

Review:

*Wayne Thexton*

**Birgitta Qvarsell & Christoph Wulf (Eds.) (2003). Culture and Education. European Studies in Education (Volume 16)**

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**Abstract:** This is a book that will be of particular interest to those with interests in education, culture and interdisciplinarity. The book is the product of a German-Swedish collaboration and is introduced as a contribution to understanding the relation between education and culture. To this end, the authors tend to draw on empirical data from German and Swedish contexts, though there are exceptions. The book is presented in two parts—part one covers theory and concepts; part two covers ethnographic research and educational practice. The short chapters cover a wide range of approaches to theorising education-culture relationships, whilst there is also a mix of interpretations of the ethnographic research that covers formal and informal education. The book goes some way towards demonstrating how readings of education and culture can be inter-related, though this calls for some work on the part of the reader. The book is finally discussed in relation to collaborative international education research.

**Key words:** *education research, cultural diversity, inter-disciplinary*

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## 1. General Context

This book is the product of a German-Swedish collaboration and is introduced as a contribution to understanding the relation between education and culture. This task is deemed to be "all the more urgent as the traditional attribution of education to the charge of each respective European national culture is currently undergoing radical change" (p.5). Whilst these changes are fragmented and inconsistent within and between nations' political and education systems, it remains the case that international education research and practice collaborations are very much of the moment and remain in the ascendancy. This is a reflection of the open secret of the inevitability of further-integrated political and education systems—especially at tertiary level. A valuable contribution that this book is well placed to make to ongoing education and culture debates is to demonstrate how different cultures create different understandings of education. [1]

In setting about the task of conceiving educational-cultural relationships, this book is divided into two sections. First, in "Theory and Concepts", the orientation is towards multifariously conceptualizing the educational-cultural relationship. Second, in "Ethnographic Research and

Education Practice", talk is of using "ethnographic methods to investigate important fields in education and the development of innovative approaches to educational action" (p.9). [2]

## 2. Theory and Concepts

Beginning with QVARSELL's pragmatic approach to culture: "culture is a concept which *may become useful* as a (non-closing) frame when I want to understand the conditions for learning and socialisation" (p.14), this section introduces research and thought from a vast array of disciplinary locations and in doing so opens up this book to a broad audience. With direct reference to anthropology, ethnology, developmental psychology and education and erring towards cultural geography and semiotics, QVARSELL introduces "educology"—a scientific discipline connected to the educational dimensions of daily life cultures that studies the conditions and processes of significance for human learning and socialization (p.17). Added to this, we are told that culture is of focal importance within educology as a scientific discipline and that, with its different connotations, it is necessary as an opening frame of reference for understanding the conditions for learning and socialization across the lifespan. From this, it is tempting to view educology as more of a "space" for discussing the formation and evaluation of education cultures—a doubttable scientific action, though one calling for a disciplined approach nonetheless. [3]

It is in this vein that the remainder of this section is presented. With this, the complexity with which culture can be interpreted is evidenced. Demonstrating this is WULF's philosophical argument concerning the diminished visibility of religion and ritual. He argues that this does not essentially equate to religion and ritual now playing a diminished role in people's lives, but rather that they show that the way in which religious spheres are recognized must be adapted. In reaching this point, WULF's discussion is reminiscent of RICHARDS' 1992 account of the shift from faith to a reason-centred discourse in the development of psychological ideas. [4]

Other subject matter around which authors seem to implicitly add to the general soup of conceptualizing education-culture relationships include the ethics of education (ZIRFAS), the work of Mary Parker FOLLETT (ALTHANS), readings of "being Latino" (PENA), education and the Tibetan culture of non-violence (GOLDSTEIN-KYAGA), the face as an actor in body politics (LICHAU), the "self" in online communication (JÖRISSEN) and media imagery from the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Centre (BAUSCH). Across these chapters, what becomes clear is the broad interest in how the visual aspects of culture and education are reciprocally related and how they come to forge a co-constructive relationship. Of course, this implies a continued distinction between education and culture; that is to say education is not viewed as culture, or vice versa. The degree to which this is satisfactory becomes clear as we turn to matters of education practice. [5]

