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BOOK REVIEW

A Book Review of the Skourdoumbis, A. & Webster, S. (2023). *The Epistemological Development of Education. Considering Bourdieu, Foucault and Dewey*. Routledge

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ABSTRACT

Skourdoumbis and Webster analyze the design of education policy frameworks in Australia, the UK and the USA and draw on sociological, political and philosophical concepts of Bourdieu, Foucault and Dewey to place familiar debate on neo-liberal education policies within a multi-faceted critical framework that integrates socio-cultural analysis of evidence-based teaching effectiveness research and questions the dynamics of institutional power mechanisms that transform classroom practices. This uncommon unite of three scholars bring novel analysis and encourage rethinking the purposes and processes of public education and creating a new inclusive epistemology rooted in Deweyan concepts of progressive education. The book contributes to the scholarly critique of the consequences of neo-capitalist-driven education policies making individual economic prosperity and the country's competitiveness the main forces of educational development. Suggestions are offered including democratic, scientific and authentic dimensions to the contemporary epistemologies of education to enable it to address the social, philosophical, cultural, local, and situated and become a "truly human activity."

Keywords: Authentic epistemology, Doxa, Governmentality, Effectiveness research, Critical policy analysis

Written with the philosophical scholar in mind, Skourdoumbis and Webster take us on a journey through recent Western developments in terms of a new scientific epistemology of education. What is recognized as knowledge? How is it validated and transferred through school systems? How are the decisions justified - through power and quantifiably measurable arguments, or dialogue and inquiry? The authors subject to the intellectual

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scrutiny the logic of economic competitiveness, effectiveness and efficiency dominating contemporary educational policies. The book can be recommended for scholars, doctoral students and teacher education professionals for its unique intellectual context framing conceptual analysis of the contemporary educational policies and historical perspectives provided in support of the main arguments.

Skourdoumbis and Webster bring together Foucault, Bourdieu and John Dewey and construct the analytical lens that interrogates the language of economic efficiency reflected in the modern “science of education” and describe its restrictive through designing the capacity to include the considerations of “philosophical, sociological, moral and political” (p. 2). I found this synthesis of Bourdieu, Foucault and Dewey the book’s most surprising aspect, which places familiar debate on neo-liberal education policies within a multi-faceted critical framework, one that integrates socio-cultural analysis of evidence-based teaching effectiveness research and questions the dynamics of institutional power mechanisms that transform classroom practices. This uncommon unite of three scholars brings novel analysis and encourage rethinking the purposes and processes of public education and creating a new inclusive epistemology rooted in Deweyan concepts of progressive education.

The book focuses on financialization and corporatization, mechanisms of economic ordering centralized on the destabilizations of “crises” and “uncritical consumption”; and international shift in economic power as the main forces currently forming the landscape of educational policies which contribute to the scholarly literature exploring forces influencing educational policy making.

The book consists of ten chapters. In the opening chapter, “The emergence of theorizing a “science of education” the epistemological development of education from traditional to progressive is critically analyzed and the main themes and claims of the book are explained. The analytical framework examining contemporary education policy and research agendas in Australia, the UK and the USA is set by bringing together the concepts of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Dewey. This framework provides for multi-faceted analysis of socio-cultural, institutional and practical aspects of contemporary public schools and allows exploring two major issues - the origins of the contemporary epistemology of education equivalent to measurable performativity and productivity; and the alternative approach to epistemology of education enriched by the “genuine” science of education. The authors question the epistemological dominance of “quality” involving the use of structured experimentation and measurement, and claim that the new “science of education” “downgrades the knowledge of the philosophical, sociological, moral and political” (p. 3), while prioritizing political-economic logic of education policies and practices.

In the second chapter, “Foucault, Bourdieu and education”, Skourdoumbis and Webster analyze how the language of economy and science formulate the dynamics of power in education. Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, capital, field, and doxa; and the Foucault’s concept of governmentality, comprise the conceptual language framing the process through which schools are transformed in institutions where compliance with established social order of individual competitiveness for economic success is being promoted as the primary outcomes of education. The authors describe how the economic crises rhetoric of governments and of supranational organizations, such as OECD, impose the evidence-based logic on decision making and promote competitive market-driven justification of the goals of education excluding more holistic understanding of the educative role of teachers and schools.

