



Book Review

The History and Future of Education: A Book Review of Gary Thomas's *A Very Short Introduction: Education*

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Gary Thomas's book, *A Very Short Introduction: Education*, is intended for students interested in the institution of education, educators, as well as researchers who seek to unveil reasons about why schools exist in the West: "a strange gap on the knowledge of the public" (p. xi). It is important to note Thomas's assertion that the text itself is a very short introduction on the aforementioned topic and as a result there is an "oversimplification, shallowness, omissions, and banality" (p. xii) of information and analysis. The text is divided into seven chapters chronicling the birth of standardized knowledge and examining the relationship between the practice of educating and information use.

The first chapter explains the early history of human life until the reconceptualization of education after the reign of England's Queen Victoria. The chapter ends with a shift in focus towards the purpose of schools: "Schools now became instruments of the dominant economic system: capitalism" (p. 13). The philosophical question of what education should be about, is debated in chapter 2: "how much emphasis should be on learning the facts and how much it should be on the encouragement of thinking?" (p. 16). The debate is separated into two: progressive education and formal education. Progressive education seeks to foster thinking through questioning and provides tailored, one-on-one teaching for students (p. 28-29), whereas formalists view this approach as "impractical" (p. 29). Formalist education, on the other hand, aims to provide students with "security, structure, and authority" (p. 29). Chapter 3 then examines various methods of teaching, worldwide, elucidating the gap between theory and praxis. Thomas condemns the standardization of teaching imposed on teachers because it prevents them from "acting and reacting as they see fit as reasoning professionals" (p. 44). In this chapter, Thomas also praises Finland's education system because it allows teachers to rely on their own "knowledge, skill, and professionalism" (p. 44) to foster learning and support their students in the way they deem best. Chapter 4 notes the shift in education during the 20th century, describing it as "an intellectual climate...in which challenge to received ideas became accepted – expected even" (p. 45). Here, the value of scholars like Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky is explored only to be questioned in chapter 5. Near the end of chapter 5, Thomas begins to untangle the interconnectedness of inequality and a student's performance in school and suggests questioning the nature of the institution of education, schools, classrooms, curriculum, and policymakers (p. 86). In chapter 6, a continued critique on the normalized practices legislated in education – standardized testing and capitulation to curriculum – is furthered through the scrutiny of education's hidden curriculum. Thomas explains that this hidden curriculum exists "in the wider set of beliefs and values pupils acquire because of the way that a school is run and its teaching organized" (p. 99). Thomas asserts that memorization of material taught in class is valued more so than ingenuity and critical thinking. Finally, chapter 7 critically examines the intersection of socioeconomic status, real or perceived, and education within society: "the lesson is that it is the cultural milieu rather than any psychological

characteristic that determines a child's success or failure at school" (p. 113). Thomas concludes by attempting to separate the concepts of education and schooling and urging for a revamp of the institution.

Collectively, the book provides an insightful examination of the interrelation between the knowledge produced through education and the economic market. Education is a machine, constantly reproducing "works who possess[s] and could use particular kinds of knowledge" (p. 13). These different knowledge forms support the advancement of a capitalistic economy thereby illuminating the purpose of education. A student who cannot or even refuses to obtain these particular knowledge forms, purported as superior through education, can never truly succeed. A significant barrier to a student's ability to excel are communicative registers: "a child's social class often impose[s] different kinds of language use on its members...working-class children...have little experience with the elaborated code, so when they get to school they are instantly alienated from much that goes on there. They don't understand, literally, what teachers are talking about" (p. 85). Neoliberal capitalism commoditized language into a form of capital within education. As an instrument of the economic system, without success in schools, most often, individuals continue to face hardship within society.

However, a substantial problem, has to do with the unexamined applicability of classroom practice research. The research reviewed, for the process of learning, was initially tested on non-human animals. The possibility that perhaps the research is itself the reason for the gap between theory and praxis is not considered. A second, more substantial problem then is, the lack of acknowledgement given to non-human animals in the development of educational research. The underlying speciesism language and principles indoctrinated through educational policies creates an unnatural divide between the student and the surrounding environment. This, linked to the systematic disenfranchisement of individuals without particular knowledge forms, is an intention of the economic system which profits from the lives of non-human animals.

The editor should be commended for compiling a critically comprehensive historical recount of the birth of education. Further, a certain amount of untapped perspectives is to be expected however, those encountered in this is par for the intended reader. The role of non-human animals in education and their undeniable entanglement with global warming and therefore the recently implemented environmental education curriculum, is the foundation for my own doctoral research. There is potential to rebuild our world through education and help prevent our planet from reaching irreparable damage. Restructuring education would require a new program for teacher training, centred on the creation and implementation of oppression-free curriculum with a focus on sustainable ways of living. This kind of curriculum would need to be mirrored at the K-12 level in order for the changes to permeate outside the institution of education and make a true impact on our planet.

References

Thomas, G. (2021). *Education: A very short introduction* (Vol. 347). Oxford University Press.

Bio-note

Alyssa Racco is a 5th year doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research interests include critical animal studies, sociolinguistics, and citizenship education. Her current research explores the anthroparcial messages transmitted to students via mandated curriculum. Alyssa is currently teaching at Niagara University and is also a teacher

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