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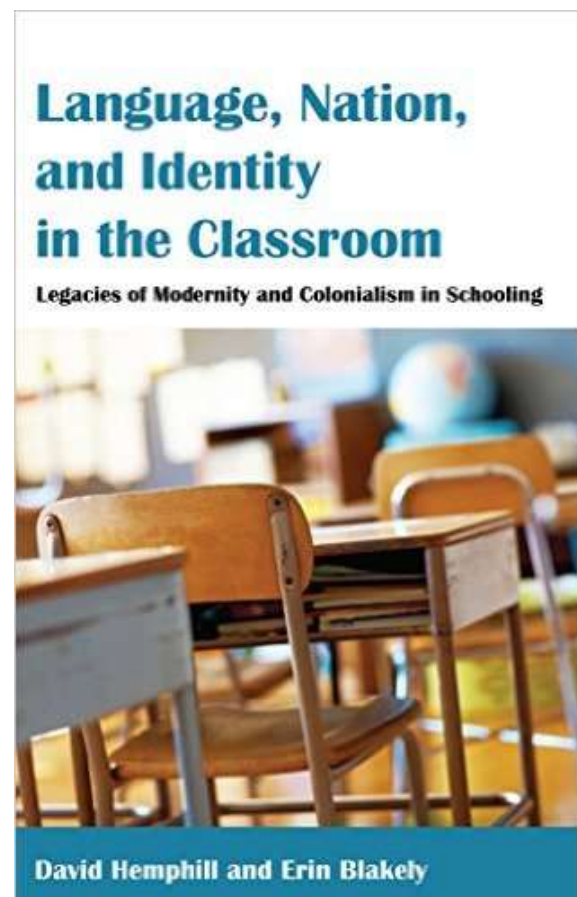
Hemphill, D., & Blakely, E. (2015). *Language, nation, and identity in the classroom: Legacies of modernity and colonialism in schooling*. New York: Peter Lang.

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Teachers-in-training and educational-researchers-in-training (henceforth, teachers and researchers) are not exactly the same, but David Hemphill and Erin Blakely (2015), respectively a professor of education and an advanced educational practitioner, have written a concise and useful introduction to critical concepts in education, including—but not limited to—colonialism, orientalism, post-modernism, and commodification. Each chapter explains and explores these theories that, while rooted in world political, economic, and social events from Europe’s colonial period to the rise of capitalism and the multinational corporation, intersect and manifest in the educational field. The book brings the work of theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu (capital) Michael Foucault (power), Edward Said (orientalism), Antonio Gramsci (hegemony), Mikhail Bakhtin (dialogism), and Homi Bhabha (hybridity) into dialogue with educational theorists, researchers, and practitioners such as Frederick Erickson, James Gee, Kris Gutiérrez, Barbara Rogoff,



Roy McDermott, and Anne Haas Dyson. This approach highlights the close connection between social theory and educational practice and reminds the reader of the socially constructed nature of education, hinting at ways education can be de- and reconstructed in the quest for social justice. While centering the U.S. experience, examples from China, the US/Mexico border, and other geographic and political contexts further illuminate the issues, especially through a “Case-in-Point” section that connects each theoretical perspective to actual issues or experiences in schooling today.

An essential lesson for all budding teachers and researchers taken up throughout the book is that the social world is not natural but rather the product of culturally-specific metanarratives developed over centuries. Whether one considers the invention of childhood (Chapter 1) or school discipline (Chapter 7), many binaries, symbols, and ideologies have developed that can make people ignorant or dismissive of other perspectives, such as non-Western notions of what constitutes quality education. In the West especially, the paradigms of modernism and positivism, while challenged through post-modernist and post-structuralist thinking, still drive much educational practice (Chapter 2). These ideals filter into the minutiae of classroom life, for example, through the rigid structure of argumentative writing or the preference for printed books over digital blogs in language classes (pp. 152-156). However, teachers and researchers must learn that this notion of a static, pure, or eternal culture can have profound and negative impacts in schools where ethnographic evidence shows the various and complex ways people experience, use, and mix culture in their everyday lives. Indeed, wide swaths of humanity engage with various practices of movement in and among communities, languages, and nations that challenge these reified versions of language and culture (pp. 139-144). The authors engage with theoretical vocabulary encompassing these understandings such as borderlands, diaspora,

