

REVIEW ARTICLE

Reflecting on Social Foundations

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Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Context, Theories, and Issues. Dan W. Butin, ed. Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005. Pp. vii+278. Pbk. £22.93, \$32.50. ISBN 0-8058-5146-1.

This essay is a review of Dan W. Butin's edited collection Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Context, Theories, and Issues. I explore how this book helps us to think about the field of social foundations: what it is we do, why, and the challenges we face. I also look at the themes that cut across all ten essays in the collection, including engaging diversity, demonstrating democracy, and reflecting on social foundations as a field.

For ten years I have been the sole person responsible for designing the one required undergraduate foundations class (Schooling in a Diverse Society) in our large teacher education programme. To keep the class current and engaging, I am always looking for new ideas for how to best cover a plethora of potentially valuable material as well as best engage students who, more often than not, are suspicious of the relevance of any education classes that are at all theoretical—classes that do not give them specific pedagogical strategies that they can immediately implement in the classroom. Being asked to review Dan W. Butin's edited collection, *Teaching Social Foundations of Education: Context, Theories, and Issues* this summer could not have come at a better time. I had been looking to rethink and reorganise the class and spent the spring considering various approaches, readings, syllabi and classroom activities. Thus when I began reading this collection, it seemed like it was written just for me. In the preface, Butin claims that the book can help those of us in the field to reflect on what it is we do and why, and to explore what we might do differently. He writes that 'this edited volume is an opportunity to begin a dialogue both within and for the social foundations field. It is an attempt to discuss, through multiple perspectives and differing strategies, not only what it means to teach social foundations, but how we can go about doing it thoughtfully and coherently' (p. xv).

One of the biggest challenges in writing about social foundations of education is determining the contours of the field. This is a challenge not lost on the authors in this collection. What exactly is ‘social foundations’? As Butin asks, ‘is it a curricular emphasis? A theoretical orientation? An interdisciplinary and/or thematic coherence?’ (p. xvi). As this is a philosophy journal, many readers may not identify at all with the label ‘social foundations’, even though philosophy of education is typically considered one of its central sub-fields. In fact, many of us teaching in social foundations fields primarily consider ourselves to be other kinds of specialists, perhaps philosophers, sociologists or anthropologists of education. This issue of naming is one that came up for me often while reading the ten essays in this volume. One of the overriding goals of the book seems to be to stake out some specific ground for social foundations—to defend our worth and centrality at a time when, according to Kathleen deMarrais, ‘there is a sense within the field that our work is slipping away from us, pushing social foundations faculty further to the margins of teacher education’ (p. 168). What does it mean that I have never actually taught a course titled ‘social foundations’, that I rarely refer to what I do in those terms, and that there is no one else in my college who claims social foundations as their field? What does it mean also that while I graduated over a decade ago from a doctoral programme named ‘social foundations of education’, this name has since been changed (perhaps in response to more postmodern sensibilities) to something less ‘foundational’? These questions lingered in the back of my mind as I thought about the unique contributions of this book, its intended audience, and the concerns I had while reflecting on each of the essays.

Before addressing any of the specifics of the book, it is useful to begin with some framing orientation to social foundations. This is an orientation largely taken for granted, rather than developed, in this collection. Arguably, any number of classes and specialties within education can be included under a broad umbrella of social foundations: philosophy, history, politics, sociology, economics, and anthropology, not to mention, diversity, multiculturalism, and even qualitative research. In fact, the amorphous nature of the field makes it particularly difficult to bring together a set of essays on the topic that feels coherent. The first part of the book, ‘Defining and Contextualizing Social Foundations’ ostensibly is dedicated to broadly mapping out the field, though there is very little historical perspective offered here and when it is, it is sweeping: an all-too-quick overview for those already familiar with the field (though to be fair, that is, seemingly, the intended audience for the book). Drawing from the Standards of the Council for Social Foundations of Education, Steve Tozer and Debra Miretzky argue ‘that social foundations uses the lenses of the social sciences and humanities to help teacher candidates develop “interpretive, normative, and critical perspectives on education” and that such perspectives are important to interpreting educational practice in cultural context’ (p. 8). Throughout the book we are offered other parallel descriptions of what social foundations courses do. For example, they help us to understand why we do what we do in schools, provide us with an

educational language of critique and possibility, disrupt the narrow and conventional ways we often think about education, help us to connect schooling to larger social and political forces, and offer us a more ethical vision for our practice.

