



Teaching Cultures: Knowledge for Teaching First Grade in France and the United States. Kathryn M. Anderson-Levitt. Language and Social Processes series. Judith Green, ed. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2002. 334 pp.

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Kathryn Anderson-Levitt focuses on reading instruction in first grade to examine and compare teacher thinking in France and the U.S. She examines what teachers do, and what they say about what they do, inside and outside their classrooms. Teacher thinking is described as reflecting "personal teaching cultures" (pp. 6-12) that are shaped by other "teaching cultures," such as national cultures, teacher preparation cultures, institutional cultures, and classroom, as well as what is identified as a "trans-national teaching culture." (pp.18-36). Early chapters define these concepts and emphasize their importance for engaging teachers in critical reflection. End-of-chapter summaries, notes, and questions provide helpful précis, background information, and topics for reflection on French and U.S. teachers' professional knowledge and teaching cultures.

The ethnographic data that are reported and analyzed will be particularly interesting for those who have not visited classrooms or studied education outside the U.S. The book identifies practices in French schools that differ from those generally found in the U.S., including whole class reading instruction as a standard grouping practice, the use of slates as a standard teaching tool, and a four-and-a-half day school week (M, T, TH, F, and Sat. mornings). Anderson-Levitt attempts to demonstrate how the "teaching cultures" that provide the context for these practices support and are supported by teacher thinking. A video-viewing process is used to demonstrate French and American teachers' understanding of one another's teaching practices. The data presented illustrate consistent differences in the way teachers from each country perceive the other and understand what goes on at "home."

The book concludes by focusing on the impact of teaching cultures upon teachers' interpretations and evaluations of children's abilities and academic performances. This is accomplished somewhat successfully in the case of French schools but fails to provide specific insight into American education. The significant differences among the fifty official state education systems in the United States, and the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts that shape teaching cultures within each state are overlooked. Sketches of U.S. teachers seem to be based heavily on older work (1976-79), and comparisons of U.S. and French schools are based on data gathered in 1988 with retention rates based on 1985-90 data (p. 249).



Anderson-Levitt visited 32 schools in a medium-sized city in west central France, which she categorizes as either "neighborhood," "middle class," or "working class" (p. 44). It is sometimes difficult to sort out the way in which these collective data were gathered and analyzed. Most of her observations occur in "middle class" schools and the bulk of data was collected in 1976-79 (17 visits), with other visits in 1987-88 (14 visits), 1993-94 (2 visits), and in 1997-98 (1 visit). The work seems dated, and may ignore changes that have occurred during these years. Although descriptions of actual classroom practice and teachers' explanations provide compelling evidence, most of the observations are described as occurring in "middle class" schools and thus reflect a tendency to over-generalize these teaching practices to all of France.

Largely ignored is the impact of political and economic social movements on French teaching cultures, particularly in relation to the education of children in poverty, and the education of non-native speakers of French. Although Freinet's Marxist oriented Modern School Movement originated in France and influenced literacy instruction throughout Europe, it is only briefly mentioned (pg. 156) in the context of a leftist oriented, low-income community. No attention is given to the influence of capitalism, globalization, and the ascendancy of the European Community on French teaching cultures.

Anderson-Levitt concludes that several things determine teacher thinking and practice. She says "institutional practice shapes knowledge, but knowledge shapes individual practice-and individual practice becomes institutional practice" (p. 279). While much of the data seems dated, the study itself is important and despite the cautions noted, this work will no doubt provoke thoughtful reflection and enthusiastic discussion among teachers, prospective teachers, and graduate students. Understanding our own teaching practices in light of practices in other countries (such as planning, scheduling, grouping, evaluating progress, and retention) and the cultures that inform and shape these practices can help reveal the arbitrariness of practices. This comparative knowledge can help us rethink assumptions and the teaching practices we take for granted as it provides fuel for change and reform.

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