

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: *Education Research in the Public Interest: Social Justice, Action, and Policy* edited by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/92c642sf>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 3(1)

ISSN

1548-3320

Author

Liou, Daniel D.

Publication Date

2007-03-08

DOI

10.5070/D431000586

Peer reviewed

Education Research in the Public Interest: Social Justice, Action, and Policy by Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate (eds.). New York: Teachers College Press, 2006. 274pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8077-4704-9

The Bush administration's introduction of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation in 2002 serves as a stark reminder of how neoliberal and neoconservative interests have impacted and shaped issues surrounding school reform. The ongoing push for increased privatization within the public sphere requires researchers to carefully question the impact of the state and the economy on schooling practices and policymaking. In their volume of critical essays, Gloria Ladson-Billings, William Tate, and colleagues outline an educational research agenda that is epistemologically relevant to a social justice oriented policy-making that is in keeping with the public good. By combining educational history, critical theory, methodological analysis, and statistical evidence, this volume seeks a resolution to the debate surrounding the seemingly competing ideas of empirical objectivity and public service, which have at times served to undermine the advancement of a research-supported social justice agenda.

Ladson-Billings and Tate define the concept of the *public* as one that is not solely distinguishable through numbers or by mass majority, but rather through social action intended to further democracy. Inspired by John Dewey's (1927) notion of education as a democratic project intended to eliminate threats to public interests, Ladson-Billings and Tate argue that educational research must be seen as a form of "capacity building" which seeks to increase civic participation and supports equitable and just policymaking. Ladson-Billings points to Hurricane Katrina as a politically symbolic example of the extent to which racism and poverty in the U.S. colludes to limit the life and learning opportunities structured into schools serving low-income and children of color. Ladson-Billings states, "The shock of Katrina was the way so many U.S. citizens were left to fend for themselves. In an administration that claimed to leave no child behind, large numbers of poor, elderly, and Black citizens were left behind. Our horror was not over the path of destruction the storm left but rather the gaping hole in the safety net left by 25 years of public neglect" (p.2). Given the flaws of NCLB and other accountability measures such as market-based and choice reforms, the authors emphasize that special private interests have not only conspired against true educational equity, but also represent a powerful retreat from education's longstanding commitment to social justice. This further marginalizes the educational rights of low-income and non-white children as well as also those parents and progressive educators who know how to best educate them.

In addition to Ladson-Billings and Tate, this volume highlights the voices of other important contributors to the field of educational research. In her chapter, entitled "What Should Count as Educational Research: Notes Toward a

New Paradigm“, Jean Anyon strongly advocates for greater alignment between school reform efforts and living wage, healthcare, transportation, and housing policymaking in order to effectively improve students’ learning opportunities. Her suggestions for such an undertaking would require researchers to act upon a cultural and political sensibility that is both anti-deficit and culturally affirming, while developing mutually respectful relationships with local stakeholders. Michael Apple, David Hursh, and Alex Molnar’s respective chapters offer practical examples of the ways in which educational research supports and sustains local efforts to bridge the research-practice divide in order to effect change. These projects, ranging from the *Youth Participatory Budget* Project in Brazil to CACE/CERU at Arizona State University are informative in demonstrating how making the public a partner in social science inquiry can be cultivated. Moreover, they argue that collaboration between universities, local communities and schools has the potential to substantially impact the educational environments of children. Apple and Molnar each point to the importance of utilizing various forms of media to broadly connect with various communities.

