

Sharon Gewirtz, Alan Cribb, *Understanding Education. A Sociological Perspective*,  
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According to the authors of *Understanding Education*,

the sociology of education has made a very important contribution to the understanding of social and educational values and how they are produced, allocated and experienced. In other words, sociology has both descriptive/explanatory and normative agenda (emphasis by MZ). (p. vi)

This excerpt contains the authors' credo around which they structured their book and its contents. Their intention was to introduce readers into the sociology of education but also to present this subdiscipline from the perspective of values. Thus, the volume does not only offer an overview of essential concepts and problems in the sociology of education but also imposes authors' vision of what this branch of sociology should stand for. The key theme in the sociology of education centres around development and balancing of educational inequalities. Therefore, it is forced to take a normative stance and to determine what is good, just or desirable. Oftentimes, it is not obvious what such an unambiguous stance should be as discussions reveal dilemmas around divergent values professed by people from various cultures and social groups, and different hierarchies of values. By analysing educational problems sociologists of education become involved into debates on practical and political solutions. Therefore, "Sociology of education [...] is a subject full of controversy and contestation [...]" (p. 21). Sociologists constantly have to ask about the nature of knowledge they have, their goals and social consequences. The sociology of education should be, to a very large extent, a reflexive discipline.

Already in the first chapter Gewirtz and Cribb present various controversies and dilemmas faced by scholars researching education processes. They use some examples to show the conflict between official knowledge transmitted in recognised institutions and individuals' interests and values. This chapter also uses the pattern around which the remaining sections of the book are structured. When presenting theories and directions in the sociology of education, the authors use examples from relevant studies. This is an excellent didactic approach: various theoretical issues are presented to readers through specific research questions operationalising those issues.

By showing real-life situations and research dilemmas the book becomes interesting rather than fatiguing, which is often the case with many other handbook publications.

The book consists of two parts. Part I offers a general introduction into the sociology of education, presenting its key theorists and major concepts. Part II analyses four key themes: social reproduction, dilemmas associated with constructing curricula, identity processes and factors determining teachers' positions. The eighth chapter at the end elaborates on, and summarises, the authors' key idea: sociology of education as a reflexive discipline.

Part I, which presents key strands and scholars of this branch of sociology, consists of two chapters. The first one outlines classic theories whereas the second one talks about modern concepts. Each consists of a brief description followed by a summary of a seminal work which the authors consider representative for a particular line of inquiry. The first chapter focuses on two classic theories. It begins with structural functionalism and, as an example, summarises a paper by Talcott Parsons "The School Class as a Social System" (1959). This is followed by a description of symbolic interactionism and a summary of Howard S. Becker's "The teacher in the authority system of the public school" (1953). These sample papers are used by the authors to explain essential differences between the two theories, stressing the dominant role of structure (Parsons) and the role of the actor (teacher) in creating or contesting the schooling system (Becker). Gewirtz and Cribb also highlight the differences between the two works in terms of method and style, with Parsons' abstract deliberations and Becker's empirically-based inferences (teacher interviews). By contrasting the two approaches, Gewirtz and Cribb emphasise that most researchers analyse mutual connections between structure and action as well as determinism and freedom of social actors, whereas differences between those approaches often boil down to different focal points.

The next two strands of research discussed at length in the book are Marxism (with researchers and theorists influenced by this strands) and the New Sociology of Education. When discussing Marxist inspirations, Gewirtz and Cribb identify the structural and, at the same time, determinist strand as well as a strand focused on human activity and creativity. The former is represented by Bowles and Gintis *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), whereas the other is illustrated by invoking *Learning to Labour* (1977), a book by Paul Willis, inspired by Antonio Gramsci. Added to the two neo-Marxist concepts is another one, highlighting the role of the state forming education systems. In this case Roger Dale's *Education and the Capitalist State* (1981) is used as an example. Relying on works by authors such as Clauss Offe, Dale does not perceive the state as a simple tool in the hands of the propertied class. With its autonomous position, the state can become a mediator between interests of various groups, which hampers destructive trends in the capitalist system and promotes its stabilisation.

The New Sociology of Education is a strand that came into being in early 1970s, with a particular focus on analysing school curricula and school pedagogies as categories that are socially constructed and, as such, express various interests and consider-

ations rather than objective values and transmission of uncontested knowledge. Scholars from this strand combine macro and micro level analysis and analyse the meaning of structures as well as social actors and their practices. One prominent scholar here was Basil Bernstein, one of the founders and ideologists of the NSE. Gewirtz and Cribb summarise key ideas from his paper 'On the classification and framing of educational knowledge' which indicate that "different types of curricula create different pedagogic possibilities and have different implications for educational identities, forms of consciousness and social relationships." The book classifies Pierre Bourdieu in the same strand, highlighting the similarities between his thinking and some of Bernstein's concepts<sup>1</sup> and invoking Bourdieu's well-known book written with Jean-Claude Passeron: *Reproduction in Education. Society and Culture* (1977). The reproduction of educational inequalities does not happen only through "formal selection mechanisms and assessment practices of educational institutions but by the self-selective and self-exclusionary choices that are product of our habitus."

The subsequent chapter presents most recent trends in research on educational processes. Inequalities are analysed not only with reference to status but, first and foremost, gender and race. The authors give an overview of various lines of feminist research, from moderate-liberal to critical. Liberal feminism is illustrated by Eileen Byrne's *Women and Education* (1978). Byrne writes that schools are institutions which fossilise inequalities and postulates that teachers should undergo special awareness training and that school curricula should be redefined to present women in roles other than those of mothers and wives. A collective volume was chosen as an illustration of critical feminism: *Learning to Lose: Sexism and Education* edited by Dale Spender and Elisabeth Sarah. The first edition of 1980 postulates a radical change in schooling and its underlying values: competition, individualism and hierarchies. Even more radical in its message is another edition of this work, published in 1988, which includes articles on abuse of lesbians and black female students. Black feminism also has a critical dimension where the writings of white feminists are discredited and accused of focusing on problems of relatively small group of women, privileged by their skin colour. According to critical black feminists, it is most pressing to analyse the position of discriminated non-white women.

