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Harry Daniels. Hugh Lauder & Jill Porter (2009) Editors Knowledge, Values and Educational Policy. London Routledge.

Section 3 Diversity and Equity

Introduction

Jill Porter

This section asks the overall question of how we account for difference. What is the role of education with respect to issues of equity and diversity? The six chapters in this section reveal the dangers of adopting a single stance to provide accounts of difference that inform teaching and educational research. Taken in turn they provide a set of alternative lenses through which to consider issues of culture, gender, difficulties in learning and disability. The section starts with a chapter by Kris Gutierrez who asks the important question “how do we go about understanding the role of culture in learning”? She argues that too often culture is seen wholly with respect to ethnicity or race, resulting in a the creation of a sense of homogeneity, over-emphasizing static characteristics of a group without looking at the history of changes and the embedded nature of practices within activities. As a result there has been a tendency to use norms based on American and European middle class measures of learning, adopting a single approach to intervention and ascribing one style of learning to entire groups. Taking a socio cultural historical understanding, the study of culture is presented as a dynamic study of patterns, looking closely at people’s participation in activities that are part of their cultural community, reflecting on traditions as well as changes across generations. She provides an example of the ways in which changes in one element of societal practice has a myriad of interrelated changes in other aspects of daily life.

Embedding education in the framework of a global economy Rassool, in the next chapter, looks at the way we understand issues of diversity and equity given ongoing economic, political and technological change and the “maelstrom of contemporary people flows”. She reminds us that worldwide, systems are marked by interconnectedness in part due to the role of key agencies (The World Bank, UNESCO and the World Trade organisation) in defining transnational policy frameworks policy which in turn shapes educational policies, structures and provisions. As she argues, education has an enhanced place and significance in determining national economies and is seen as a way of reducing poverty. However the potency of these transnational frameworks is reduced by the lack of resources and access to teacher training in many developing countries. She draws on the concept of a learning ecology rather than that of multicultural education to analyse and interpret the changes taking place and to provide a sense of the complexity, dynamic, multi-layered nature of understanding the impact of the educational experiences on children from transmigratory groups. How do we best accommodate children who may not have experienced school before, who may have had classes under the trees and who have experienced psychological trauma and uncertain identity in their migration to find a country that can and will accommodate them ? She charts the situation of Somali children, some of who will have moved across countries without parents or relatives in the belief that their life chances especially with a view to education will be improved

In the following chapter we turn to issues of gender, the term referring to a social construction rather than a biological state. Dillabough sets out to examine the theoretical

stances adopted in the study of gender and the implications this has had for research. She outlines the early research into the ways in which education served to reproduce stratifications seen elsewhere in society, ways in which masculine “rationality and female subservience” were maintained through schooling. Research then diversified with a growing emphasis on gender identity with recognition of its shifting nature and as a consequence the possibility of multiple positions. She explores four themes in her chapter: the complexity of identity given competing and contradictory experiences in school that suggests we need to view gender as more “permeable and changing” than we have before; the importance of culture and family as exposed through studies of gender and ethnicity research; the role of market forces in contributing to social inequalities; and theories of social change that have directed research to looking at the often contradictory messages and the transformations in gender relations. In short this chapter highlights some of the ways in which our understanding of gender and gender identity has developed from simple constructions around issues of discrimination to recognition of the shifting and complex nature of gender identity and the contributions of schooling to these changes.

In contrast to the previous chapters which have illustrated the need for a multi-layered understanding of issues of difference, Saljo and Horne illustrate the ways in which professionals within a particular institution can give rise to particular accounts of difference that lead to a narrowing and almost deterministic account. This chapter illustrates a circular relationship in the way difficulties are described and categorised and used to access resources. These socially constructed categories are seen by the authors to enable a shared understanding and underpin the process of decision-making in schools. Historically, Sweden like other countries have seen in turn an emergence of different categories reflecting societal concerns about the religious and moral, the social and familial and the biomedical. The focus of this chapter is how these categories are introduced and talked about amongst different professional team members using case studies of children who are assigned a label of attention deficit disorder or minimal brain dysfunction. An analysis of the meetings over the course of a year illustrate the speed with which consensus is reached as to the cause of the child’s difficulty in the face of quite contradictory descriptions of behaviour taken without reference to context or teacher intervention. This illustrates the need for professionals to recognize the possibility of other explanations to account for difference.

In a chapter with a focus on difficulties in learning, Florian and Kershner take a rather different approach to others in this section by arguing for commonalities rather than difference with the adoption of inclusive pedagogies. Instead of adopting specialist pedagogies they advocate the need to build on approaches that are generally available with a recognition that (all) students have “an open-ended potential for learning”. They argue for multimodal responses using combined strategies that promote participation in shared (rather than different) purposeful learning where activities are meaningful and relevant to all students. They contrast this to the recipe like approach that can be advocated in response to particular types of need. Instead teachers are called on to become explicit in their strategic responses when students encounter difficulties gaining knowledge through “reflective practice and tinkering”. For the novice teacher this may be demanding and the authors cite research to suggest that such practice is best sustained where organisational aspects of the school, together with resourcing are supportive of inclusive practices.

While Kershner and Florian might be described as adopting a social model in which disability is seen to result from the barriers that schools and society present, Shakespeare argues against the narrowness of rigidly adopting a single view or model and in particular the inappropriateness of reducing impairment to a socially constructed state. He recognizes from his own perspective as a disabled activist that there is an “experiential reality” that shouldn’t be denied. Instead he argues for a holistic understanding of the interaction between the individual including their personality, qualities and abilities as well as the impairment and the external context in which they find themselves which in turn reflects a wider set of cultural and societal values. He accuses others of not recognizing the continuum of impairment or of differences that arise from a condition that is static compared to one which is variable. In contrast to the chapter by Kershner and Florian he uses the term integration to reflect an argument of *shared* responsibilities between the individual and society- it taking “two to tango”. For him disability is more complex than issues of equity arising from gender or race because in his words it is intrinsically “connected to disadvantage”. This is a strong chapter on which to end this section and to lead us to ask again: How do we account for difference? How are these accounts reflected in our practices, both as an individual and as an institution?