While it is important for researchers to consider Anyon’s framework as a valuable context in which to study the relationship between education and other social science research domains, I would argue that there is an inherent risk in de-centering children’s best interests and the corresponding needs of schools as the foundation for educational inquiry. Community-based research must find ways to connect and report what is happening inside schools and whether children’s needs are met. A good example of this type of inquiry is found in Pedro Noguera’s (2003) research in Oakland and his current work in New York City in which he utilized research-based knowledge as a way to empower parents, cultivate civic and economic capacity at the local level, and initiate school-based change from the outside in (p.96). Furthermore, it is important to document the day-to-day impact that these complex reforms have on children’s lives so that policymaking accounts for the social and academic needs of young people. In order to fully realize Anyon’s (2005) social movement theory, schools of education across the country must come to value interdisciplinary and community-based approaches to redefining what is social science research and recognizing the inseparability of the university’s mission to the interests of the public it is charged to support.

This volume arrives at a challenging time when a number of political and economic forces are powerfully aligned to reshape schooling in a way that limits educational opportunity, and by extension, operates in contradiction to public interest. While the book offers some important insights for improving the connections between educational research and social action, it overlooks three critical points that could further readers’ reflections on their own work. First, through his analysis of consciousness between oppressed communities and their oppressors, Paulo Freire (1970) reminds us to turn our critical gaze on those who

benefit most from inequity and other manifestations of hegemonic power (p. 55). The widening of the wealth gap has rendered inquiries on poverty insufficient when extreme wealth goes unquestioned. To add to Anyon's social movement theory, I point to the ever-popular regressive tax imposed by states as a case in point. The slow, yet deliberate, deterioration of the social welfare system requires a galvanizing of grassroots community organizing in order to bring about the sweeping changes necessary if we are to build lasting momentum towards school improvement. By problematizing sources of privilege and power, we can then proceed to understand how stakeholders, as subjects of history, are best situated to change this reality and pave the way for possible reconciliation, solidarity, and social transformation (Freire, 1998, p. 37). Thomas Popkewitz's chapter speaks to the relative failure of educational research to providing stakeholders with the scientific ammunition required to support sustainable grassroots advocacy and reconciliation (pg. 120). While social science research has the potential to serve as a powerful tool for marginalized communities to name and transform our world, it has in many respects failed to do so.

Taking into account prior work by Solorzano and Yosso (2005) as well as Smith-Maddox and Solorzano (2002), I suggest a stronger case for public interest research would be to integrate Freirian theory within David Gillborn's chapter on Critical Race Theory and Tate's afterword on the need to promote intergenerational studies (p. 259). Understanding the complexities of racism (and I would add ethnocentrism in many nation states), as well as finding the intersections between race, class, and gender-based struggles, are important analytics for studying the historicism of white supremacy, power, privilege, and inequalities. Thus the guiding principles of Critical Race Theory (Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) can be a powerful educational framework for examining the structure and culture of schools and its connections to larger social inequities. Although Critical Race Theorists are at times accused of over-emphasizing the salience of race and racism in schools and society, Gillborn refutes this assumption in his chapter. He states, "Critical Race Theory (CRT) is sometimes attacked for placing race at the center of the analysis, seemingly to the detriment of gendered and class-based analysis. In fact, a good deal of CRT takes very serious the intersections of raced, classed, and gendered inequities" (p.175).

Second, although each author did an adequate job in conceptually differentiating between public and private interests, the book could have done more to examine the pathologies that privilege self-interest over a common good agenda. Noguera (2000), for instance, identifies individualistic interest as an intractable obstacle to school reform, where the affluent are unwilling to comply with calls for redistribution of power, opportunities, and resources. Apple's chapter on the need for "critical dialogue", as a way to reshape common sense in economic, political, and cultural domains reminds us of the importance that

Freire's (2000) concept of "epistemological relationship" has as an "indispensable component of the process of both learning and knowing"; in this case between researchers and participants (p. 17). In his theorizing about adult literacy, Freire's idea of dialogue, with an emphasis on listening, should be utilized more frequently in any research design intended to build awareness around individual versus collective rights (p. 77). Aside from Apple's chapter, the book could do more to inform researchers on ways to strengthen their abilities to work with all stakeholders--since self-interested forces often thwart reform despite informed awareness. The book misses the opportunity to illuminate the intersection between self-interest and privatization efforts as a way to discuss concrete strategies on how to best minimize these forces and successfully work with or against those who resist wide-scale change.

