



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

January 27, 2011

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

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Semel, Susan. (2010) *Foundations of Education: The Essential Texts*. NY: Routledge

Pp. 224 ISBN 0-415-80624-0

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To begin, it is essential that this review acknowledges the bold nature of this textbook that Dr. Susan Semel has developed, primarily for teaching Foundations courses in undergraduate teacher education. The title *Foundations of Education: The Essential Texts* holds great promise. It entices the reader with the claim: here, we have the essential, foundational texts. This enticement is problematic for a variety of reasons, the most obvious one being that there are only twelve readings therein.

Before reflecting on these actual texts and their foundational essentialness, this review shall treat the introductory essay penned by Dr. Semel, which works as a web tying together the textbook. It shall also briefly discuss a more troubling question: are the foundations of education actually, for lack of a better adjective,

Citation: Christou, Theodore Michael. (2011 January 27) Review of *Foundations of Education: The Essential Texts* by Susan Semel. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1033.pdf>

foundational in education faculties. Finally, this review shall comment upon the primary source readings that the book collects and organizes.

Dr. Semel begins her introduction to the text by demonstrating, with great skill, the necessity of scrutinizing contemporary education analytically. The foundations of education, which herein include history, sociology, politics, and philosophy of education, collectively offer educationists the tools for doing so effectively. As a collective unit, the foundations allow for careful study of the processes, relationships, and tensions between individuals, organizations, states, policies, and practices in education. We need the foundations, Semel argues, in order to understand and to maneuver the pedagogical systems that we study and in which we work. The author argues for the fundamental relevancy of the foundations, stating that they are: “An important lens for understanding the complexities of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) as well as myriad other complex issues and questions related to schooling” (p. 1).

Semel touches on a matter too frequently disregarded in discussions, primarily within political rhetoric, of school reform. Teacher education is the usual culprit of all that ails public education. Teachers, it follows, are not sufficiently knowledgeable of the subjects they will teach, largely because their preparation programs are insufficiently rigorous. Yet, as the author beautifully notes, most school reform initiatives fail not because of teachers or teacher education programs, but of greater and grander social and economic inequities. Initiatives such as NCLB, which are intended to address achievement gaps in learning, do not suffice, “as they fail to address myriad problems outside school such as poverty, which are associated with social class and racial differences in achievement” (2).

Semel also addresses the perils of depicting teacher education as teacher training. Concentration on teaching methods and content at the expense of the critical and evaluative contexts of education is narrow-minded. Education broadens; it does not narrow our understanding of what our aims are and how to achieve them. Again, it is upon the four pillars of history, politics, sociology, and philosophy of education, that a robust teacher education

program must be built: “The core principle of this reader is that the foundations of education must reemerge as a central building block of teacher and principal education, rather than as an after-thought as has been the case in the recent past” (2). Further, the four disciplines that constitute the foundations are, according to the Semel: “by no means separate and distinct perspectives” (2). This, I would like to argue, is where the author goes a bit too far. It is in large part due to the conflation of disciplines and the overconcentration of textbooks as a means of delivering crammed and overextended foundations textbooks that the foundations are, today, an after-thought.

While Dr. Semel concedes that the foundations are composed of “unique vantage points of the separate disciplines of history, political science, sociology, and philosophy,” she depicts these perspectives as being somehow distinct from their parent disciplines and united in a concern with the same central questions (2). This position reinforces the statement, quoted above, that the foundations are “*an important lens*” (1, my italics). Yet, *doing* history is not akin to *doing* philosophy; likewise, *thinking* sociologically cannot be conflated with *thinking* politically. Each discipline has its own questions, its own expected responses, its own sets of data, and its own methods. It is in doing history, not in reading history, that we understand history. The same must be said of each of the disciplines that we associate with foundations courses. The de facto foundation of teacher education is the collection of methods courses associated with each of the subjects teacher candidates will teach. These match up to the curriculum of schools, and they are, rightfully, criticized by Dr. Semel as reconfiguring teacher education as training in methods and content. These courses respond well to the demands by political and educational organizations to reform teacher education along lines that will prepare teachers more efficiently and more directly for the demands of teaching particular subjects in schools. With regards to accountability, foundations subjects can never demonstrate their immediate utility in the same way that, for instance, language or mathematics methods courses can. Attempts to demonstrate the pressing immediacy of foundations in teacher education will, consequently, fail; where the overarching principle of applying evidence-based practices within a pedagogical context dominated by accountability and efficiency

concerns, the methods courses allied to particular disciplines have prevailed. If the disciplines that Dr. Semel associates with the foundations—history, philosophy, sociology, and politics—can step out of the shadows and margins of teacher preparation, it is on the strength of their independent disciplinary approaches to questions in education.