## 3. Ethnographic Research and Educational Practice

Opening the second half of this book, HÖGBERG presents a clear theoretical and conceptual framework for coming to understand "the institution inside". This is an account that speaks broadly of socio-dynamic educology. In highly reflexive terms, there is discussion of how institutions affect our individual selves as we communicate with other individuals and with "society". This is discussed in relation to institutions tasked with caring for children with disabilities. HÖGBERG goes on to open up the politics between institutions and individuals, raising the notion of "institutions between" as a cultural barrier in the building of relationships between the receivers of care and carers. The point here is that people have to work on how they experience themselves and others in diluting the personal and the institutional. This is lucid in how it speaks to university-based researchers: for the researcher the university is an "institution inside"—this becomes manifest through

"identification with an elevated position, competition for funding and publication, role relations between students and professors and systems of graduation and promotion ... New alliances between politics, university and business are being established, and research is now a natural strategy in the competition for prosperity and wealth" (p.154). [6]

Again, diverse contributions add to this section of the book. With reference to families' conversational interactions at meal-time rituals, AUDEHM demonstrates a fine-grained form of social analysis and cultural commentary. BALLDIN then presents a brief though fascinating insight into pedagogic ethnography—combining ethnography with traditional semiotics (e.g. PEIRCE, 1985). Focusing on an unconventional school in Stockholm, boundaries between such conventional signs as working time and leisure time come to be dismantled. GÖHLICH and WAGNER-WILLI then go on to further compound school as a rich cultural and semiotic space, though this is with reference to more performative and dramaturgical ways of inhabiting such spaces. Through everyday life in these spaces, cultural differences come to be constituted, confirmed or diminished. Through their language "games", this is supported through TERVOOREN's description of children dealing with racist name-calling. Here, the extent to which play and performativity are utilized for political purposes comes to be a raised question. Referring to dilemmas in researching children's peer and ethnic relations, LÖFBERG explains how children bring their own cultural knowledge into school spaces and research contexts, thus creating the potential to destabilize researchers' efforts to form equitable power relationships with participants. Finally, LINDQVIST and SJÖGREN present an account of the development of teaching on a computing course for socially deprived young men, thus closing the book on post-compulsory education note. The main point to emerge from this chapter is that for the young men being tutored, the internet proved to be a socio-cultural, as well as educational, revelation. Coming from deprived backgrounds, the young men experienced the diminished social barriers of cyberspace (CLEMENT & LA FRENAIS, 2004; MIAH, 2000). [7]

The second half, however, raises the question of the overall readability of this book. The school-based focus constrains what could be a wider-ranging conceptualization of educational-cultural relationships. In terms of translating what is presented here into "the development of innovative approaches to educational action", there is still much research and practice work to be done. [8]

#### 4. Timeliness

From my own research and practice perspective, *Culture and Education* is a timely publication. With a view towards post-compulsory education, other recent publications have set about mapping European education and cultural frames of reference in more systematic ways (e.g. OSBORNE & THOMAS, 2003; THOMAS & QUINN, 2004). These have been published with clear agenda and target audiences in mind and have also reflected the macro-level policy interests of institutions. For example, in support of THOMAS and QUINN (2004), the European Access Network is a Europe-wide, non-governmental organisation for widening participation in higher education. It is organised for educational purposes and has a remit to share pedagogical strategies and multi-cultural curriculum approaches and to explore professional and political issues that promote wider participation (EAN, 2005). In this context, attempts are made to conceive relationships between education and culture (as part of standard research practice) at both local and national levels. This is something that has been partly achieved in *Culture and Education*, though not in any clearly systematic way. [9]

Whilst individual chapters are short, the book is not the most easy of reads—its formation is akin to a patchwork quilt of contributions; diverse subject matter are approached from diverse perspectives; but, like a patchwork quilt, this mix is what will make it an attractive piece of work to some readers. The collection speaks most loudly of the desire for international research collaboration. It also contributes to literature that demonstrates the tensions in pursuing collective understandings of education and culture, whilst simultaneously pursuing systems that foster global forms of educational practice. Such matters are best considered with reference to national and international culture and politics concerning "nation state" and federalism—features outside of the coverage of this book. [10]

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