BOOK REVIEW

A review of *Systems Theory for Pragmatic Schooling: Toward Principles of Democratic Education*, by Craig A. Cunningham, 2014. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, xi + 176 pp. ISBN 978-1137449313.

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Systems Theory For Pragmatic Schooling (Cunningham, 2014) is a well-written, thought provoking read that pushes educators and policy makers to consider their own beliefs about the current state of American public education. Cunningham works within a Deweyan paradigm of progressive humanism and incorporates systems theory to unpack schooling as a complex adaptive system which cannot successfully operate under the current constraints of standardization. 'Schooling' is Cunningham's term of choice when referring to education, as it more fully encompasses "the *intentional* process of organizing the activities of learners to produce learning" (pp. 9-10).

Clear themes emerge as Cunningham supports his thesis, that we must reconsider the democratic purposes of education and the means by which we achieve them. The first theme appears early in chapter one and describes the foundation upon which our schooling system is built. A complex, triangular interaction is constantly occurring between society's political economy, prevailing ideology, and the schooling system it constructs and reconstructs through reforms. Cunningham ably helps readers visualize this formative model before moving on to his second theme, learning. Learning is a natural, temporal, and evolutionary journey of **experiences** and interrelationships with others and entities inside our awareness and is influenced by entities outside our awareness. His final theme identifies the generic traits all living systems share. He then uses these to successfully situate schooling as a living, complex adaptive system.

Cunningham provides a clear argument as to why 'outsiders,' those outside the schooling system—among them, politicians and members of state school boards—fail to envision the kinds of reform that could bring about positive changes in schools. First, outsiders have corrupted the ultimate purposes of schooling to align them with capitalists' interests, instead of supporting purposes that would increase the capacity of all students to flourish and thrive in the 21st

century. He makes an apt reference to Ravitch (2010) but gives no reference to Lipman's (2011) work, which provides many specific examples of the neoliberalization of American public education. Schooling should aim to engage students in joyful, "deep learning, critical awareness, [an] understanding of systems and complexity, and belief in the value of democratic discourse" (Lipman, 2011, p. 8). Outsiders have also failed to conceptualize schools as systems composed of unique characteristics: contexts, student bodies, strengths and weaknesses. In answer to the question, "What *is* a school?" (p. 18), Cunningham defines it as a nested, complex system of people, relationships, interactions, activities, artifacts, emotion-filled acts, and cognitive transformations that make the very context much more than the "physical building" itself.

Why then, do we have "this kind of curriculum" (p. 9)? Here, Cunningham's answer could be enhanced by Doll's (2005) study of curriculum history, in which he shows the linearity and division by subject content of American curriculum reflects Peter Ramus's arrangement in the mid-1500s. However, Cunningham gives an excellent description of how curriculum has devolved into "a grab bag of random isolated facts and disconnected skills, assembled with attention to marketing to test-anxious administrators and harried teachers, rather than presenting a coherent picture of our complex world" (p. 9). This description supports one of his major theses, that current reform has all but destroyed the purposes of education.

In Cunningham's chapter, "The Complexities of Schooling," he identifies four sources of complexity: "multiple diverse people" (p. 64); individual students; learning as a complex process; and, the unique, situated contexts of schools and individual classrooms. I take some exception to Cunningham's broad description of diverse classrooms, in which he negatively portrays teachers struggling to manage multiple students' behavior while supporting the learning of all (p. 65). Master teachers do manage these complexities every day and build caring relationships with and between students. (Cunningham waits to refer to caring and Nel Noddings' (2012) work in a later chapter.) It could be that, in his attempt to convey to outsiders the complexity teachers encounter daily in their classrooms, he simply chooses to emphasize those aspects teachers find most challenging. Indeed, he shows mathematically how, in an average "classroom of 23 students, one text, and one teacher, there are 300 possible [initial] interactions" on any given day, the complexity of which multiplies as ideas and questions are generated across the curriculum.

Education researchers may infer a challenge to their methods of collecting data in Cunningham's caution not to overlook "the experience of teachers and students" (p. 78) when investigating what makes schooling so complex. He then proffers two modes of investigation. We can 'conceptually and temporarily' take 'still shots' of schooling's complexity at different levels to obtain a simplified picture that may provide us with a better understanding of momentary inputs, processes and outputs. The inputs include "people, funding, materials, knowledge, values, and energy" (p. 79). The processes with these inputs include the "development of aims and priorities, content (curriculum), teaching, learning, management, scheduling, facilities, maintenance, quality control, finance, and perhaps research" (p. 79). The results are seen as outputs: "educated people and waste products, as well as jobs for teachers and staff" (p. 79). Alternatively, we can seek to understand schooling's nested state within ever larger systems, thereby uncovering all its complex connections that together explain its "function and purpose."

I wonder if Cunningham read beyond Fleener's (2005) introduction to *Chaos, Complexity, Curriculum and Culture*. If so, he probably found many of Doll's (2005) ideas closely match his own; ideas about moving away from rigid, objective-driven curriculum to an emergent one. Doll (2005), a dyed-in-the-wool Dewey enthusiast like Cunningham, also has something to say about play in his "pedagogy of practice" (pp. 44-45). Within the same text, Trueit's (2005) conception of poiesis (pp. 77-99) might expand Cunningham's discussion of the creative potential of imagination in students' acts of transdisciplinary inquiry.

Ultimately, Cunningham uncovers complexities of schooling and student learning, thrusting the limiting factors of standardization into the foreground. He also exposes 'student failures' as an inherent consequence of the current situation. Educators are invited to realize their own unique potential to change the schooling system. We all may hope policy makers will take a moment to read Cunningham's relevant piece for pragmatic schooling and that a paradigm shift will ensue; schooling, such that students are expected to learn rather than perform, express creativity rather than conform, and experience the birth of intrinsic motivation as a result of authentic, evidence-based assessments of their progress.

References

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