hybridity, bifocality, and simultaneity, pushing teachers and researchers to recognize and value the talents that students whose lifeworlds include various languages, ethnicities, and family structures have. Otherwise, a consistent warning in the book is that many students will continue being chronically labeled as “at-risk” or “deficient.”

Central to this shift is language and its connection to theories of teaching and learning (Chapter 6). If language is simply an abstract code that can be acquired through repetition and correction, then behaviorism would be a good approach. However, this is not an accurate view of language, which is a socially-mediated system of ever-changing codes (pp. 135-139). The problem is that much of education is orientated to a monoglossic, ahistorical, acultural, and atheoretical view of language, which results in systems that ignore the lifeworlds of students. Education then becomes a commodity that manifests itself today with the world of literacy rankings, standardized/scripted curricula, and the banking model of education that ignores students’ funds of knowledge.

Finally, teachers and researchers must develop a critical theoretical perspective about power in education. Foucault emphasized how power is both a repressive and productive force built from webs of relationships between people, institutions, and laws. However, absent critical actors involved with these webs, individuals or groups with more power may be able to bend the system to their benefit. For example, a company may see education as a way to tap new consumers and will develop curricula, offer them “for free” to schools starved for resources, and transform normal human activities such as puberty or menstruation into sources of present shame and future profit (pp. 165-167).

Throughout the book, the authors help new teachers and researchers develop a critical vocabulary and perspective by developing an understanding of language, culture, and students as dynamic and changing, requiring an emphasis on local contexts in both

classroom and research practices. To do so is to embrace, understand, and nurture students rather than force them into molds created by colonialism and racism. As the authors argue, failing to do so will allow the status quo to continue:

“Context is generally ignored, however, in teacher preparation where the focus remains on providing educators the tools to implement ‘best practices’...educational research has been reduced to product testing... [and the] commodification of knowledge leads to deskilling of teachers, narrowing of curriculum and pedagogical choices, decontextualization, neglect of social relations and students’ funds of knowledge, and maintenance of colonial/modernist hierarchies” (p. 181).

For example, if students in a classroom are emergent bilinguals, live in Anzaldúa’s borderlands, and speak varieties of English, Castilian Spanish, Northern Mexico dialects, Tex-Mex, and Nahuatl (among others), the relevance of many educational standards such as the Common Core to their lives is questionable (pp. 141-142). Even more seriously, the types of curricula developed at the mass-market level have little cultural-historical relevance in these communities, which can leave inexperienced teachers confused or lead them to develop a deficit perspective towards the learners. In short, this is a form of educational oppression, and teachers and researchers must be aware of it before they enter the field.

Paradoxically, a weakness of the book is that its close attachment to the critical and grand theories makes many educational problems clear but ignores or downplays possible solutions. The book does highlight some examples that speak against oppressive educational structures such as Kris Gutiérrez’ Third Space, a cultural-historical space well known for “using conflict as a starting place for negotiating and reorganizing lessons, drawing parallels between home and academic

discourse, accepting slang, humor, informal language, and mixed languages (like Spanglish) in class discussions” (p. 78). However, these examples are not as well developed as they could be and might lead a reader, especially those embarking on a teaching career, to conclude that education is hopelessly flawed. The authors ignore hopeful examples that range from Montessori education, bilingual immersion programs, Afrocentric schools, experiential education, and even Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs) or homeschooling that attempt to reorient educational goals and practice from standardized curricula and testing to an emphasis on play and inquiry, the lived experience of diverse groups, or expanding access to engaging learning experiences. These are some of the possibilities that can inform the everyday practices of a critically-aware and engaged classroom teacher in their local context such as a public school district. These might include resisting scripted or commoditized curricula, advocating for more recess time or field trips, or developing culturally sustaining school discipline policies.

