it particularly interesting, the first of which is Forsey's (2007) use of Victor Turner's conceptualization of conflict as a "social drama" (1974:9). Forsey considers its four phases of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration as he analyzes Grace's actions as principal, and the subsequent responses from the school community and the larger educational system. Turner's model provides a useful way to understand the events of the school, and helps to make visible particular structural and cultural frameworks. The ways in which Forsey employs this theoretical model as an analytic tool for his data could be used to launch valuable discussions in ethnographic research classes.

The second element of interest is Forsey's (2007) portrayal of the key actors in the context of policy reform, all of whom were caught in the gap between rhetoric and practice (p. 13). This ethnographic account demonstrates how each of the actors bore responsibilities for the ways in which the "social drama" at Ravina High played out, rather than shifting the blame to a particular person (e.g., principal) or collectivity (e.g., bureaucrats, administrators, teachers, or parents). These themes of rhetoric, practice, and ultimately, responsibility, could serve as salient and significant topics for discussions in classes on educational policy, educational reform, comparative education, and global education.

Throughout his ethnography, Forsey (2007) captures a wealth of perspectives across a range of the school's venues. There are two areas, however, that may have merited more attention. He states that he spent "a great deal of time in classrooms" (p. 7), though there are few, if any, portraits of classrooms. How might the classrooms have provided an



important window on the "social drama"? Furthermore, he explains that his initial research focus was on the school lives of teachers, and thus, he missed at least one key opportunity to focus on Grace as the principal (p. 7). Because Grace was such a central actor in this "social drama," the ethnography may have benefited from additional opportunities to "hear" her voice in less public spaces, rather than in the more public spaces of the staffroom, the various meetings, or through the media. More data from individual interviews or daily shadowing may have provided deeper insights into her unfolding goals and strategies throughout the year.

In its entirety, Forsey's (2007) ethnography makes a valuable contribution to the scholarship on school reform in its daily manifestations, that is, "policy as practice" (p. 8; see also Sutton, Margaret, and Bradley Levinson, Eds. *Policy as Practice: Towards a Comparative Sociocultural Analysis of Educational Policy*, Westport, CT: Ablex, 2001.). At the conclusion of his account, he explains that all of us play a role in the fate of schools: "The ways in which schools are structured, positioned, funded, managed, appreciated, critiqued, cared for, and neglected presents us with a mirror for seeing the values of the community that produces and replicates them" (p. 170). It is this understanding that is perhaps at the very heart of the book.

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