The second chapter in this section is a dialogue between four experienced social foundations professors (Eric Bredo, Wendy Kohli, Joseph Newman and Barbara Thayer-Bacon) addressing the question, 'Is There a Social Foundations Canon?' It is also offered in a somewhat introductory way to highlight the challenges faced by those of us working in the field. The chapter is essentially a transcript of a panel discussion they engaged in at a recent meeting of the American Educational Studies Association, the organisational home for many social foundations scholars. Each addresses questions about what they teach in their courses and why, with the end goal of considering what this tells us about the field of social foundations. Ultimately, what I think that we learn from this dialogue, and from considering all the essays in this book as a whole, is that lots of different things are done under the banner of social foundations, that we all have our own unique lenses and passions, that some people in the field care deeply about carving out specific terrain for a 'discipline' of 'social foundations' and others do not worry about that at all, and, finally, that the contexts in which we teach matter significantly to both what we do in the classroom and what we worry about.

Following a thoughtful preface and the opening two contextualising chapters, the book is divided into three further sections. The second offers models of social foundations in action and includes chapters that describe pedagogical activities using oral histories, foregrounding ecological consciousness and responsibility, and integrating aesthetic activities. These chapters are especially suited to social foundations teachers looking to try different things in their classrooms and to engage their students more actively and holistically in their own learning. They are also the most accessible chapters for students of social foundations who are in the process of developing their own identities as teachers and looking for some concrete classroom strategies. Part three situates social foundations within teacher education programmes and considers some of the challenges of teaching classes that aim to get students 'to articulate, refine, and reexamine their assumptions about schooling and society' (p. 159). Chapter authors here explore such topics as how to deal with student resistance in the classroom, confront the paradox of trying to teach critical thought while also illuminating structural constraints on our thinking, cultivate theoretical awareness and ecojustice, and more thoughtfully position social foundations coursework in teacher education. These chapters will likely appeal mostly to more experienced social foundations scholars who already have a good sense of the field and its challenges. In the final section, Butin ties together what he sees as the issues that cut across all the chapters and offers his vision for social foundations as involving 'a passionate engagement with contested positions' (p. 192). An appendix of four different social foundations syllabi by some of the chapter authors is also included at the end of the book.

So what are the issues or themes that cut across these essays, and what do they offer us? Butin suggests three. First, social foundations engages diversity. We certainly see this in the wide range of topics that the chapter authors address and in their underlying commitments (however explicit) to a more inclusive and just world, a world where diverse perspectives are seen as enriching and enabling of possibilities, not something we must overcome. This diversity is manifest also in the fact that any number of texts and readings are included in social foundations classes. There really is no social foundations canon. 'Because we represent what is not emphasized generally,' Bredo reflects, we 'tend to be united by what we are against: narrow, prejudicial, and thoughtlessly conventional ways of thinking and doing' (p. 31). While we share a commitment to engaging a wide range of perspectives about education, especially those that historically have been silenced and/or marginalised, and a commitment to cultivating ethical and imaginative thinking, a vast array of readings and pedagogical approaches can help us to translate these commitments into lived practice. One of the concerns that I often have as I am designing my social foundations course is that I will somehow leave out a text or perspective or idea that others deem essential, that there will be some glaring oversight on my part and my students will suffer because of it. Yet as I read the different approaches in this book, I felt more confident in my own choices, rather than less so, especially as I was reminded of how they best suit my context and how they indeed help students to engage with the kind of concerns that all the authors in this collection prioritise: how we can make schools more equitable and just places, cultivate thoughtful and responsible citizenry, and help students to develop the habits and dispositions necessary for a thriving democracy. I found it telling, and somehow comforting, that there is very little overlap in the readings required in the four syllabi included in the appendix, and yet all are seemingly introductory level social foundations classes.

The second overriding theme in this collection is that social foundations demonstrates democracy. Butin maintains that 'the social foundations of education classroom can promote the basic attributes of liberal democratic societies—the ability to articulate and think through conflicting conceptions of the good' (p. 195). Exploring the relationship between democracy and education is one of the central passions of social foundations scholars. This passion is manifest in different ways by chapter authors. For example, Eugene F. Provenzo uses action research and oral histories to help students 'become more politically and socially aware of the communities in which they live' (p. 59). Rebecca A. Martusewicz and Jeff Edmundson cultivate an eco-ethical consciousness in their students, maintaining 'to become educated as humans means that we must learn how to engage with others to consider questions of how to live on this planet, how to live just and sustainable lives without destroying the immensely diverse system that makes life possible' (p. 71). Kathleen Knight Abowitz asks her students to 'put their background, traditions, and worldviews into a larger context so that, when required, they can reason with diverse others who do not share their worldview and norms' (p. 136).