Reading educational sociology and reflecting upon said readings is a poor substitute for practicing it and applying it to contemporary problems or contexts. Herein lies the core problem with foundations textbooks and, speaking more broadly, with textbooks in general. The coverage of questions, problems, dilemmas, and disputes in textbooks can only be, at best, superficial; at worst, textbooks are also banal and inaccurate. Dr. Semel's text is encouraging in many regards, because it features primary sources as readings, rather than summaries or shards and fragments of these. The readings themselves will be discussed shortly. Here, in the interest of summarizing the overarching critique of the foundations model, as well as the use of textbooks therein, it is important to note the banality of cramming four distinct disciplines into one single course of study. Foundations courses have made beggars of the historians, philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, and anthropologists of education. I speak here as an educational historian; we are fortunate in many Faculties and Departments of Education across Canada to have even one quarter of one course in which to explore with teacher candidates our approach to studying education. This course is too often set up in a large lecture hall, further complicating the pedagogical possibilities. We depend upon the textbooks, because we have so little time and so few resources available to us.

We should, rather, in the context of educational history—within the context of each discipline, different methods and resources need to be used—engage in meaningful historical inquiry. This would involve, to begin with, examination of sources, both primary and secondary, consideration of the historiography surrounding a particular topic, the construction of historical questions of interest to pursue, broad contemplation of context to frame the question, and the construction of historical understandings that enrich the present. Pedagogically, why would we teach educational history to future teachers

in ways that are distinct from how historians work and construct understanding? Foundations courses have the potential, if not the absolute necessity, of making what is foundational to each of the disciplines involved desiccate and flimsy.

Leaving aside for a moment the critique of foundations courses in teacher education, Dr. Semel's textbook is an exceptional textbook for teaching said courses. It nicely organizes core readings from each of the four disciplines within different sections, which is no doubt helpful for any teacher educator using the text to introduce, albeit briefly and potentially superficially, each of the subjects and articles. The teacher candidates using the textbook here have the opportunity to read John Dewey, rather than only reading about John Dewey. This is becoming too rare. The voice of Jane Roland Martin rings through loudly, and beautifully, as no cursory summary could aspire to emulate. We have a more healthy balance in this textbook of female and male voices in education, which is edifying. We lack voices outside of the United States. We lack voices outside of the twentieth century. We, regretfully, lack the voices of Black Americans such as Mary McLeod Bethune, which would enrich the text and broaden the conversation. Perhaps the text might be more suitably named a *History of American Foundations: Some Essential Texts*. These caveats aside, the selection of texts is expert. With only twelve readings, Dr. Semel covers a great deal of material and many pressing questions and debates. The essential texts included are as follows:

Part I: The History of Education

1. *Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others* (W.E.B. DuBois)
2. *The Progressive Movement in American Education: A Perspective* (Lawrence A. Cremin)
3. *Inside the System: The Character of Urban Schools, 1890-1940* (David B. Tyack)

Part II: The Politics of Education

1. *Broken Promises: School Reform in Retrospect* (Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis)
2. *What "Counts" as Educational Policy? Notes toward a New Paradigm* (Jean Anyon)
3. *The Democratic-Liberal Tradition Under Attack* (Diane Ravitch)

Part III: The Sociology of Education

1. *Functional and Conflict Theories of Educational Stratification* (Randall Collins)
2. *The Logic of Teacher Sentiments* (Dan Lortie)
3. *The Tracking Wars* (Jeannie Oaks)

Part IV: The Philosophy of Education

1. *Experience and Education* (John Dewey)
2. *Wide-Awakeness and the Moral Life* (Maxine Greene)
3. *The Ideal of the Educated Person* (Jane Roland Martin)

