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This volume is a collection of twelve essays that focus on the historical, emergent, and sometimes fictional divide between theory and practice in education. As an edited collection, it is ambitious in its attempt to provide frameworks and questions to help determine possible frameworks toward the construction of future directions for education research, study, and practice. Developed for both educators and educational researchers and theorists, this book sits well as a Baedeker of the historical, cultural, theoretical, political, and social discussions that have permeated educational discourse and pedagogy for the past three hundred years.

The collection is divided into three sections, moving from historical conceptions of theories of education studies into the practice of understanding and theorizing education and finally centering on reconceptualizing and creating new agendas for educational theory. Each section contains three to five chapters on its proposed subject. Biesta, Allan, and Edwards, in order to frame and then, in the conclusion, reframe discussions from the text provide the introductory material and final chapter. In the introduction, the authors suggest that “[d]iscussions about theory have often been conducted in terms of unhelpful dichotomies such as theory versus practice, the theoretical versus the empirical, and theoretical versus useful” (1). This book attempts to create a “more precise analysis of the extent to which and the ways in which educational research and practice are actually over- or under-theorized and why and how this might matter” (2).

Section 1, “The Contextual Presence of Theory,” contains four chapters: “The Empirical and the Political 'Fact' of Theory in the Social and Educational Sciences” by Thomas S. Popkewitz; “Challenges of Educational Theory in the Age of Knowledge Capitalism” by Lisbeth Lundahl; “Between Universally Claimed Theory and Common Understanding: Theoretical Knowledge in Education” written by Daniel Tröhler and “The Changing Field of Educational Studies and the Task of Theorising Education” by Joannes Bellmann. Chapter 1 looks at how theory, or ‘styles of thought’, actually becomes an actor in education, influencing practice and social history. The work also considers the role of theory as historicized in order to allow us to unthink and then rethink the role of educational research itself (27). In Chapter 2, Lundahl argues that social and educational theory must be understood as history in order to understand the present neoliberalism that is having a universal impact on education. She questions the validity and usefulness of market-model of education. Daniel Tröhler, in Chapter 3, outlines a European history of educational theory and its links with the human soul that were legitimized in countries such as Germany through the religious, humanist and hermeneutic schools of thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The impact of psychology in the early twentieth century attempts then to provide a legitimacy and universalizing model of teacher education and student roles and outlines education as a place to solve
individual problems. Tröhler ultimately argues that by unraveling and understanding the various salvation-based roles educational theory has played we can find new ways of discussing and researching education. Chapter 4 focuses on the relationship between educational theory and practice in Germany through a discussion of what have come to be two competing terms, Erziehungswissenschaft and Bildungswissenschaft. ‘Bildung’ as a current trend, attempts to create an educational meta-theory focusing on scientific approaches to education. The earlier term, Erziehungswissenschaft, focused education more on the study of education as a unique discipline focused on children’s upbringing and their behaviours; Bildungswissenschaft suspends education as part of a broader interdisciplinary study. Bellmann sees part of the conflict between the terms in light of evidence-based educational theories that attempt to create a more scientific paradigm for education where it had previously been philosophical or social scientific in nature. Bellmann ultimately argues not for seeing education either as about science or scientific phenomena (as in Bildung) or as context-dependent behavioural discussions of children, but as the iteration of a third space that includes not just the child and the researcher (or teacher, etc.). This third is another viewer, one that shines light on the interaction of the two in the educational process. Bellmann suggests such theorizing might come to be thought of as a ‘relational turn’ and proposes a distinct field of the science of education – one that focuses on the social quality of education even more than just the social context (78).

Section 2, “The Practice of Doing Theory” includes three chapters: “Theories have Consequences, Don’t They? On the Moral Nature of Educational Theory and Research” written by Deborah Gallagher; “Bildung and Educational Language: Talking of ‘the Self’ in Anglo-American Education” by Norm Friesen and “On the Theoretical Limits of Education” by Alexander M. Sidorkin. In Chapter 5, Gallagher critiques the scientistic nature of current educational research, arguing that it forgoes important questions about the moral and political contexts of education. She also points out the disturbing binary of overly scientific studies losing all relevance in educational practice in comparison to the overly context-dependent qualitative studies that have no ability to provide useful information more generally. She draws on anti-
foundationalist theory to suggest, almost as Bellmann does, that traditional binary lines between teacher and researcher need to be blurred and made more relational. Chapter 6 is concerned with ‘the self’ and compares concepts of self as they relate to the foundations of education. The contrasting roles of John Dewey and Edward Thorndike are discussed in relationship to the language used to discuss the self in education and how the way we speak about the self needs to be rethought and reshaped to reflect current cultural circumstances in education. Many concepts are discussed but most critiqued is the idea that we can create useful categories such as ‘good’ or ‘poor’ when we talk about the self in education. The final chapter in this section, Chapter 7, by Alexander Sidorkin, discusses quite reasonably what the limits of education and or educational reform efforts might be. He firmly suggests that change in education may well be slow or small simply because there is little that can be done with an educational model that reflects a need for control, mass learning, and human achievement. Sidorkin draws a comparison between mass and elite schooling and suggests some important differences (such as elite students’ firm belief that their private education will lead to well paying jobs and successful lives versus many mass schooled children’s belief that they would be better off doing other things) that exist in the traditional school model. These limitations might be breached by such efforts as paying children to go to school or to simply maintain the status quo rather than spending resources on what may turn out to be impossible improvement.

