

A Review of Alexander, R. J. (2000). Culture and pedagogy : international comparisons in primary education. Oxford: Blackwell pp.642 ISBN 0-631-22051-8 Paperback \$77

The 'ubiquitous escaping of pedagogical stream', representativeness and generalisability, Ned Flanders' pedagogical asymmetry and the 'inescapable whiff of the classroom'.

While claiming not to have produced a "best buy" *effectiveness* study Alexander clearly wants his UK (English) readers to reach particular conclusions about the lessons for England's (primary) education (p.531). He is (rightly) highly critical of a growing "me-too" tendency in the UK (and in Australia) of governments and education departments attempting to transplant policies and practices from one national setting (where they appear to be "effective") with little understanding of the multi layered historical, cultural and political contexts of their origin (Alexander, 2000 p.546). In many ways this agenda weakens Alexander's other stated goal to 'unravel the complex interplay of policies, structures, culture, values and pedagogy' (p4) and to develop a theory of pedagogy with general application. On more than one occasion he "lets fly" at his erstwhile colleagues, Chris Woodhead and David Reynolds, whose work has been influential in Blair's New Labour instrumentalist education policies. Setting them up as the proverbial "straw men", he suggests they have failed to connect their recommendations with cultural context as if they are independent of each other (p.29). This, Alexander argues, limits teacher (and perhaps pupil and community) agency.

This very ambitious book aims to differentiate what is universal in pedagogy from what is country specific or bounded by culture (p.4), developing a 'coherent account of pedagogy ... the values and ideas by which teaching is informed [by] its contexts of culture and history' (p.6). By his own account this work omits the two thirds of the world's people who have never used a telephone, email or the Internet.

Australian teachers and teacher educators are become increasingly familiar with the term *pedagogy* though familiarity with 'Productive Pedagogies', the product of longitudinal research on school reform recently undertaken in Queensland, Australia (Lingard et al. 2001). More generally, Government Departments of Education have begun to acknowledge the importance of good pedagogy for successful teaching, if not its centrality in connecting relevant curriculum with authentic assessment (Bernstein, 1977). Alexander adds that while pedagogy is perhaps 'the most elusive theme of all' it is 'arguably the most important' as at a practical level it relates to the context of culture, structure and policy in which it is not just situated but embedded (Alexander, 2000 p.30).

The longitudinal *Five Cultures* project (1994-1998) on which this book focuses, was first conceived in 1992 and 'sought to describe, illuminate and explain primary education in five countries in terms of ideas about culture and power, schools, curriculum and pedagogy' (p.271). This is perhaps the book's greatest weakness - it is most definitely very much situated in time and space. We do not learn about how primary school may be so different an experience for children from different social

and economic classes, migrant, ethnic or gender backgrounds making each particular site unique. It has been argued that for Australian educators, the construction of difference and how ethnicity, race, gender and class are mediated in and by the school, is today critical (see for example Thomson, 2002).

The data in fact comes from fieldwork in a very small number of schools (30 from five countries) and a mere total of 36 lessons were analysed! Tackling a quantitative and qualitative task of this magnitude - capturing the essence of not only five very different national (multi) cultures on the macro level but also how these are reflected in the culture (s) of the classrooms of the early years of schooling in England, France, Russia, USA (actually the state of Michigan!) and India - is surely a brave adventure. How representative of United States schools however is Michigan or Paris and Nice of France? Could any researcher confidently nominate six schools in Australia that would accurately reflect Australian pedagogy and cultural practices?

In an earlier paper (Alexander, 1999) he asks whether "generalisability" must be the 'cardinal criterion for judging the claim of educational research How far are this insistence and this arithmetical monopoly justified?' (1999, p.152). And further '[H]ow far can what I derive from individual schools ... claim to address the condition of primary education anywhere beyond those schools themselves?' (1999, p.157). While disparaging of school effectiveness researchers calling them a club not a discipline (2000, p.39) Alexander suggests that ethnographies (like *Culture and Pedagogy*) are not valued by policy makers because 'they fail to meet their criterion of generalisability' (1999, p.152). In this new book he challenges this exclusive numerical construct in the provision of evidence based policy formulation by attempting to deconstruct the 'socially embedded discourse of teachers and pupils' as one of the central texts of pedagogy. It is a pity that these provisos and his explanations are not upfront in the introduction to *Culture and Pedagogy*, but almost hidden in the mass of documentation and data. In effect Alexander has by his own acknowledgement written two books - one on comparative education, the other on comparative pedagogy. His purpose was to be 'interpretive rather than normative or prescriptive' (Alexander, 2000 p.3).

Despite the acknowledged shortcomings of classroom observations methodology (how intrusive were video cameras in rural schools in India, how accurate are the translations?) we are presented with extremely rich and multi-layered descriptions of classroom practices.

Alexander takes the classroom and its lesson as the basic unit of analysis (Alexander, 1999, p.166) understanding that teaching is *performance*. He correctly points out that "child-centred" pedagogy as we know it may not be any more liberating and empowering for the child than the more traditional didactic pedagogy that has been long ago eschewed by teacher education institutions in Australia. Brian Simon's question "Why no pedagogy in England?" (Simon, 1981) is still (unfortunately) equally apt for many Australian schools today. Rejecting the notion that pedagogy is a 'neutral-free vehicle for transmitting curriculum content (p.30), Alexander moves beyond the contemporary dominance of the socio-cultural theory which emphasises the relativism of education and knowledge construction.

