EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Book review

Donald, D, Lazarus, S & Lolwana. P (2002) **Educational psychology in social context** (2nd edition). Cape Town: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0195780515 pbk.

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Up to the mid-1990s, Educational Psychology was dominated by two overarching philosophical approaches in South Africa. In most of the more conservative universities, Fundamental Pedagogics was very influential, with Educational Psychology often housed in Faculties of Education rather than linked to the teaching of Psychology. This often led to the marginalisation or even alienation of Educational Psychology from mainstream Psychology, both due to differences in understandings of "deviations from the norm" and the therapeutic approaches espoused and applied. In more liberal universities, departments of Educational Psychology took more progressive approaches, drawing theoretically from humanistic, social cognitive and even psychodynamic schools of thought. In such departments, critical approaches to the focus on the "remediation" of problems with the individual child were followed, with teaching about "inclusive education" and responses to "difficulties in learning" being seen as part of the continuum of good teaching practice. It has therefore been a challenge to develop a text to draw academics and practitioners together from such diverse approaches, to enable the teaching of Educational Psychology to be responsive to the particular context that now pertains in South Africa. Whilst such seminal texts such as Woolfolk (2004), now in its ninth edition, may provide sound generic principles and foundations, the examples and illustrations drawn from and dominated by the American context, as well as the cost, has meant that such texts could not easily be prescribed. The unique nature of the South African context, the challenges of providing for students studying in English as second language, as well as the need to shift the worldviews of those steeped in traditional views of learners and teachers, have all contributed to the urgent need for this text book.

I looked forward to the publication of the second edition of *Educational psychology in social context* with great interest. The first edition, published in 1997, was a useful introductory text, but there were a number of shortcomings, and I was therefore not able to prescribe the book for the course I co-ordinated at the time, as I had hoped. The problems I had with the first edition related to its limited theoretical coverage, the way the material was organised, and what seemed to me an uncritical view of educational

developments in South Africa. I will therefore consider these issues in relation to the new text, but will first give an introduction to and overview of the book.

The authors of this text have all been working in the field as it has evolved over the past decade and more, and are well qualified to write such a text. They have also consulted widely and appropriately. Educational psychology is by no means a unitary field, and in South Africa, it covers both what the Americans term School Psychology (the "work" of qualified and registered educational psychologists) and Educational Psychology (the application of psychological theory to the broader field of education, as by teachers and administrators). A book such as this needs to focus on the impact of the broader political, social and economic issues on the lives of learners and educators, as well as on the specifics of tackling everyday management and issues related to learners whose performance is challenged in various different ways. All of this needs to be related to the rapidly changing milieu in education in South Africa, as stakeholders at all levels grapple with the implications of the application of the new curriculum. I believe the authors have met these needs.

In order to give a broad coverage of the field, as well as to provide an introductory text, the authors have chosen to use an ecosystemic framework to organise the contents, starting with the macro issues first and progressing towards more micro issues later in the book. They use their own annotated diagram of a tree, repeated at pivotal parts in the text, to assist the reader's orientation to the text. This drawing is described as a "symbolic representation of the interrelationship" between the "different elements and overall aim of the book" (p4). Whilst the use of such a tool might irritate the more sophisticated reader, it provides an organising tool for students and gives some coherence to the book.

After a useful introduction and chapter outlining the prerequisites for quality in education, the authors provide a broad theoretical framework. They cover the ecosystemic approach well, and then move on to the work of Piaget, Vygotsky and Erikson related to human development (locating these in a transactional model). In the last chapter of section II, constructivist approaches to making sense of learning processes are outlined and the contributions to the concept of learner motivation are discussed. Although the coverage of theory is of necessity brief, the key issues are highlighted, with a focus on the application of the theory in the classroom, rather than concentrating on the details of the theories. In section III, the authors concentrate on strategies and approaches to the creation of healthy school and classroom environments, taking a proactive position before moving on, in the last two sections, to social, contextual and individual issues impacting on effective learning. I believe that this sequence of topics works well, giving a number of creative suggestions to teachers rather than dwelling only on problem issues.