Questions for further discussion are included at the end of the textbook, but these are far from exhaustive, and a suggested list of further readings would be helpful. In the introductory essay, the author offers very clear explanations about why texts were included, but not why from an editorial standpoint, others were not. The reader may be left wondering why, for instance, Herbert Kliebard's monumental contributions to the history of education are not worthy of selection. Where is Kieran Egan's work on the importance of fostering enriching opportunities in education to evoke the imagination of learners? Is it not foundational for students to explore readings of Howard Gardner's contributions to educational thought, including the multiple intelligences model? Is it not essential that we encounter Jane Addams' work at Hull House in Chicago, or of the mass burning of Harold Rugg's textbook series in fits of red scare fear mongering?

I can only presume, as this point is not explicitly stated, that the selection of twelve texts has some practical purpose. Perhaps there are only between twelve or fourteen weeks in a term, and the book offers a practical resource for the many teacher educators charged with teaching foundations courses. Yet, one wonders why there are not double, or triple, the number of texts offered for readings. The inclusion of more texts would allow a teacher educator as well as teacher candidates, alternatively, to read more in the foundations, or to choose the readings that resonate most. We have a very good, but a rather limited, range of readings in this foundations textbook.

What is most problematic is that the text *Foundation in Education: The Essential Texts* works for and within the very model of teacher education that has suppressed and

marginalized its existence. Each of the disciplines enclosed within the foundations is meritorious of a prominent place in teacher education. For all the reasons that Dr. Semel mentions in her introduction, they are foundational to robust and comprehensive teacher education programs. Teachers should, as Semel states, know more than merely the *what* and the *how* of curriculum.

The foundations model, much like the social studies field in elementary education, developed out of progressivist interests in orienting, in an interdisciplinary fashion, studies upon pressing and contemporary questions in society, is flawed. It has led, across North America, to the decline and marginalization of each of the subjects and disciplines enclosed within. The foundations are a trap and we who, like Dr. Semel, have a fervent interest in the perseveration of history, philosophy, sociology, and political science—I dare add anthropology and psychology of education, which are not treated in this text but have been in other contexts affiliated with the foundations of education—as lenses to examine education, need to rely upon the disciplinary integrity of each discipline as a core argument in our cause.

The foundations model distorts and limits the scope of each subject involved therein. For instance, using history to examine the present is in actuality ahistorical and presentist. While that is not to deny the importance of being historically minded in the present, the affiliation of history with the foundations would see the discipline justify its existence primarily through a measure of its ability to elucidate present conditions. Such justification undermines the disciplinary aims and integrity of history and, it can be said, of the other affiliated subjects.

To conclude, the textbook *Foundations in Education: The Essential Texts* offers teacher candidates opportunities to read exciting and important primary texts, which are too often only referred to, from the fields of history, sociology, philosophy, and politics of education. These texts, because they are limited to only twelve, constitute only an introduction into these disciplines. It is highly recommended that the limitations of using readings as substitute for research and authentic learning tasks be discussed whenever textbooks are used in teacher

education. Teacher candidates are at peril of abandoning all the constructivist and pedagogically progressive ideas they believe in and adopt when pursuing a degree in education once the pressures of an overburdened curriculum in public schools sway them towards the use of textbooks in their own teaching. We, particularly those of us involved in the traditional foundations areas, ask of teacher candidates to be brave, and to challenge and resist the pedagogical status quo. We, too, must challenge ours. Foundations courses, as presently constituted, have the potential to do more harm than good to sociology, philosophy, politics, and history of education.

About the Reviewer

Theodore Michael Christou is Assistant Professor at the University of New Brunswick in the Faculty of Education. Theodore teaches social studies, history of education, and philosophy of education at the University. His research concerns two contexts, both concerning the history of educational ideas. One research project, titled *The Problem of Progressive Education*, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is examining at the roots of progressive education and its rhetoric in Atlantic Canada. A second project, funded by the Harriet McCain Foundation and the University of New Brunswick is titled *Paideia and Catechesis*; this project examines Byzantine monasticism and the interweaving of religious and humanist education in Byzantium. Theodore is a published poet, and editor of *Antistasis: A New Brunswick Education Journal*.



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