Third, research, social justice, and action are not mutually exclusive when brought into the context of the university's commitment to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism, as a form of social justice premised upon the engagement of multiple voices, should not be bound by a Black-White dichotomization around issues of race. As such, the book could have been more inclusive of public intellectuals who are not members of this strict binary. Echoing James Bank's chapter, in which he describes the power of multicultural education in the construction of new epistemologies and paradigms, the alignment of democratic values and public interest must serve as the catalyst for both publicly responsive and culturally inclusive scholarship in the academy.

It is vital for educational research to rearticulate the role of schooling in the era of a pro-market political climate that advocates for an assumable *value-free* and powerblind approach to policymaking. The ideas presented in this book must couple with Jennie Oakes, Karen Hunter Quartz, Steve Ryan, and Martin Lipton's (2000) argument that schools play a central role in creating a *virtuous society* where democratic deliberations and social problem-solving are foundational to its mission, as well as to questioning our dominant beliefs over what is the common, public good (xii). To further advance this idea and those provided in this book, I am struck by Sonia Nieto's profound wisdom, "Although for over a century our nation has advanced the ideal that a high-quality and excellent public education is the birthright of all children, our schools cannot fulfill this ambitious and noble purpose unless all of us—parents, policymakers, and the general public—commit ourselves to sustaining education as a public trust and a promise to future generations"¹. Thus, research institutions and colleges of education should take equal responsibility for aligning its institutional mission to serve the common, public interest. While this book is not without theoretical and conceptual limitations, it is an important contribution to bettering our understanding as to how educational research can be more responsive to those most underserved.

Notes

¹ Quote taken from Sonia Nieto's personal website at <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~snieto/>.

References

- Anyon, J. (2005). *Radical Possibilities: Public policy, urban education, and a new social movement*. New York: Routledge.
- Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Politics and education*. Los Angeles: The Regents of the University of California.
- Nieto, S. (Ed.) (2005). *Why we teach*. Retrieved February 27, 2007, from <http://www-unix.oit.umass.edu/~snieto/>
- Noguera, P.A. (2000). Challenging racial inequalities in education: One school's response to ending affirmative action. In Motion Magazine. Retrieved October 4, 2006 from <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/pnpd4.html>
- Noguera, P. A. (2003). *City schools and the American Dream: Reclaiming the promise of public education*. New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.
- Oakes, J., Hunter Quartz, K., Ryan, S., Lipton, M. (2000). *Becoming good American schools: The struggle for civic virtue in education reform*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Smith-Maddox, R. & Solorzano, D. G. (2002). Using Critical Race Theory, Paulo Freire's problem posing method, and case study research to confront race and racism in education. *Qualitative Inquiry*, (8)1, 66-84.
- Solorzano, D. G. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical Race Theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. Davis: Teacher Education Quarterly, Summer 1997.
- Solorzano, D. G. & Yosso, T. J. (2001). "From Racial Stereotyping Toward A Critical Race Theory in Teacher Education." *Multicultural Education*, 9, (1), 2-8.
- Solorzano, D. G. & Yosso, T. J. (2005). "Maintaining Social Justice Hopes within Academic Realities: A Freirean Approach to Critical Race/LatCrit Pedagogy." In Z. Leonardo (Ed.). *Critical Pedagogy and Race*. London: Blackwell. (Reprint of the Denver Law Review article).

Reviewer

Daniel D. Liou is a doctoral student at the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. His research interest includes but is not limited to the ways in which social and economic forces influence policy change, school culture, and learning opportunities in urban schools. From 1993 to the present, Daniel has worked and researched with teachers, students, and families in Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, Boston, and the greater Los Angeles County. The author thanks Veronica Terriquez and Clayton Pierce for their generous and helpful feedback.