

BOOK REVIEWS

Bringing knowledge back in: from social constructivism to social realism in the sociology of education, by Michael F. D. Young, London and New York, Routledge, 2008, 247pp., £22.99 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-415-32121-1

Michael Young develops in this book a carefully crafted, thought-provoking and challenging argument for adopting a position of social realism rather than social constructivism in the sociology of education. The choice of Francis Bacon's reflection on the enigmatic and compelling nature of truth itself, and the demanding dimensions of human beings' search for and struggle with their understandings of truth, provides an apposite epigraph for this book.

The tension identified by the philosopher Bernard Williams in his book *Truth and truthfulness* (2002), between the idea of truth and being truthful, recurs and is illustrated in an illuminating way throughout the book from both theoretical and practical perspectives. The implications for the sociology of knowledge of a tendency towards truthfulness and against the idea of truth, and of Williams' own position that accepting a notion of truth is the necessary condition for a genuine commitment to truthfulness, are thoroughly investigated through the work of a wide selection of theorists who occupy different positions on the spectrum between social constructivism and social realism. In his evocation of what he terms 'the heady days of the 1970s' (205), Young brings vividly to life a battle of ideas whose repercussions are still alive and strongly felt today, despite the fact that a systematic study of the sociology of education is rarely included on contemporary programmes of initial teacher education and professional development.

The book is based on a series of papers, and its tone is ambitious in that it seeks to relate and integrate discourses from specialist literatures that are not traditionally connected. The author acknowledges in the introduction (xvii) that he runs the risk of irritating some readers because of this, but for me the benefits outweigh any disadvantages.

Through a nuanced critique of voice discourses, *Bringing knowledge back in* engages not only with different philosophical and social constructions and understandings of what and how authentic knowledge is constituted and recognized, but also with the implications of these diverse perspectives for policy-makers and educational researchers, and in particular for learners and teachers seeking to translate the concept of the curriculum into pedagogical decisions and practices. The author demonstrates that educational theories always imply a theory of knowledge: the possibilities and opportunities as well as the dilemmas and conflicts presented by different interpretations of the meaning of the curriculum are communicated by revealing their roots in the history of ideas, and contextualized and illustrated through a range of examples from educational settings in the UK and South Africa.

The book is structured into two parts, *Theoretical issues* and *Applied studies*. In part one, Young's cogent and detailed analysis of seminal theoretical work in the field of epistemology is presented in a clear and accessible style that will be illuminating and informative for both specialists and non-specialists in the sociology of education alike. In chapters three and four he focuses in depth on the thinking of Emile Durkheim and Lev Vygotsky in relation to their theories about the differentiation of knowledge, and demonstrates through comparing and contrasting the

implications of their work the crucial and continuing importance of these theories for the curriculum. Young guides the reader through a wide-ranging and comprehensive consideration of the debates and controversies which Durkheim's and Vygotsky's work has inspired among their supporters and opponents. Of particular value in the course of the author's commentary are the clarifying connections he establishes with the thinking of philosophers such as Hegel, Dewey, Cassirer, Ilyenkov and Williams.

The positioning of the theoretical chapters first is helpful for tackling the second part of the book. The theoretical exposition of the ideas and principles underlying the curriculum continues to resonate, and enables the reader to bring a complex conceptual framework to bear on the consideration of, for example, the professional education and development of further education college staff in South Africa; issues relating to the recognition of prior learning in adult education; professional knowledge and the formation of identity; or the role of contrasting approaches to qualifications in educational reform.

The presence of the late Basil Bernstein pervades this book both intellectually and personally. The long relationship between the author and Bernstein is movingly described in a personal appreciation in the Endword, and the retrospective autobiographical strand in the writing allows readers to trace the evolution of the author's own thinking in relation to Bernstein's work. Both the theoretical and applied chapters provide an absorbing insight into Young's own intellectual journey in the sociology of education as he moved away from his earlier social constructivist perspective of viewing knowledge and the curriculum, and developed a new stance of social realism.

Reference

Williams, B. 2002. *Truth and truthfulness: An essay in genealogy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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An Atlantic crossing? The work of the international examination inquiry, its researchers, methods and influence, edited by Martin Lawn, Oxford, Symposium Books, 2008, 206pp., £24 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-873927-26-7

The International Examination Inquiry (IEI) has, as Martin Lawn writes in his introduction to this edited volume, almost been forgotten. Yet, from 1931, 'it was a well-funded scientific project, operating over seven years, which attracted key world figures in educational research and undertook significant exchanges of data and experiment' (7). In the chapters that follow, European researchers examine the IEI from the perspective of eight of the nine countries associated with the Inquiry. England, France, Germany, Scotland and Switzerland participated from the outset, together with the Nordic countries of Finland, Norway and Sweden, which joined later. There is, unfortunately, no chapter on the US, which was also active from the beginning of the IEI.

Across North America and Western Europe, the start of the 1930s was characterized by discussion about the possibilities for expanding secondary education beyond elite groups. The spotlight also naturally fell upon the purposes of examinations. Was their principal function to serve as a mechanism for secondary school selection? Could they be used more directly for