One of Alexander's overriding concerns (p.564) is the empowerment of primary children and that 'for the theory of pedagogy towards which I work depends on an understanding of how nation, school and classroom are intertwined' (Alexander, 2000 p.6). Alexander, a mainstream critic, exploring Gramsci's concept of hegemony enjoins the reader to take up the challenge of *critical pedagogy* as developed by Apple, Bourdieu, Freire, Giroux and others (Alexander, 2000 pp.161-172) 'who provide the corrective of *resistance*' (p.165).

A prominent theme for Alexander is the controlling of education and the power of education to control. He, unlike Said (1993) writes not as an exile but as a citizen of a country whose 'imperialist past cannot but have shaped its and my educational present' (p.504). Although Alexander entertains a critical perspective, the issues of student empowerment and student agency *for what purpose?* are however neglected. A critically generative or engaged pedagogy asks, "who benefits and who does not?" by particular social, economic and cultural arrangements. It combines anti-colonial, critical and feminist principles 'that enables the interrogation of biases in curriculum, assessment and pedagogy - that re-inscribe systems of domination while simultaneously offering new ways to teach diverse groups of students', especially the most marginalised and oppressed (hooks, 1994 p.10).

While quoting Bernstein's (1990 p.184) judgement that 'pedagogic discourse ... selectively relocates, refocuses and relates other discourses to constitute its own order and ordering' Alexander provocatively insists on a 'pedagogy [that] frames everything else' by conflating it with both curriculum and assessment (pp.550-553). Acknowledging that pedagogy is critically connected to culture, social structure and the mechanisms of social control, he suggests that it is clearly more than teaching. It includes the theories, beliefs, policies and controversies that 'reflect characteristically ... a gulf between theory and practice' (p.540). Today our teacher certification boards, teacher training institutions and universities and pre-service teachers are witness to this divergence between education theory and the practice of teaching ("just tell me what to do on Monday!") being played out.

Alexander reminds us (and some need the reminder) that pedagogy whether in its broadest or narrowest sense retains 'the inescapable whiff of the classroom' (2000 p.551). The real power of pedagogy is that while curriculum and assessment (and school organisation) are largely outside of the agency of the teacher (and student) what happens in the space of the classroom (loosely defined), between teacher and learner is surely a generative space for resistance.

By *tilting at the windmill* of the curriculum edifice and praising those engaged in the 'parallel literature on pedagogy more broadly defined' (p.551) Alexander throws his lot in with a pedagogic discourse which sees pedagogy as part of the mechanism of social control and cultural reproduction. In doing so he invites, without further elaboration, the development of liberationist (engaging) pedagogies.

Alexander provides a very clear account of the danger of the increasing intellectual and political hegemony of *effectiveness* and *standards*, underpinned by tight central political control increasingly frustrating rather than enhancing pedagogical development, practice and inquiry (p.37). This is a salient and timely warning for educators (and maybe politicians and bureaucrats) unsure about the implications and

dangers of reliance on statistical measurement. He warns of 'engineered education debates' by governments that serve to absolve them of the economic and social responsibility for any supposed lack of achievement - instead directing blame for pupil failure to the education system, to teachers, schools (and their heads) and to teacher training institutions (p.40). The search for the education equivalent of the oxymoronic *smart bomb* along with instrumentalism and its associated pathology of progressive, ideologically suspect teachers and training returns almost inevitably to deficit discourses of *back to the basics* in the primary curriculum that we see in Australia today (p.41).

Above all it would be wise to keep in mind William's understanding that the 'deepest impulse (informing cultural politics) is the desire to make the learning part of the social change itself' (p.158). Alexander does not seem to consider that education 'as a cultural pedagogical practice' (Giroux 1998, xi) happens in more than just schools and universities, but equally (at least), in the public spheres of the mass media and popular culture. It is in this context that education makes 'us both subjects of and subject to relations of power' (Giroux 1998, xi). Alexander's study should clearly send the message to our policy movers, makers and shakers that there is no "magic bullet", no single pedagogy or pedagogical practice and no single definition of best practice.

The book does seem to come to its end rather suddenly, not providing an equal insight into pedagogy that his detailed study of the need for classroom discourse implies. With all reservations in mind (including a number of annoying *typos* and referencing errors) Alexander is a reflective critic informed by a deep humanity. *Culture and Pedagogy* could (and should) be read to good effect by politicians, academics, teachers and in particular pre-service teachers - anyone interested in understanding how complex primary school really is.

And what of Ned Flanders and pedagogical asymmetry? Teachers will be impressed to know that Ned Flanders' (not Homer's nemesis and neighbour!) celebrated rule of two thirds (1970) is still observable if not acknowledged in many classrooms today - that for about 2/3 of most school lessons somebody is talking, that about 2/3 of this talking is done by the teacher and that 2/3 of teacher talk is direct instruction (Alexander, 2000 p.393).

In the end what we do in our classrooms with and to our children is culturally specific. Except perhaps for the 'ubiquitous escaping of pedagogical steam - "Shh ... shh" heard in four out of five countries ... So there are some universals in teaching then' (Alexander, 2000 p.382).

In 2002 *Culture and Pedagogy* won the Outstanding Book Award of the American Educational Research Association.

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