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Andrew Wilkins

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ORCID

0000-0002-4486-8034

Short bio

Andrew Wilkins is Reader in Education at Goldsmiths, University of London. He writes about education policy and governance and governing relations with a focus on privatisation management, meta-governance, attraction and soft governing, risk responsibility, expert administration, regulated participation, and democratic cultures. His recent books include Modernising School Governance (Routledge 2016) and Education Governance and Social Theory (Bloomsbury 2018).

Review of Social Theory and Education Research by Mark Murphy (ed.), by Andrew Wilkins

In this very timely, accessible and resourceful book editor Mark Murphy brings together experienced researchers to consider how and why social theory is relevant to our understandings of contemporary education. The combination of expert commentary, practical advice, considered prose and empirical casework will prove invaluable to practitioners and students interesting in applying theory and philosophy to education (and non-education) research. (In fact, many of the analytical frameworks explored in this book will be particularly useful to empirical studies of health, social care, local government, and so forth). A unique feature of the book (one which will appeal enormously to those intimated by dense, philosophical texts) is the focus on rendering complex ideas accessible and providing critical skills to help guide education research design, development and evaluation.

Social Theory and Education Research is divided into four sections. Each section consists of three chapters dedicated to a particular philosopher/social theorist: Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida. The first chapter of each section situates each theorist historically, intellectually and culturally, in addition to providing a useful summary of key concepts. The remaining two chapters in each section are more empirically driven and evidence the use of theory for framing research ethics, data collection and analysis. The book is packaged as a textbook, presumably with a target audience of practitioners and entry-level and advanced students. The

empirical-based sections therefore could have been strengthened with the addition of discussion questions and boxed examples. The benefit of doing so would have been some reflective practice for the reader.

The first section of the book focuses on Michel Foucault. By way of Foucault's classic text Discipline and Punish (1977) Allen offers an accessible account of Foucault's concept of 'panopticism': the process by which subjects are governed through a field of disciplinary technologies and normalizing discourses. In the following chapter Hope fleshes out the concept of 'panopticism' through empirical casework to show the impact of school-based surveillance practices (information systems, attendance databases, timetables, architecture) on students' behaviour. In the final chapter Fejes links the practice of reflective diary writing among care workers to a type of ontology or technology of the self; a relation or field of power in which confession constitutes the very mode for self-improvement.

The second section focuses on Habermas. Lovat begins with an instructive and accessible discussion of Habermas' distinction between knowledge that is technical in scope and which impels instrumental, 'empirical analytic' forms of knowing/learning; knowledge which is shaped by the search for meaning, and which in turn demands 'historical/hermeneutic' forms of knowing/learning; and knowledge driven by the need for emancipation and which necessitates the utility of 'critical' or 'self-reflective' forms of knowing/learning (pp. 71-72). In the following chapter Murphy and Skillen

skilfully draw on these insights to trace the impact and limitations of bureaucracy and accountability (audit, inspection, quality assurance mechanisms, benchmarks, target setting) which they align with insidious forms of political regulation that threaten the professional integrity of public sector organization. Specifically, Murphy and Skillen utilize Habermas' theory of communicative action – the need for dialogue between actors and goal-oriented, strategic action supported by rational deliberation – to highlight 'the reaches and limits of bureaucratic regulation in modern liberal democracies' (p. 85). In the final chapter to this section Sandberg applies Habermas' theory of communicative action to an investigation of health care assistant's understanding of RPL (recognition of prior learning) assessment interviews. In a vein similar to Murphy and Skillen, Sandberg suggests that the closures and hierarchies inherent to these assessments might be overcome through the application of dialogue and communicative action.

The third section (somewhat inevitably) covers the work of Bourdieu. My only gripe with this section of the book is the huge amount of education research already committed to the application of Bourdieu's theories (consider the sub-discipline sociology of education with its enclave of card-carrying Bourdieuians). Perhaps this section of the book may have been better utilized as a space for discussing the theories and application of Gilles Deleuze, Judith Butler, Zygmunt Bauman or Valerie Walkerdine, to name a few. Rawolle and Lingard begin the section however with a very accessible account detailing Bourdieu's key concepts of field, habitus and capital and discuss their value for better understanding the reproduction of social structures and inequalities. In the following chapter

Green demonstrates the utility of these concepts by mapping the interaction between structure, practice and agency in the context different religious-sponsored academies. In the final chapter Kleanthous utilizes similar concepts to explore of the impact of parental influence on Cypriot students' dispositions toward studying at higher education institutions.

The final section of the book is on Derrida and by far the most difficult to navigate. However, such difficulty might be considered inevitable for any reader and symptomatic of Derrida's style ('deconstruction'). Derrida's writings are notoriously dense, for example, and by Derrida's own admission, deconstruction is not strictly a method for analysis. On this account, the authors of this section should be commended for making accessible the seemingly incomprehensible. The first chapter in this section sees Irwin cut through the denseness of Derrida's texts to capture the essence and emancipatory promise of his work. Irwin characterizes deconstruction as a means of eschewing any kind of complete or stable understanding. In the tradition of critical theory which makes contradiction the object of investigation, Irwin aligns deconstruction with indeterminacy, uncertainty, contestability and the incommensurability of values, the promise of which is new ethical and political imaginaries and terrain. In the next chapter Winter usefully applies deconstruction to question the democratic, inclusive and dialogical content/performances of pedagogical practices – how much of what students learn and engage with is a result of reflexivity, for example? In the final chapter Mercieca applies deconstruction to a consideration of teachers-students reflective writings and, in true Derridean style, considers how much of autobiographical writing (commonly understood

as a reflective practice through which to better understand, even improve, the conduct of the self) invites closure and jettisons possibilities for alterity. The idea being that autobiographical/reflexive writing is reductionist and flat – it involves inscribing meaning through already parcelled discourses (socially circulating norms, language, modes of signification, etc.).

Social Theory and Education Research serves as an important reminder that theory and philosophy are not exclusively solipsist activities bound by armchair rumination, contemplation and detachment from 'reality'. Theory and philosophy offer a means of engaging the world critically and for thinking through and beyond superstition, myths and false oppositions; ideologies disguised and taken for granted as given, ahistorical and unchangeable, for example. Equally important Social Theory and Education Research demonstrates that theory and philosophy enable individuals and groups to impact their relations to power; to resist the histories, governmentalities, technologies, ontologies, ethics, politics and epistemologies that work to structure social existence, identity and our relations to each other.