The Knowledge of Power and the Power of Knowledge — A Review of "Understanding Education: A Sociological Perspective"

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ABSTRACT

This commentary reviews *Understanding Education: A Sociological Perspective* (Gewirtz & Cribb 2009). The book covers major themes of the sociology of education (such as social reproduction, knowledge, and identity), while selecting examples to highlight a more multifaceted understanding of education. The writers provide a dense overview of sociology and its role within education, while also delving into complex "normative questions" (p. 185). This perspective engages the reader by widening the scope of education, creating a convincing narrative for the relevance of sociology within educational policy. However, the book's examples and references appeal to academics rather than policy makers, forcing readers to question whether or not the book successfully crosses the gap between sociological research and educational policy.

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Introduction

From Durkheim to Weber, the founding fathers of sociology recognized the importance of schooling in the formation of societies within the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the sociology of education exists as a *contested* field within today's political climate, as policy makers and teachers defend themselves from potentially critical perspectives (Lauder et al. 2009). Hence, *Understanding Education: A Sociological Perspective* (Gewirtz & Cribb 2009) comes during a crucial moment, attempting to cross the classic gulf between theory and practice by reemphasizing the importance of a sociological perspective. In particular, Gewirtz and Cribb write, " … sociology is the study of social relations, processes, institutions and structures, whilst sociology of education is the study of these phenomena with a particular focus on educational processes and on how educational and other social processes are mutually implicated and intertwined" (p. 19). The book always maintains a *process* focus for how "structures shape agents" and how "agents shape structures." Yet the question still remains, what distinguishes education from *other* social processes? Although the writers claim with the title that the reader will acquire a greater understanding of education, the reader leaves with a much deeper perspective of sociology focused on educational structures. This orientation explores the reasons for social phenomena and hierarchies as opposed to delineating how these processes are distinctly "educational." Hence, the intended audience for this book remains students and

professors of social science rather than educational policy makers themselves, leading the reader to question whether or not the writers successfully cross the chasm between theory and policy.

Education as Power

As a study of process, the book inherently explores the connection between power and knowledge. The writers sometimes reflect the classic Baconian axiom: "*scientia potentia est*" (knowledge is power). For example, while exploring the nature of the relationship between doctors and the parents of disabled children, Gewirtz and Cribb write, " … knowledge and power are intimately bound up together. The power of professionals — to diagnose, define a condition as a problem that needs to be treated and decide what counts as an appropriate treatment" (p. 6). Hence, according to the writers, education serves a social function of reaffirming a hierarchy of influence between specialists and lay people. The reason for this does not necessarily relate to coercive or competitive means, but rather the skillful ability to *define* the original problem as well as *select* an appropriate response.

However, this example presents an oversimplified notion of power. According to Remmling (1973, p. 341), mere education is "potential power" rather that power itself. Instead of knowledge, "*specialized knowledge matched with work*" grants power. As a form of "potential power," the analysis should reorient the process of education as a *dynamic* system of exchange. Bourdieu (mentioned multiple times in the book) writes about three forms of capital: cultural, social, and economic (Grenfell & James 1998, p. 21). Accumulating such cultural capital after education generates potential power, because agents can exchange it for other forms of capital to achieve a certain purpose. Hence, the writers should highlight a more complex notion of power within the beginning examples in order to generate a discourse more relevant to a political landscape.

Exploring Agency

Gewirtz and Cribb also provide a complex understanding of agency within educational structures. The grand sociologic scope of education mentioned in the introduction could potentially challenge power structures by identifying alternative nodes and receptors for the knowledge transformation and communication. For instance, examples such as using the Internet (p. 4), learning from multicultural education (p. 142), and resisting discourse (p. 105) could potentially grant agents greater power as they question national and local systems of knowledge production. In particular, Gewirtz and Cribb reference Fisher and Fisher's (2007, p. 520) analysis of autodidacts, "subverting professional power." Yet, at the same time, the writers balance this perspective by questioning how the "micro-level methodologies" of the referenced studies could potentially ignore overarching structures such as "labor markets" that are not affected by this "resistance" (Gewirtz & Cribb 2009, p. 106). Near the end, Gewirtz and Cribb ask the question: "… is the possibility of agency so constrained that it is more valid to see teacher and student 'agency' as essentially a product (i.e. explained by) persistent structures of domination and oppression" (p. 188). As a result, the writers create a very complex understanding of agency, and the reader leaves with confusion, wondering how to apply this understanding to normative debates at the end of the book. After reading the publication, the reader will no doubt understand the importance of emphasizing sociology in public policy discourse. Yet with such a complex notion of agency, the question remains how to implement this change?

Conclusion

Gewirtz and Cribb's book attempts to connect sociology to educational policy by reemphasizing the importance of a sociological perspective. The reader leaves with a renewed fascination for sociology due to insightful analysis and skillful organization. Yet the

book's examples and references appeal to academics rather than policy makers, forcing readers to question whether or not the book successfully crosses the gap between sociological research and educational policy. In order to create a renewed impact, the writers must question how to translate these important ideas into directed strategies for change.

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