

commissaires avaient fixés au nouveau.

Andrée Dufour
Université du Québec à Montréal

Bryce E. Nelson. *Good Schools: The Seattle Public School System, 1901-1930.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989. Pp. xi, 187. \$20.00 U.S.

Good Schools: it seems an incongruous title for a history of urban education. Urban schools in the late twentieth century often epitomize the worst features of American education. Heavily centralized, bureaucratically organized, plagued by a variety of social ills, city schools have symbolized failure and hardly evoke images of success and goodness. So-called revisionist scholars from the late 1960s to the early 1970s often focused their sights on the historical origins of urban schools, exposing their racist, sexist, and class-biased values. So it is somewhat startling to meet an author who contradicts the now-conventional revisionist wisdom.

The "good schools" in Bryce E. Nelson's book existed in Seattle, Washington, during the early twentieth century. In his perspective, they were especially good until the years around World War I. Ultra-patriots, tax-cutters, and an array of conservative special-interest groups thereafter turned Seattle's schools into more rigid and less responsive institutions. Most of

Nelson's volume, however, deals with the numerous school reforms that swept the city before the war, and this constitutes the heart of his contribution.

Good Schools is an extremely thoughtful and well-written volume. Nelson is an extraordinarily clear stylist. His book reads so well that one ultimately regrets its brevity, since the author raises more important issues than he can resolve in a slender volume. Nelson often provides the reader with a sketch instead of a fully detailed view of the urban landscape. So much critical scholarship exists on the progressive era (c. 1890-1920) and the public schools, however, that it is refreshing to read someone who is almost partisan in praising Seattle's pedagogical progressives.

Nelson does not offer a philosophical interpretation of what might constitute a "good school" or "good society." One nevertheless quickly sees that he admires a host of community and neighbourhood-oriented progressives who tried to transform Seattle's schools in the early twentieth century. The main figure in the story is Frank Cooper, who was reared in the small-town Midwest but eventually became the city's school superintendent from 1901 to 1922. Near the end of his term, political pressures gradually forced Cooper to embrace the administrative agenda of school superintendents elsewhere. But his heart was never in it. Cooper never quite fit the mould of those administrative reformers who were enamoured by industrial metaphors that likened children to bits of raw material on conveyor belts. Until

World War I, according to Nelson, Cooper guided the system through a period of remarkable expansion in terms of student numbers, curriculum offerings, and social services in the public schools and resisted the more ugly side of urban reform.

Working with local parents and various civic groups, Superintendent Cooper built a humane school system that was inclusive of the interests of teachers, neighbourhoods, and students. He fought the idea that schools were factories and that efficiency and economy were the highest virtues; he thus swam against the main educational currents of school administration. Cooper was no urban radical. He did not wave a Wobbly banner or call for teacher unionization. He believed in a uniform curriculum and centralized control and was paternalistic toward his teaching staff. At the same time, compared with many other reformers, he was a benevolent man. He valued neighbourhood schools over large and impersonal facilities, championed more flexible teaching methods, and defended teachers' civil rights despite public criticism. One can easily see why Cooper had so many admirers as well as conservative enemies in his own time.

Good Schools is most compelling when highlighting the different political factions that struggled for the control of urban schools in the early twentieth century. Nelson has a keen sense of the politics of education. He also correctly states that the historiography of urban schooling for too long has been an Eastern or increasingly Midwestern saga. At the same time, Seattle shared much in common with

other cities. The smaller percentage of immigrants, the differing economic base, and so forth naturally made Seattle somewhat different. But the issues debated in Seattle were commonplace throughout urban America during the Progressive era. Socialists, clubwomen, and other community groups elsewhere vied for influence on the school board, and Nelson's volume reaffirms the truth that a top-down view of reform that only looks at business interests will not do.

Pedagogical progressives such as Cooper changed the schools in fundamental ways. By World War I, Seattle's schools had assumed new social functions. Medical and dental inspection of children, community access to the schools as meeting places, a broadened curriculum: these and similar innovations helped make the school a centre of neighbourhood life. Nelson mostly bases this analysis on official school reports, committee minutes, and correspondence between Cooper and school officials. For all its conceptual richness, the book does not provide the reader with a sense of the texture of the local neighbourhood schools that Cooper and his supporters revered. Whatever distinctions or unique qualities existed in particular neighbourhoods are absent in this account, as the author tries to make more sweeping generalizations about the influence of reform.

For example, Seattle's pedagogical progressives wanted to transform the entire system through innovative teaching styles. Cooper continually urged teachers to teach through discussion techniques, the use of the project method instead of lectures, and the

partial abandonment of traditional recitations. But Nelson himself notes that teachers do many things sight unseen when the schoolroom door closes. Many scholars have noted that teaching styles vary enormously in different neighbourhood schools, no matter what central administration wants. Moreover, the poorest children have often had the most restricted education, one emphasizing rote memorization, filling in workbooks, and the like. When conservative critics after World War I lambasted Cooper and pushed him out of office, they most interestingly accused him of encouraging polly-parrot teaching methods. That was a lie. Whether progressive practices were as common as reports and speeches calling for their implementation nevertheless remains unclear. Even Nelson recognizes that efforts to change traditional teaching methods led to "mixed results" (p. 149), even though Cooper sincerely wanted to make students active and not passive learners.

Good Schools is such an enjoyable book to read and ponder that one continually wants more information and examples. Some of the chapters are very short and remain suggestive rather than persuasive. The 1920s zip along too quickly, making it difficult to appraise which progressive reforms remained intact and which ones the new efficiency reformers devastated. Indeed, the last chapter, covering 1922 to 1930, also leaps to the 1960s and even serves as a conclusion: all in eight pages, including notes.

These caveats should not obscure the many strengths and value of this case study. *Good Schools* recaptures

some of the vision of the pedagogical progressives, honours their legacy, and reminds us that perhaps better forms of school organization and political control occasionally existed in our urban past. Seattle did not have a golden age of education in the progressive era, but Bryce E. Nelson admirably restores some of the vitality and excitement of the age.

William J. Reese
Indiana University

Ronald D. Cohen. *Children of the Mill: Schooling and Society in Gary, Indiana, 1906-1960.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. Pp. xiv, 280. \$35 U.S.

What makes one city's school system worthy of a case study and important reading for those other than local history buffs? It may be a remarkable system: well known, or beset by particularly acute crises, or at the vanguard of educational change. Or it may be more typical of other cities' systems, but remarkable in the wealth of resources available for its study, and therefore able to shed light on the experience of students and teachers in school, the dynamics of educational change, and the links between schooling and historical change in the society at large. Initially, the Gary school system in the hands of Ronald Cohen ap-