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Identity is complex, but as a member of many dominant groups, I believe it is worth stating and naming some of my multiple identities and not take them for granted. If I am not aware of the multiple roles I occupy, and my relationship with those I study, I risk marginalizing those I study (Harry, 1996). As a white, able-bodied, heterosexual male who grew up in a financially stable household, I do not have first hand experience of going to school while being poor. However, my experience as US Peace Corps volunteer, living in rural Philippines for 2 years and then working as a educator near the Navajo reservation in Northwest New Mexico for the past 6 years.

has impacted my views on poverty and education tremendously. I read this book having already read pieces that critiqued deficit views of poverty and approached education and poverty from a more asset-based view (Gorski, 2013; Lindsey, Karns & Myatt, 2010; Sapo & Lensmire, 2009, Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008). This book adds to the discussion greatly, as it also addresses the slippery idea of class and the inevitable inequality and exploitation that exists as a byproduct of capitalism. Hopefully, my position in many dominant identity groups will not hinder the discussion on poverty and education, but instead, as Tatum (2013) describes, help build the alliances needed to address and move towards solving the issue.

Poverty impacts schooling. Period. While there may be few who would argue that, Smyth and Wrigley (2013) in their text examine many of the explanations revolving around that statement, and eloquently describe how people end up in poverty, not as a matter of choice, but as the result of a system that demands this type of stratification. Unfortunately, there are a number of theories regarding class, poverty, and schooling that are quite harmful, (most notably, Payne, 1996) and the authors go to great lengths not only to show how those theories misconstrue poverty and class in general (and especially those who live in it), in essence blaming them for their poverty, but also offer more asset-based ideas on how we might address the idea of schooling (and poverty in general) amidst the very real issue of poverty many students and families are forced to deal with on a daily basis. Smyth and Wrigley’s identification of deficit-based thinking models and theories and their ability to humanize people and address class, poverty, and school from an asset-based model of thinking was perhaps my favorite on-going theme throughout the text. While the authors are Australian, I did not find it as an American to be problematic, since issues of class and poverty are not specific to my country, and it was also refreshing to read from a point of view outside of America.

As someone interested and invested in ideas of poverty and school, I was drawn to this book perhaps more than others with a more passing interest, and found myself circling and high-lighting many passages throughout as they reaffirmed much of what I thought and believed. To
be honest, in my case it was true that the authors were preaching to the choir for almost the entirety of the book. With that in mind, Smyth and Wrigley do a fantastic job of slowly scaffolding their argument around the concept of what class and poverty really are (and what they are not) and how students, families, communities, teachers, and schools are impacted by those things, that I found myself exclaiming “Yes!” and “Of course!” quite often throughout the book. Those with a more limited exposure to these transformative ideas about poverty shared by the authors might find some of the material challenging, as the authors do confront many normative ideas and stereotypes about what class and poverty are.

It is helpful to outline the book’s layout for those who are interested in reading the full text, which I which I highly recommend. The book is divided into 3 parts. The first part (“Understanding Class and Poverty”), contains chapter 1 (“Making sense of class) and chapter 2 (“Understanding Poverty in the Twenty-First Century”), and provides a solid framework of class and poverty that helps the reader find grounding for the arguments in the rest of the text. In short, the authors describe poverty as the result of an economic system and that those who live in poverty are not deficient, regardless of prevailing media stereotypes.

Part 2 (“Blaming Individuals, Families, and Communities”) contains four chapters. Chapter 3 (“Material Poverty and ‘Problem’ Neighborhoods”), chapter 4 (“Blaming Individuals and Blaming Their Genes”), chapter 5 (“Speaking the Wrong Language”), and chapter 6 (“Aspirations and ‘Cultures of Poverty’”) all address the pervasive ideas that those in poverty are in some way lacking and are in some way or another deficient, and continue to refute the idea that kids, families, and communities are to blame for poverty. Part 3 (“The Role of the School”) digs into how educators might address the issue of poverty both inside and outside of the classroom in three chapters, while continuing to counter the calls for blame by media and politicians being pressed onto educators and schools; chapter 7 (“Neoliberal School Reform: Blaming Teachers, Blaming Schools”), chapter 8 (“Improving Schools or Transforming Them: The Politics of Social Justice”) and chapter 9 (“Poor Kids Need Rich Teaching”) focus the discussion on poverty as it relates to school and education. The authors conclude the book with some theories of good practice, which can
summarized succinctly with their words, “we need to do school differently!” (p. 195).

I do not want to diminish in any way the amount of work and scholarship put forth by the authors, and there is certainly much more to the book than this short list, but these are the bullet points I came away as an educator interested in poverty:

1. People who are poor are not deficient.
2. People who are poor are not stupid
3. Parents want good things for their children, even if they are poor
4. Just because someone is poor does not mean they lack ambition
5. We need to listen to and respect the voices of people who are poor.
6. We need to change the way we do school

I commend the authors for their comprehensive look at class and poverty and how they impact schooling, and I appreciate their insights as to how they believe educators should best address the issue. Perhaps most important for educators to realize from this text is that schools do not operate in isolation, but exist within an economic system that produces poverty. Educators are not going to “fix” (a deficit-type term) students, families, or communities, but should see them as possessing what González, Moll, & Amanti (2005), term ‘funds of knowledge’ who bring important knowledge and skills to any discussion, and see poverty for what it is—a systematic problem that requires social activism inside and outside of the classroom to overcome.

References


About the Reviewer

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