

BOOK REVIEWS

Socially-Critical Environmental Education in Primary Classrooms: The Dance of Structure and Agency

Jane Edwards Springer International Publishing, New York, 2016
doi: [10.1017/ae.2017.2](https://doi.org/10.1017/ae.2017.2)

Reviewed by Jorja McKinnon, Deakin University, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

In the opening sentence to Jane Edwards' preface she writes, 'How to best prepare children to participate in, contribute to and confidently embrace the changing opportunities of our rapidly evolving global community is a challenge faced by every teacher in every school'. This statement's sentiment is carried throughout the book as Jane takes readers on a journey that strips back the layers of what pedagogical change, to cater for these skills in students, means to classroom teachers.

In stripping back the layers, Jane asks the reader to reconsider traditional aspects of educational research as she explores Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration as an ontological framework not yet established in educational research. There is a call for researchers to move beyond what Jane considers as two compartmentalised educational research findings: those that address subjective factors and those that address objective factors. Jane considers the value of Giddens' theory to be 'a theoretical perspective for understanding human phenomena by focusing on the process by which social structures are produced and reproduced over time and across space while being transformed through human interaction' (p. 62). Within the ontological framework, there is a recognition that individuals are able to interpret and incorporate social experiences into personal knowledge and belief systems. The framework of structuration means that the subject and object are now no longer seen as separate compartments but positions the structure and agency as a duality that incorporates the notion of praxis (p. 62). While the term 'praxis' is used throughout research within the social sciences, it is used here to describe how individuals use experiences to enact change and how this occurs within structural influences. It is these structural influences that shape an individual's knowledge and beliefs, and this is at the heart of Giddens' theory of structuration.

Chapter 4 gives comprehensive examples of how Giddens' structuration framework has been adapted effectively for use across a wide range of social contexts. In the opening paragraph of this chapter, Jane expresses concern that the field of educational research has been slow to embrace Giddens' ideas and puts forward the idea this may be due to concerns of validity for structuration as a theoretical basis for sociological research. When considering the duality of structuration, that of structure and agency, of the subject and the object, I see links that can be made to Merlu-Ponty's work on phenomenology (Merlu-Ponty, 2002). The broad ideas that individuals as the object are intrinsically moulded by environmental factors and absorb change via subjective focuses gives further credit to how the nature of structure and agency can influence classroom teachers' ability to adapt to pedagogical change and the challenges of overcoming the rhetoric-reality gap.

Socially critical pedagogical change and its associated rhetoric-reality gap becomes the core concept explored throughout the remainder of the book. Specific focus is on the success of the implementation of the Sustainable School Program (SSP) to address the goals of Education for Sustainability. Chapter 5 gives the account, via case studies, of six primary schools, to highlight the experiences and perspectives of teachers who are asked to implement the socially-critical pedagogy needed for the SSP. Each story is considered to provide insight for the reader into the three main factors that contribute to the rhetoric-reality gap:

Rhetoric — the teachers' understanding of the curriculum guidance documents related to the SSP and the socially-critical pedagogy embedded with them;
Reality — the manner in which the teachers were implementing the socially-critical pedagogy of the SSP and;
Teachers' experiences of implementing the SSP within their school — the relationship between structure and agency in the teachers' work environment.
 (p. 95)

As the teachers from each school are introduced, their ontological in-situ frameworks are recognised as informed by Giddens' theory of structuration. Having moved with the author on the journey, there is now richness to the discussion regarding the critical elements of the duality of structure and agency that is the underpinning reality of the teachers' classroom practices. Chapter 6 outlines the classroom practices in terms of permission and support; knowledge required to implement the SSP; the need to implement socially-critical pedagogy; and previous teaching experience. This is an important part of the story, as it defines the teachers with best practice and the teachers with rhetoric-reality gaps. It is during chapter 8 that the influence of Giddens' theory of structuration informs the notion of teachers' environmental and educational ideologies, and ontological security.

In pulling the ideas together, Jane makes clear 'the effect of each teacher's educational ideology was best illustrated by the manner in which they chose to utilise their power and authority in the classroom, and by what they perceive to be the goal of their classroom strategy' (p. 239). When rationalising what this means when considered in terms of Giddens' theory, there becomes a knowing that individuals act within an 'unconscious safety system' (p. 240), which is termed 'ontological security'. In the concluding portion of the book, Jane demonstrates how Giddens' theory of structuration can influence how educational researchers understand ontological security and reduce the prevalence of rhetoric-reality gaps for the successful implementation for programs that seek to guide educational change.

Reference

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002). *Phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge

Reviewer Biography

Jorja McKinnon is the STEM Catalyst Project Manager with Deakin University and also undertakes various teaching roles within the university. Jorja was a secondary science teacher before joining the tertiary sector. Her background includes working with land management agencies as a field scientist and with Zoos Victoria. Jorja is currently completing a PhD with a focus on the coupling of STEM education with environmental education. Jorja is also an employee of Environmental Education Victoria and provides guidance and professional development for the VCE Environmental Science teachers in Victoria.