Edmundson and Mary Bushnell Greiner see their role as foundations scholars to work in schools to 'widen the reach of justice' in a world in 'which rights and responsibilities are truly shared' (p. 153). Reading across these chapters, we get a nice sense of what it might look like to foreground democracy in our thinking about education, as well as how diverse groups of scholars live out their own passionate commitments to democracy in the classroom.

More clearly articulating the contours of social foundations of education and its value in the broader educational field, is the third overriding concern in this collection. Here the authors seem more divided. Some worry that the open-ended nature of what we do leaves us vulnerable to the charge that anything goes in our classes and engenders a suspicion that we are not really sure what it is we do. Butin questions, for example, 'if we don't define our boundaries to one extent or another, won't others define it [*sic*] for us' (p. 44)? Similarly, Tozer and Miretzky are worried that the leading reform movements in education (e.g. drives towards privatisation and imposing standards) are ignoring the importance of social foundations altogether. Consequently, they argue it is up to us in the field to be more active and to make our worth more visible. Others seem less concerned, recognising that foundations has never been narrowly and firmly defined and that this diversity is part of our strength. Moreover, they recognise that 'such a lack of calcification fosters an ongoing dialogue within and across educational disciplines, allowing for the questioning, rethinking, and reworking of theory and practice' (p. xiv). For those within social foundations, the primary audience for this text, these debates about where we fit and how valued we are (or are not) are nothing new. Yet I am not sure how those outside our field read our concerns. Sometimes I wonder if our ongoing reflection on 'the lack of a foundation within foundations' (p. xiv) gets in the way of showing how the questions, theories, lenses, and passions we bring to the educational arena are a valuable resource that can complement the efforts of those in other fields, for example, to teach such things as learning theories, educational psychology, classroom management and teaching methods.

Thinking more about this on-going task of defining our role and asserting our importance, we might better serve the social foundations field by spending less time dwelling on whether others are paying enough attention to us, and instead continuing to do the important work of actually making ourselves relevant in a variety of contexts and to a range of audiences. While reflection on our field is surely important, sometimes it feels a little self absorbed or even self-indulgent. Here I find Barbara S. Stengel's (2002) response to the similar worry that philosophers of education have about whether they are relevant to be compelling. She argues that often this dilemma of relevance is more of a personal or existential identity crisis than anything else, and that in her own work and among her own colleagues, her voice as a philosopher is always respected and welcomed, especially when she meets others on their own terms and takes on the task of creating productive spaces for dialogue. She demonstrates 'the relevance of the field', as Nicholas C. Burbules (2002a)

suggests, ‘not by arguing about it, but by getting down to work with educational colleagues’ (p. 259). Like the discipline of philosophy of education, I don’t think there was ever really a heyday of support for social foundations, rather, there were perhaps more classes offered than there are now, largely because they were more explicitly called for as part of teacher education standards. Several of the authors in this collection allude to the existence of fewer classes and academic positions and suggest that we ought to do a better job of inserting ourselves into debates surrounding teacher expectations and certification. This seems like sage advice. Yet ultimately, we will be valued (or not) on the basis of what we actually do more than if we somehow define the contours of our work better or more explicitly. Reflecting on this issue in relation to philosophy of education, Burbules (2002b) thoughtfully offers that ‘where the positions were deeply respected and valued, I would maintain, it was because the *persons* occupying them were deeply respected and valued, not because “philosophy of education” was’ (p. 350).

In the end, I return to the place I began—rethinking my own undergraduate social foundations class, and wonder, was this book helpful to me as I reflected on reorganising and revitalising that class? Ostensibly, I represent the ideal audience for this text, an experienced foundations scholar who is committed to ongoing dialogue about what we do, why, and what we might do better. While I did update and change some of the material and activities in my class, I am not sure any of those changes are because of something I read in this book. I suppose I had hoped for more from this text: more new ideas, deeper insights, profound revelations and compelling suggestions. At the same time, after reading *Teaching Social Foundations*, I felt more confident that the struggles that I have are shared by my colleagues and that the passions and commitments I uphold are too. I also have a few new activities I might try and many new readings to peruse for possible inclusion in my classes. I am still not as worried as some of my colleagues are about defining specific contours for social foundations or that as a field we are not valued enough. In my own context, even as the only full-time foundations professor on my campus, I do feel as if my colleagues and students see the importance of this field to the broader educational conversation. Moreover, I think many scholars believe that their disciplines and academic commitments are not as valued by others as they could be. This is one of the consequences of specialisation. While we in social foundations ‘passionately engage contested positions’, in the words of Butin, I would like to believe that this is true of all good educators. Perhaps our awareness and reflexivity of engagement—how we call attention to the critical processes that go behind engaging various positions (especially in the broad field of education)—is in its own way unique. This is something I am left thinking about.

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