



The pendulum swings: transforming school reform

Scott Eacott

To cite this article: Scott Eacott (2011) The pendulum swings: transforming school reform, Journal of Educational Administration and History, 43:1, 85-86, DOI: [10.1080/17439884.2010.543020](https://doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2010.543020)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17439884.2010.543020>



Published online: 02 Feb 2011.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 136



View related articles [↗](#)

BOOK REVIEWS

The pendulum swings: transforming school reform, by Bernard Barker, Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books, 2010, 220 pp., £18.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-858-56468-5

In *The Pendulum Swings*, Bernard Barker delivers a historically informed and contemporarily relevant review of school reform in England drawing on a wide range of intellectual resources. In doing so, Barker is able to deliver an argument that uses both an economic and social lens to critically engage with issues and ask questions of policy and practice in order to provide an alternate. This is most evident in Barker's four strategic priorities for an alternate form of school reform: rebuilding communities; creating the conditions for worth, growth and achievement; empowering school leaders and teachers; and overcoming disadvantage. While written explicitly in the English context, the argument is not lost on an international audience. Many of the policy initiatives pursued in England have also been embraced, although in varying degrees, across the globe. The value for the international reader is the conceptual work that Barker does in engaging with the mechanisms of school reform. Importantly, while discussing recent sustained attempts at school reform, this text does not fall into the trap of many Critical scholars who become entangled in theoretical discourse which limits hope and the possibilities of alternatives. In contrast *The Pendulum Swings* is optimistic, both portraying the limitations of current and past reforms and embracing the opportunity that is the immediate post financial crisis era.

In relation to the writing, at least for this reviewer, there is a stage early on where the argument meanders. I wanted a more theoretical discussion and a pushing of ideas or knowledge claims. However, it was in this moment that I actually began to truly appreciate this book for what it is. The argument of this book, that historically education reform has failed to live up to the rhetoric and that we have a rare opportunity to reinvent education policy and practice, is always going to be given a sympathetic reading by readers of *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. In recent times (if not always), substantial attention has been given to such matters. This is a luxury however that cannot be guaranteed in other outlets for research on educational leadership, management and administration. For policy-makers, systemic authorities, and practitioners who seek rationality, predictability and the linearity of much educational leadership and management literature, the challenge of

contemporary practice and concepts would not sit well. For example, the critique of 'best practice' in chapter six is contrary to the popular notion of evidence-based practice and the desire of systems to deliver management learning through pre-packaged ring binders. As Barker notes, the very notion of best practice excludes the context in which practice is deemed effective. Of course the idea of effectiveness is itself, a contested terrain. Despite claims that there is a high level of predictability surrounding schooling, the general consensus in the literature and professional body is that context matters. Therefore, engaging with 'best practice' on the basis that there are some essential skills, behaviours or techniques that have utility across schools is an interesting phenomenon in itself.

A highly contested notion in work on educational leadership and management is the balance between problem solving and problem posing. Problem solving, which is central to the 'what works' and 'school effectiveness and school improvement' movements, is prone to technicist writing and a de-professionalism of educational practice. In contrast, problem posing is central to more sociologically informed writing on education policy and leadership, and centres on asking questions and disrupting the status quo. In *The Pendulum Swings*, Barker uses a form of problem posing to challenge existing practices and then uses these challenges to construct an alternate to address the problems of the current state of affairs. This is arguably only possible by engaging in knowledge construction that crosses boundaries, namely education policy, school leadership, and school reform. This is what makes the latter stages of the book, and especially chapter eight, so significant. Unlike the 'educational entrepreneur' or 'management consultant' who engages in an uncritical adoption of the managerialist agenda, this book contributes to an emerging literature that is embracing the unique historical moment of the post global financial crisis era to challenge the assumptions of contemporary society and ask questions as to the possibility of an alternate way to do things. These efforts are to be applauded, encouraged, but most of all, engaged with.

Scott Eacott

The University of Newcastle, Australia

Scott.Eacott@newcastle.edu.au

© 2011, Scott Eacott

DOI: 10.1080/17439884.2010.543020

Towards the third generation university: managing the university in transition, by J.G. Wissema, Cheltenham and Northampton, MA, Edward Elgar, 2009, 252 pp., £69.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-848-44216-5

There is no shortage of scholarly work on the university as a historical and contemporary institution. Authors of new books in this area therefore have an