Critical race theory (CRT) is another contemporary strand of research presented in the book. It attempts to unmask racism in structures, institutions and interpersonal relations. indicative of this movement is the article by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate entitled "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education" (1995). It talks about racism which can still be found in the American society, with race as the key factor underlying discrimination. Multi-cultural education programmes which are being launched are superficial: they teach about customs, foods and clothing but not about discrimination. The current educational policy supporting school choice introduces schooling vouchers but intensifies segregation of schools and contributes to deterioration of teaching/learning conditions for non-white population.

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<sup>1</sup> P. Bourdieu himself, convinced about the autonomous nature of his thinking, would probably never agree to his ideas being classified in this way.

In conclusion, the chapter mentions the influence of post-structuralist thinking on the sociology of education and illustrates it by invoking Valerie Walkerdine's *Sex, Power and Pedagogy* (1981). Walkerdine challenges feminist views and writes that enduring divisions may be confusing and prevent people from noticing reality. For instance, teachers are not always oppressive and children are not always passive and subject to teachers' authority. Sometimes it is the teacher who is under children's pressure and incapacitated by the rules of 'progressive pedagogy'. An individual's position is not determined by the fact that someone is a child, a woman, a man etc. but it is liquid and depends on their personality, situation, professed ideas etc.

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Part II of the book, called "Key Themes", illustrates how concepts and theories presented in Part I may be applied to themes such as social reproduction, curriculum policies, identity or teachers' positions.

The chapter about social reproduction analyses changes in views expressed by sociologists concerning the social foundation of educational inequalities and a connection between rivalling interpretations with competing value systems. Authors also invoke recent research as an example of issues under study and ways of analysing them.

Chapter "Knowledge and Curriculum" presents three approaches to the rules governing knowledge production: critical theories, post-structuralism and social realism. Then, following the same pattern, a selection of works illustrate the consequences of various theoretical perspectives.

The chapter called "Identity" introduces readers to the concept of identity and its significance for sociological inquiry. The largest part of this chapter is devoted to cross-cultural education and its significance for shaping student identities. Authors quote numerous studies, among them a story about Asian girls for whom school is a liberating place. Schools represent space where numerous conflicts emerge, as a result of conflicting value systems, customs or aspirations. Teachers may either encourage greater openness and tolerance among their students or they may limit it. Sociological knowledge might point at the significance of specific values for different social groups yet practitioners such as teachers have problems putting that knowledge to use. They work towards the order which, in their view, should ensue.

The last chapter in "Key Themes" focuses on the role and position of teachers. Since 1980s education systems have undergone numerous reforms which largely affected teachers' responsibilities and autonomy. Those reforms associated with neo-liberal policies, led, on the one hand, to partial marketisation of schools and, on the other, subjected schools to the control of various central institutions. Hence, teachers' roles have evolved into customer service roles. Many teachers perceive this development as degrading for their professional position. In some countries, education policy increases teachers' autonomy and their responsibilities, which has a positive effect on teaching and learning. However, there are still questions about the scope of teachers' autonomy and the control over their activities.

In conclusion of their book, Gewirtz and Cribb emphasise the role of social scientists as active shapers of social life. However, political engagement raises numerous concerns. They were highlighted by Martyn Hammersley in his article written in response to Gewirtz and Cribb. Hammersley is attached to the vision of sociology which stays away from values. However, Gewirtz and Cribb see the main goal of the sociology of education as supporting education policies, since practical implementation of research findings becomes an important criterion in assessing theoretical reflection.

*Understanding Education* is designed as an introduction to various issues in the sociology of education. Written to help students and those interested in education, the book fulfils this role very well. The language is simple and the style is clear. The design of the book ensures an interesting read. Theoretical deliberations are presented in connection with specific problems in social life. Also, the selection of issues to analyse seems fully justified.

The UK market sees many new introductory publications related to education, for instance Rob Moore's *Education and Society* (2004), with a more theoretical profile, a volume edited by Stephen J. Ball *RoutledgeFalmer Reader in Sociology of Education* (2004), or a description of changes in education policies and systems by Sally Tomlinson, entitled *Education in a Post-Welfare Society* (2005). The book by Gewirtz and Cribb represents a good complement to those works, combining theoretical chapters with discussion of research practice and references to education policy.

All of the aforementioned publication share one feature: they focus on the English-speaking world. While Anglo-Saxon sociologists are familiar with Pierre Bourdieu or A. van Zanten, an often quoted French author who writes in English, the world of literature in German, Spanish or other languages seems non-existent. While globalisation has its limitations, one must admit that Anglo-Saxon literature does provide interesting patterns and inspirations for theoretical deliberations and examples of interesting studies.

The aforementioned publications, as well as *Understanding Education*, are largely based on qualitative research. The key issue tackled by sociologists of education, i.e. educational inequalities, is discussed by illustrating mechanisms which lead to inequalities, and often relies on opinions expressed by victims of discrimination. Therefore, the authors prefer qualitative inquiry and cases studies which enable in-depth analysis. It seems, however, that a publication which aspires to become a handbook should have at least a small section reporting numerous quantitative studies relevant to issues under discussion.

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