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The legacy of postmodernism in educational theory

Postmodernism has left behind a mixed legacy for educational theory. Through a shared distaste for Marx, Hegel and dialectical thought, it has contributed to a weakening of class analysis in education studies, and helped shift the focus away from material understandings of inequality to one seemingly framed by the politics of identity. Postmodernism and its acolytes also helped to create the so-called theory wars in fields such as literacy criticism, which found their way into educational theory and helped to turn theoretical debates into often quite polarised, sour and unproductive forms of one upmanship. The effects of this are evident in today's theoretical scholarship, which often offer entrenched intellectual positions on education with little in the way of fruitful dialogue between them – a form of intellectual siloism that has slowly crept up on educationists, with little acknowledge of its existence or where it came from.

But postmodernism, for all its flaws, also made a vital contribution to one key subject in the field of educational theory – the theory of knowledge. The forensic-like work of Foucault, Lyotard and others placed conceptions of knowledge centre stage, and triggered a debate about knowledge production and application that helped position epistemological concerns at the forefront of educational thought. Although postmodernists cannot claim a monopoly on theories of knowledge – the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Norbert Elias among others suggests otherwise - the postmodern turn paved the way for the creation of an intellectual space that could be shared by a diverse set of ideas, from Belenky et al's focus on women's way of knowing (1986), through Richard Johnson's take on the 'really useful knowledge' of the working class (1979) and the various efforts to valorise indigeneity as a source of legitimate knowledge (Connell, 2007).

The postmodern turn has placed the spotlight on knowledge and in doing so has certainly opened up education to greater scrutiny. Curriculum, assessment and pedagogy cannot be shielded from these epistemological concerns, which is evident in the legitimate modern day struggles over the decolonisation of educational institutions. In this way it could be said that postmodernism has not really 'ended' at all and is very much alive and well, at least in the field of educational theory. If this is the case then what comes after postmodernism is a more focused version of postmodernism, one that can make a legitimate claim to theoretical significance around what is a key concept in educational studies. It remains to be seen, however, whether this legacy can shake off the theory politics of the past and help inform more reasoned and rigorous debate over epistemology and education.

References

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