Researchers, in turn, may struggle with the fact that the grand theories developed in the book highlight unequal or oppressive social structures and might feel that their work is doomed to exist within a certain grand theory, highlighting education’s depressing or oppressive aspects. Although these theoretical concepts help many researchers understand the social world, the theories can also be limiting, leading researchers to forget that society is dynamic and that people are agentive or, to borrow from Michel de Certeau, *tactical* in their own environments (de Certeau, 1984). Thus, researchers would have benefitted from other theoretical perspectives such as “mid-level” theory that

“hovers just over the particularity of events, seeking to explain human social life as situated, contextualized, and indeterminate. As such, mid-level theory eschews the universal and instead theorizes a bounded series of social

events as complexly and multi-leveled structured meanings" (Newell, Bloome, & Hirvela, 2015, p. 6).

Mid-level theory may help researchers balance grand theory with their description and analysis of the social world, a powerful recommendation of many preeminent social and educational researchers (e.g. Geertz, 1977; Latour, 2004; Wolcott, 2001, pp. 80–84).

Another weakness is that, although the book introduces much theory about multiculturalism, hybridity, and related concepts, these terms are still being debated. The theoretical goal here is to offer terminology that accurately and simultaneously describes and values what people do or attempt to do in situations where their lives, languages, identities, and cultures are facing minoritization. Here, perhaps the notions of “trans” could be helpful from the work of Ofelia Garcia (2008) and Marjorie Faulstich Orellana (2016). According to Orellana:

‘Trans’ is not just a substitute for ‘multi’ or ‘inter.’ It is not just about fluidity or movement, or even ‘just’ transgressions. ‘Trans’ suggests a movement *beyond* borders, a transcendence or transformation of things that were being held apart, or artificially constructed as separate and distinct. This is not the same as hybridity, which presumes an even and presumably equitable blend of different forms. Nor is it the erasure of difference. Rather it is about questioning the ontologies that hold things apart. It involves the resolution of dialectic tensions and the emergence of something new—something that we perhaps cannot even imagine (p. 91, italics in original).

As such, the book may best be read as an overview of essential topics but not as up-to-date with topics such as the notions of “trans” or “mid-level” theory just mentioned or even, going further into the past, through a

discussion of intersectionality, the notion that certain oppressive statuses intersect to create unique and potentially more oppressive structures (Crenshaw, 1991).

The final weakness of the book is framing and audience. It not clear in the writing who the audience is except for a brief mention on the back cover. The authors could have framed the book more clearly with an introduction and conclusion, offering some context for the theoretical perspectives from sociology, linguistics, and cultural studies and their application to educational research and practice. Despite this omission, the book would be a useful introductory or companion text to any teacher or researcher program, especially at the graduate level. Students or professors, especially those involved with critical or ethnographically-informed approaches to education, can develop knowledge quickly through this book. Personally, as a budding educator and researcher invested in work with refugees, language, and education across the lifespan and in multiple contexts, the book helped reinforce and expand many notions taken up in my own training and experience.

The book’s ultimate take away is that teachers and researchers have a profound responsibility to shine a light on current and historical issues in education across time and space. *Language, nation, and identity in the classroom* will help teachers and researchers critically assess and respond when presented with arguments that the mixing of languages or cultures is a “problem,” suggestions to implement a “research-based” curricula, or requests to research “best practices” following SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-Bound) methodology. The point is not that these methods are necessarily bad, but that they come with distinct histories and ideologies that privilege certain groups over others. Resisting the reproduction of these inequities should be the heart of education, and this book has potential to support teachers and researchers in this important work.

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