



Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education. Robin Alexander. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. 688 pp.

THUY DAOJENSEN and KAREN ANIJAR

Arizona State University Thuy.DaoJensen@asu.edu

Anijar@asu.edu

Culture and Pedagogy is an extraordinarily ambitious book— exploring the complex interactions among educational policies, structures, and cultural values at the localized and national levels that inform the practices of primary school teachers and the experiences of students in their classrooms. Alexander chose study sites in England, France, India, Russia, and the United States based on the rationale that all five nations shared “a formal constitutional commitment to democratic values” (p. 4).

Alexander negotiates a difficult terrain between macro- and micro- analyses. The book’s 600+ pages forge important, unexplored comparative ethnographic territory while raising complicated questions concerning pedagogical relationships among school and society, government control, and national identity. Unlike previous comparative studies of cultural influences on teacher pedagogy and discourse, Alexander uses juxtaposition in order to paint a more inclusive picture of schools; nevertheless juxtaposition and symmetrical point-to-point comparisons are not at the center of his study. Each chapter covers a complete topic—be it a nation-state or a concept/theme that emerged from his research. Despite the attempt to construct a comprehensive study transcending traditional paradigmatic structures, Alexander’s approach remains problematic, as he conflates and generalizes often complex and contradictory forces. Nevertheless, we do not want to belittle his accomplishment. The book has enormous breadth, meticulous detail, and ambitious scope. We can not imagine how the difficulties we highlight could have been avoided in a single volume (or even two volumes), or by a single author.

The focus on social, historical origins and developmental changes contributing to current educational policies in each country assumes a locus of authenticity and tends to essentialize by using demographics and short factoid-filled surveys of history. For example, in the section on the United States, Alexander uses three school districts in Michigan as examples or exemplars. This sample size cannot acknowledge the many differences among districts, funding, demographics, and the plethora of other factors comprising the mosaic of districts in the United States. “[D]istricts and schools were caught between not just state and teachers’ unions, but a variety of interests and pressure groups” (p. 115).



From this short passage readers could assume that all school districts in the United States have teachers' unions! And, that all teachers' unions in the United States have enough power to influence policy makers.

While invoking Raymond Williams "making the familiar strange and the strange familiar" (p. 27) Alexander states that one of the goals of his study is to uncover "educational universals" (p. 44), a rather anachronistic Eurocentric epistemological notion, and certainly one incommensurate with Williams. The tension between post-positivist universality and more critical perspectives persists as a subtext throughout the book.

In all five countries there are common legacies of the drive to mass education following the first Industrial Revolution. France and England, although now together in Europe remain torn between confrontation and co-operation. The United States and India share educational legacies of British colonialism. France, the United States and Russia have ties of revolutions that although different in their form and consequences all had discernibly British connections. Historically all five countries have participated in the lively international trade in educational ideas and practices yet these have been domesticated and acculturated in very different ways. [p. 44]

Although Alexander's work (almost) achieves the daunting task of providing incisive, analytical comparisons cross-culturally, Alexander's subjectivities are not sufficiently woven into the text and context of the volume. Alexander asserts that as a researcher coming from an individualistic enquiry-based ideology, his analysis of collective-based teaching such as that found in India may be inadequate and may perpetuate the colonialist narrative. As an outside observer, Alexander far too easily dismisses unequal power dynamics that linger reconditely as an outcome of colonialism. In a discussion surrounding an English lesson in a Russian school he writes: "Perhaps this observation is merely ethnocentric" (p. 313). Since Alexander engages critical perspectives, it seems ironic that he falls into the trap of what apparently he sought to castigate. One of Alexander's "overriding" (p. 564) concerns is "how primary education children can be empowered" (p. 564), but he does not answer more fundamental questions of empowerment: "for what?" Nor does he mention that empowerment cannot merely be granted but is also a function of agency.

Reading through *Culture and Pedagogy* it becomes clear that Alexander's expertise and concern lie with British schooling and institutions, and we sense that schools in the United Kingdom



remain the unacknowledged standard against which all others are compared. Indeed, Alexander's comparative study allows readers to draw connections between schooling and culture within the context of globalization. Many national governments, in attempts to compete as economically viable polities on a worldwide scale, have pressed to universalize and centralize primary education.

Alexander points to the UK's New Labor government's concern that its "distinctive capabilities are not in raw materials, land or cheap labour" but rather in "knowledge, skills, and creativity" (p. 14). This rationalization perpetuates hierarchal relations between developed and undeveloped nations, specifically in the ways in which nations will be able to compete for economic prominence.

Despite the volume's shortcomings, *Culture and Pedagogy* would be an excellent comprehensive text for a variety of Comparative Education and Anthropology and Education Classes (particularly methods classes and classes focusing on globalization). The multi- methodological approach and the emergent themes informing each chapter expand the possible scope and breadth for future studies in comparative education.

©2003 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the June 2003 issue (34:2) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. It is indexed in the December 2003 issue (34:4).