Section 3, “Refractions on and Agendas for Theory” includes five chapters: “Educational Theory and the Practice of Critique” by Robin Usher and Anna Anderson; “The Excess of Theory: On the Functions of Educational Theory in Apparent Reality” written by Tomasz Szkudlarek; “Speaking Educationally about Teacher Education by Anne M. Phelan; “Teaching Theories” by Lynn Fendler and “Towards an Agenda for Theoretical Interventions in Education” by Julie Allan, Richard Edwards and Gert Biesta. Chapter 8 looks at the task of understanding educational practice as an applied theory. The authors look to Foucault’s concept of genealogy as a way to successfully fill that space of applied theory in contrast to popular methods of using critical theory in order to enact change in education. Their argument is that
critical theory takes a too powerful position in research and does not go far enough in defining the assumptions and power relations inherent in theoretical research projects. In Chapter 9, Szkudlarek presents a powerful suggestion that theory might undermine education because it contributes to an imbalance of power. As Usher and Anderson suggested, Szkudlarek argues that theory can make the political and powerful seem benign or too universalized to contain important implications for those involved. Szkudlarek suggests that language and ontological processes be made more clear, that discourse should take into account the way that theory is always a powerful construction of a reality that doesn’t really exist and that must ignore and occlude in order to appear organized and coherent. Chapter 10 presents a deceptively simple premise, that all educational research is contextually grounded. Looking specifically at historical and cultural practices in teacher education, Phelan points out the ways that many teacher education programs have become unnecessarily prescriptive and market-oriented and don’t allow teacher candidates to have the freedom of individual understanding to really consider what they are becoming. Phelan sees that this can be found in the tension between what is and is not in teacher education and in the freedom to ask difficult questions about education rather than endlessly seeking out methods of improvement. Fendler, in Chapter 11, also creates a deceptively simple task for her paper, and that is to consider what teaching means, as opposed to what teaching might mean in the future. Her argument is that we need to continually blur these boundaries in order to make the assumptions in the question as explicit as possible. She maps out some possible ways of considering the question through the use of an analytical map, a book called *Models of Teaching* that has gone through eight editions in the US since 1972. By looking at the types of theories and goals of theories throughout the almost forty-years of its publishing history, Fendler tries to problematize what is missing from what is popular and what we can learn from looking not just at what is but also at what isn’t in educational research.

In the concluding chapter, Chapter 12, Biesta, Allan, and Edwards point out some threads that weave throughout the volume (the first in the series from Routledge titled “Theorizing Education”). They see these as critical, political, and generative (198). One of the most apparent
threads of discussion in the volume is the need to make assumptions explicit when theorizing education – this has critical, political, and generative implications. Ignoring our assumptions weakens our critical position because researchers take on paternalistic and deterministic roles. It is political because not discussing assumptions means history and contexts are often left out. Finally, it is generative because a discussion of assumptions has not often been part of the educational realm. Part of this, for many of the authors, has to do with the language that is used to talk about education and who the audience is for the work in the first place. If language is a key challenge, many of its solutions lie not necessarily in clarifying that language but in problematizing it, historicizing it, and making it more flexible. Some of the authors in this text see the reason for doing this as linked to the theoretical problem of evidence-based strategies for educational theory and the resulting political problems of using education merely as a means of ‘control’ rather than as a means of ‘emancipation,’ – a concept some of the volume’s authors question from both sides.

As a discipline, many of the volume’s authors try to tease out, through a historical lens, why education is either seen as not having a theoretical foundation or as one that takes its theoretical foundations from other disciplines (most notable psychology and social science). It is in this discussion that various international histories and perspectives show clearly the way that education has been developed differently in different spaces. Graduate students reading the volume will see made manifest the divide between foundationalist and anti-foundationalist approaches to educational psychology and the move from interpretive frameworks in education towards critical and post-critical theory. Some authors still tend toward discussions of Dewey while critical theorists discuss the role of emancipator educational research. Those interested in post-critical theories look to Foucault primarily to find new ways of considering the tension between education as a form of control as opposed to one of finding the self.

But this volume does look for ways to move forward, even if it is through further dialogue on educational questions from a more international framework than researchers might be used to. Even with the differences between, say, German humanist educational history and North American
understanding of a Christian foundation to education, many current challenges in the formulation of educational theory seem to move in general categories: the politicization of school reform, the business model of education, the move toward evidence-based research methods, the role of technology and how it impacts the role of the teacher. As the world becomes more globalized, the writing and research put forward by educational theorists and influential bodies such as the OECD will impact even those countries that seem farthest away from dealing with such questions.

About the Reviewer

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