

Book Review

Hedegaard, M. & Lompscher, J. (editors) (1999) **Learning Activity and Development** Aarhus University Press

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Not many books manage to be both original and theoretically consistent when it comes to writing about education. This book may be an exception. It consists of fifteen contributions written from a cultural historical psychological perspective. The authors share the view that education and schooling relate to how societal knowledge is acquired by pupils, and learning as proceeding from society to individual. In so doing great importance is ascribed to schools as mediators of the relationships between public and personal knowledge. The book's focus is primarily children's education, but readers interested in adult learning can find much of interest (explicitly e.g. in a chapter by Ramírez-Garrido et al concerning adult literacy, but also more generally in choice of methods and theory).

The structure of the book, not accidentally, proceeds from society to individual. And it is this interweaving of societal means of knowledge production, personal knowledge, and modes of thinking, which I think as a reader, was especially rewarding. The "societal means of knowledge production" referred to here, are approached in the book by looking at art, science etc. Thus this book's focus is much broader than more traditional texts on educational psychology.

The reason why the book is recommendable, I think, is that it – through a consistent theoretical framework - explains a number of highly complex phenomena. This is e.g. seen in the book's first chapter written by Mariane Hedegaard. She takes up the hard, but necessary question, about the transformation of public knowledge into personal knowledge. The argument is that the transformation happens through the child's active use of the formal subject matter content and methods in motivated class activity. Thus teaching is thought to rely upon the teacher's motives, but also on the children's motives, since the teaching should open up for children to cooperate and communicate with each other.

Another chapter, by Georg Rückriem, illustrates the book's concern with large societal problems related to education. This chapter is downright provocative. Rückriem takes up the question of violence in school. He mocks the traditional explanations for the rising prevalence e.g. it being "caused by media", "a medical problem", or "part of development". In line with the tenet of the book he moves the focus from an individualistic problem of behavior. He argues that violence is not a problem of upbringing, but one related to knowledge. Therefore schools should not be thought of as repair shops for quick fixes following the breakdowns of

society. On the opposite, school knowledge is essentially destructive, and violence in schools will increase until the schools are essentially changed. He finds this evidenced in the obsolescence of society's scientific institutions and in the rising of new forms of knowledge e.g. from computers and other new mediational means. Though Rückriem definitely outlines some of the new educational challenges that society (and educators and social scientists etc.) face, I did not find concrete answers, that e.g. a teacher could implement in his class, or where it became clear, how institutions could make proper teaching arrangements for change to come about.

Davydov has a central chapter in the book. In it he is concerned with how appropriation of societal knowledge and learning are interrelated in learning activity directed towards the creation of some material or spiritual product. His concern is with how pupils can develop creative abilities and personality. This is interesting for two reasons. First because school education in this paradigm is thought to be able to radically transform human thinking and being. This view of course differs from views about (the limited) potential of school. Second because it at the same time is a critique of ordinary schooling, where the didactic aims are to move the learners' cognition from the particular to the general aspect of a given problem area. The problem is that such thinking easily can be developed outside school. In school programs initiated by Davydov the learners appropriate general knowledge and then move on to see the many particular appearances of the material. This is highly interesting, and there could have been given even more examples on how the learner actively transforms the learning material. However the reader finds further elaboration on these problems for instance in the chapter written by Nina Talyzina, where she shows, how generalization can be mediated by a subject's activity with objects.

All in all, the different contributions come around central aspects of the interconnectedness of society, institutions and individuals as it relates to education. But unfortunately - apart from the introductory chapter written by the editors - the authors do not reflect on each other's contributions. For instance Georg Rückriem uses Bern Fichtner (who is also a contributor in this book) and his critical assessment of the demands of society and the demands of the child and his future. But he does not mention Fichtner's chapter arising some of the same points in this book. Furthermore a few chapters (e.g. Rückriem) refer to literature, which is not listed in the reference-list. It must, however, be emphasized that the book is a rare glimpse into educational psychology outside the mainstream Anglo Saxon tradition. It is a scholarly work highlighting the importance of societal conditions for learning activity.