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Critical analysis and review of an educational anthropology monograph or book

Tangled Up in School: Politics, Space, Bodies, and Signs in the Educational Process

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Tangled Up in School: Politics, Space, Bodies, and Signs in the Educational Process

Jan Nesor (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum), (1997), 256pp., \$22.50 (pbk), ISBN 0-8058-2653-X

Theoretical assumptions and presumptions were the dominant perspectives in the 1970s (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). Sociologists of education viewed schools as reflection of society and were merely concerned with how schools symbolized society in a mirror where the pictures either affected evenly or unevenly in the classroom. Also, the theory of social reproduction was clear in the 1970s when assertion was made that schools prepared students to function in the same manner delivering them from their classrooms to the social system. In the 1980s, theorists moved from assumption to empirical studies where data were collected to narrate what happens in classroom, school, and society without building an interrelationship amongst any factor. According to Hargreaves & Fullan (1998), anthropologists, in the 1990s, began to think in a more sophisticated approach towards school matters. Studies started to look at classroom, school, community, district, and county as a one interwoven entity.

Jan Nesor's book, *Tangled Up in School*, is a case study research based on examining those layers (school, community, and county) carefully to see how much they are related together as a "tangled" web. According to Page 1999, Nesor's book is an evolution in qualitative research as he continues to draw postmodern and practical theories of studies into sociocultural issues. He does not look at incidents in isolation schools and society "are not isolated systems of meaning; they intersect with flows of representations and systems of images" (p.xiii).

In *Tangled Up in Schools*, Nesor is holding a field research asking certain questions to school officials, parents, and kids. This research takes place in Thurber Elementary school (Roanoke, VA). The reason for choosing this school is its diversity of blue-collar neighborhood;

“54% of the kids were European American, 39% African American (bused from outside the neighborhood), and 7% Asian American or Latin American.” (p.xiv). In his research, Nespor, was observing and participating in a variety of settings in and around Thurber, including classrooms, PTA, school board and administrators, city council, and community and neighborhood streets. He also supported the principal and teachers in taking various decisions and giving them the theories’ points of view. Moreover, Nespor conducted interviews and audiotape with a wide variety of students, parents, and teachers to record their experiences in and out of the classroom.

Nespor’s book is a complex and sophisticated research that needs us to pay specific attention to the details provided in each chapter. Hence, in my critique, I divide my analysis into two parts: First, the important factors that Nespor built his research web on, which he describe in details as the relationships and the reasons that tangle up schools, society, politics, and economics together; he gives these minute-details for his postmodern study in the first three chapters. Second, the weaknesses that the author had fallen into and how he would avoid them to save himself from being tangled.

One of the important factors in Nespor’s book is his understanding of the real rather than the artificial relationship between what happens in the classroom and what happens in the social context; in other words, different contexts are not taken as individual variables. Thus, he questions any predefined issues and looks for “flows rather than states” (p.xiv). He interrelates the threads of the schooling web rather than finding discrete solutions. Nespor is aware of the continuous fraction between context and people from one side and the structure of people’s agencies from the other side (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). For example, in chapter one, he

tackles a clear cut dispute between teachers, parents, and the school grading system and digs the surface unravel the deeper political change and socioeconomic decline reasons. Nesor takes us into the political “clean-up” that was going on in the county and how politics derive superintendents and principals to act and try to justify confusion and incorrectness to parents and teachers. Consequently, he shows how teachers have little role in the selection of innovations and parents are also outside the innovation process.

Another factor, in Nesor’s research book, is his study of the relationship between schooling and what is going on in the community and the socioeconomic politics. For instance, he provides narration of how the corporate world influences the way schools and curriculum are designed to serve their own agendas. In chapter two, Nesor traces the devastating evolution of Roanoke’s economy and the ironic parallelism of the pairing up of the elementary school (in this economically devastated area) with a corporate partner to create an “innovative curriculum to classrooms into corporate economies” (p. 54).

Last factor is his methodology in showing how the classroom connects with the society is built upon factual data “fund of knowledge.” He interviewed students and parents, observed teachers and principal, and looked at districts archives and media reports. This provided Nesor with a study of multiple data settings which helped with his unique descriptive style in the research. According to Hargreaves & Fullan (1998), Nesor’s *Tangled Up in School*, brilliantly “highlighted the links, flows, and interactions between school and society.” In chapter three, Nesor used all of his documents to study the surrounding community and neighborhood of Thurber. He studies the kids’ perspectives and how they try to carve themselves in such neighborhood that is organized by race, ethnicity, and social class. Their adeptness process in

their classroom spaces help them escape temporarily from the school's overwhelming control striving for finding symbols for their own personal identities (Page, 1999). After collecting his data, he found that the school ignored the problems of underemployment, families dislocation, and social historical and geographical alienation etc. to cause confusion among: teachers and their understanding of what they are teaching, parents and their coexistence with the rapid change of the world around them, and students and their harmony with their social identity.

According to Levin and Riffel (1997), the first three chapters of Nesper's book could help educators understand where their schools lies in society and how teachers could avoid being passive and unknowing what is going outside in the social context that affect the whole paradigm inside their schools.

The weaknesses in Nesper's *Tangled Up in School*, are the degradation of the level of persuasiveness from chapters 1-3 going to chapters 4-7. The excessiveness of referring back to his colleagues theories and book referencing showed Nesper as tangled up himself in the web of book marketing and publishing propaganda (Egan, 1997).

After chapters 1-3 it suddenly became difficult to follow or understand what he is targeting. For instance, this following quote "Economic and political forces, along with organizational fields, shape bodies, instill in them certain dispositions, and most important, situate them in flows of activity that move them physically in certain ways and connect them to distant activities spread across space and time (Nesper 1994)" (p.119) to me is just too showy; he is just trying to superficially connect himself to academic discourse with an unneeded level of complexity.

What Nespor is tangled up in is the publication market and the seek for one's peer acknowledgement (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1999). The threads of political favors and agendas and their influence in community and school districts was strongly presented in the first part of the book. Then the second part appears to be difficult and less politically sophisticated to put the power of the thread in a weaker position and disconnects this second part from the first part. I would suggest that Nespor would put this last part under a strong editing process to eliminate marginalization of the main strong case study.

To conclude, I agree with Nespor's last part about the relationship between academic professionals in education and teachers as a process of "mutual accusation" (Page 1994) in schooling issues. According to Early (1994), in the US, discussions between these two parties carries a "culture of bruising" of a boxing match until one knocks the other down. These definitions carries me to the idea of the necessity for universities' involvement in the learning process and curriculum design, and mutually understand what the schools are tangled up in rather than just studying their cases in isolation. This will enable both to untangle the knot and mingle together academia and knowledge with factual data brought from the field of study i.e schools, classrooms, teachers, students, and parents.

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