Book review

Title: The Production of Educational Knowledge in the Global Era

Edited by Julia Resnik 2008

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This edited book, in six sections, contains nearly three hundred pages of fairly dense print and as one would expect, a high concentration of ideas. The editor, Julia Resnik, an education sociologist at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has collected papers that engage the reader in issues of globalisation, supra-nationalism and the commodification of education and knowledge. In places, the book makes a real contribution to our understanding of the impact of globalisation, on Higher Education in particular, and offers a sometimes refreshing critique of the progress that non-western countries have made in the new anti-autarchic paradigm.

The running theme of the book is that an education discourse can no longer be had in national contexts, but must be explored in global terms while simultaneously recognising the importance of 'the local'. It is both a strength and a weakness of the book that it offers such 'glocalisation' (Robertson, 1992) as a way forward: it may be appropriate for institutions with strong local allegiances, but it can be constraining for those who wish (or need) to position themselves as international centres.

The book examines ways in which non-western education is being integrated into western models, though such shoe-horning does, of course, 'privilege' western models as a basis for understanding and exploiting knowledge; while western models *are* more developed and integration *may* be a legitimate way for advancing non-western models (Reid & Loxton, 2004), the process of integration should not be a euphemism for suppressing 'the non-western' (rather than liberating it from its perceived inferiority).

- In the first section, the chapters address the demise of state-centred educational research. Robertson and Dale, and the editor, argue that there is a need for a new paradigm that integrates the local and the global as a way to interrogate, analyse and deconstruct educational research and policy.
- Section Two is a discourse in which Benavot proposes a move beyond the universalisation of education to the universalisation of education *quality*; a contribution made more powerful by the focus on *equity* added by Cusso in the subsequent chapter. It is argued that while educational efficiency has traditionally been serviced by statistical comparisons of participation and performance, globalisation requires new metrics that additionally capture (amongst other things) hunger, mortality rates and economic deprivation.
- Section Three deals with the potential disconnect between reforms in western neo-liberal countries and those in non-western countries, which are 'deforming' when based on western templates that have little resonance with local requirements, and when free-market imperatives are not balanced by consideration of the moral values of local people.

- Section Four moves the discussion, such as it exists, to consider the role of international schools and education, noting that there is no accepted framework for understanding the skills, knowledge and values that these schools must develop as they prepare their graduates for the globalised environment.
- Chapters 9 and 10 focus on reform in a European context (though the model proposed for enhancing quality looks a lot like TQM). The problem, it is argued, is that European institutions benchmark progress against US ones that are better resourced, have a superior infrastructure and provide greater opportunities for research and mobility. Most commentators agree that in order to improve, systems need to be benchmarked against 'the best' and not just against 'the rest', but comparisons that do not allow for context are known to entrench a disconnect in educational development.
- The final section of the book has three chapters: the first, by Ben-Ari, focuses on early childhood education and care, and notwithstanding its importance, is something of a 'curiosity' in a book that deals, in the main, with Higher Education (though its treatment of Japanese attempts to integrate the local and the global provides a reflective opportunity for readers); the second by Naftali deals with the challenges of Chinese education and in particular the notion of transforming the Chinese learner (see Seligman, 1998) from a passive recipient of knowledge to an active participant in its construction; and the final chapter by Wexler hints at a new sociology of education based not on post-modernism but on the fundamental tenets of globalised markets and profit.

Every edited book must ultimately be judged on the extent to which its contributions benefit from being part of a concatenation, over and above what they offer individually. Collectively, they should add contestation to what would otherwise be a monologue and offer an exegesis that challenges the ideas presented within the collection. Unfortunately, this (mostly) fails to happen in this book, despite the best efforts of the editor to 'herd her cats'. And while the book has some coherence in terms of how the sections are ordered, there are a few chapters that are repetitive in their treatment of issues, or are misplaced. The editor might also have taken more risks with the content: perhaps to have included a paper on Sen's capability approach in the context of Section Two; perhaps something on the production of knowledge for ecological sustainability; perhaps a political critique of global forces 'goose-stepping' into the subtleties of other cultures as if there were nothing there and stamping western anomie all over them. The book takes a specifically sociological view with little acknowledgement that there are alternative complementary perspectives; it is not a compelling collection for those with an economic, political or philosophical bent. The chapters are of uneven quality and feel too much like a collection of good - sometimes excellent (e.g. Robertson and Dale, some of the editor's own contributions, and others) - conference proceedings presented by friends and associates in six fugues. The whole would have benefited from a wider *variety* of contributor, but to be fair to all concerned the chapters *do* reward re-reading and *do* avoid the cynical Leftist dissent which so often characterises work in this field. While the book's production, at least in the paperback version, is not great and would have been enhanced by the inclusion of an index to allow readers to navigate selectively around the multiplicity of concepts, the book deserves (and will get) a place on academic bookshelves, especially those of sociologists and anthropologists. Despite reservations, it is a good book.

References:

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