Through the third chapter, “The confines of education policy-making”, the Bourdieu’s concept of “doxa” (dominant or “taken for granted” views) and Foucault’s synonymic concept of “governmentality” are used to highlight the linkage between measurable criteria of performance and a certain conceptualization of teachers’ professionalism. *Doxa* – a

commonsense of a good and effective teacher is created over the correlational patterns of teacher behavior and students' learning, which reflects a vision of teaching as a technical skill reducing "the qualitative richness of classrooms" (p. 44) to quantitative indicators of effectiveness. The authors' conclusion is that doxas of policies grounded in measurable school and teacher effectiveness do not merely alter the conceptualization of a good teacher, but also reshape their identities as contributors to national economic competitiveness and prosperity.

In the subsequent chapter "Crisis and Change" Skourdombis and Webster argue that the potential change in education is hindered "by the persistent fear of economic collapse" (p. 55). The Bourdieusian notion of "hysteresis" helps explain major educational reforms as responses to crises, urging to address real or perceived emergencies associated with global change. In such contexts, the implementation of performativity measures and data-driven policies act as the only capable solutions, which brings teachers' agency, autonomy and professionalism "under scrutiny if not outright attack" (p. 67-68). An interview data with two teachers illustrates how teachers understand their work as "making learning accessible" (p. 58), and "as much as possible holistic" (p. 63) – the views critically highlighting a deep controversy between the policy rhetoric and complex classroom realities. In the following two chapters, the readers are invited to revisit Dewey's concepts of experimentalism, educative experiences and openness. The question is how Dewey is relevant in the era of datafication, when experience is reduced "to metrics and data" guiding teachers to assume effectiveness "solely through the lens of data" (p. 77). This chapter contributes to the debate on datafication policies by critiquing as their replacement of replacing professionalism and pedagogical judgment with performativity and compliance, altering teachers' identities and reconfiguring students' learning experiences toward quantifiably predicted outcomes.

In the two subsequent chapters, Skourdombis and Webster continue analyzing the process of transformation of educational purposes and practices, and focus on students' "growth" through the lens of standardized proficiency models, and teachers' "entrepreneurial" delivery as mechanism limiting their abilities and motivation to act in response to the multidimensional classroom realities. Proficiency models of educational outcomes and entrepreneurial delivery of educational experiences, according to the authors, covers up holistic understanding of student development by silencing the creativity and professional judgment of teachers, and limiting their intentions to teach by engaging students in understanding and reflecting on complex social issues.

Skourdombis & Webster (2023) conclude that the dominant "scientifically objective" epistemologies of education frame educational problems in a reductionist way mirroring dichotomies and permanently pointing on failures in meeting an average of quantitative indicators in large-scale assessments. They insist that "scientifically objective" epistemology does not account for a meaningful understanding of what truly educational experiences require – namely, a holistic consideration of both students and teachers – and it also falls short of genuinely reflecting the fundamental practices and principles of science (p. 134). Considering the critical self-reflective insights of the leading theorists of the scientifically-objective epistemology relying particularly on large quantitative correlational studies, where significant differences in the predictable effects of the assessments and the absence of the theoretical models underlying them regularly pointed out as the major deficiencies (Scheerens, 2013; 2016; Reynolds *et al.*, 2014), this conclusion cannot be overestimated for its alarming critique. An alternative multi-dimensional educational epistemology is proposed that is "embodied by educators", and includes democratization of policies and practices by intentional and purposeful teachers' participation in formulation

of educational aims considering moral, political and social aspects of it; and teachers' active and reflective professional engagement in scientific experimentations.

To summarize, the Skourdombis and Webster's book contribute to the scholarly critique of neo-liberal education policies reflecting so-called "scientific" epistemology of education in the UK, USA and Australia and revisit the historical origins of the techno-rationalist approach to educational epistemology to emphasize its failure to acknowledge the complex sociological, philosophical, political and moral dimensions of students' learning, teacher profession and classroom realities. What distinguishes the book among many exploring the issue of contemporary epistemology (Apple, 1995; Nash, 1999; Ball, 2003; McGuire & Wilka, 2024) is its analytic language constructing a holistic account of power dynamics and social structures pressing schools into the conformist realm of standardized, technocratic measures. The book invites readers to see the complexity of contemporary educational policies and practices beyond taken-for-granted views and familiar theoretical lens, and suggests a new epistemology of education foregrounded in teachers' professional agency and intentional systemic engagement in decision-making from schools and classrooms to policy levels.

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