One of the strongest features of this text is the inclusion of a number of relevant and diverse case studies. They are very useful as a teaching tool, and their utility is enhanced by further references to them at later points. This means that the case studies are used, in different ways and contexts, to assist readers in viewing the same issue from a variety of perspectives, bringing the issues to life.

The book is aimed primarily at pre- and in-service teachers, and much of it is purposely written in everyday language, making it more accessible than many other texts. However, I found such statements as "The theory in this section is not easy. No theory is ... " (p42) patronising, though I am sure the intentions were not so. The authors use techniques such as text boxes, a glossary in the margins with the in-text words chosen for explanation in italics, chapter summaries (at the beginning of each), questions posed for reflection at various points, issues for debate, and suggestions for activities and possible projects. Such tools are found in most introductory texts, and are well utilised here. The items in the suggested reading lists were carefully selected, and the short description of each is helpful to the student. However, I would have liked to see summaries given at the end of chapters (with a brief outline at the beginning), and I found the typesetting and design crowded at times, with a couple of the drawings rather naïve.

Overall, I believe that this edition is a considerable improvement on the first, and that this text will now make a valuable contribution at undergraduate and PGCE level. However, for me there were a number of irritations related to detail, which I believe detract from the quality of the text. Firstly, the promise of mind maps in the first chapter is not adequately followed through. The example on p14 is not a good one, because it does not follow the generally accepted conventions (as in Buzan, 2003). Mindmapping is a complex skill, and if it is to be used there is the need for an appendix with a clear set of principles to follow, with in-text follow through. The Mindmanager website *http://www.mindjet.com/eu/index.php* provides a useful resource. Perhaps I am being pernickety here, but this is a skill that few students manage pick up because it works counter to linear note-taking practice. It needs a carefully modelled approach with students actively involved, in order for them to incorporate it as a useful study skill.

Then, some of the diagrams are helpful: for example the levels of system related to the educational process introduced at 3.5 and judiciously repeated at a number of other points, those illustrating the idea of the ZPD at 4.2 and 5.2, and the diagram at 6.2 integrating elements of the school as organisation. Others are less helpful, for example the relationship between placement alternatives at 10.2, and the remedial cycle at 10.3. At times there are irritating juxtapositions of diagrams and text: an example is the description of the styles of conflict resolution, where one feels that to save a page, the illustration is placed where it best fits the pagination, and one has to page back and forth to make links to the relevant text (pp264-266).

From a content perspective, I have some quibbles. Firstly, a paragraph juxtaposing Piaget and Vygotsky as contemporaries, but also showing how their differing contexts and cultural influences influenced their theories would have added interest. Then, Lifeskills education is a well-established approach originating in the late 1970's and early 1980s in Britain and USA. A paragraph about its origins would have been useful, and Lifeskills should be written as one word – not hyphenated or as two words (both found in the text). Third, assessment is covered in five pages, with no reference to standardised testing. I do believe that a brief mention of, and some critique of standardised testing should have been included (since so many educational psychology texts devote whole chapters to this topic). Fourthly, there is little mention of bullying, a perennial and widespread problem in our schools; this could have been part of a discussion of aggression (perhaps linked to the sub-section on "violence"). Fifth, I was

shocked to see "vocational guidance" used as terminology in two places – this is a very outdated term, since career development is now seldom linked to "vocations", and the term "career education" is preferred because "career" refers to the series of occupations and roles that typifies 21st century working life. Sixth, although the authors refer to the exponential growth in the number of orphans in the next decade on p258, they only include one page about dealing with HIV/AIDS in the classroom, and do not explicitly deal with the issue of coping with death and grief as a very real problem for a growing number of our learners. Lastly, although I am aware that many students may still not have computer access, those in urban areas do, in growing numbers, and I believe that some judicious references to the ever-expanding wealth of material located on the internet would have been good educational practice.

To conclude, in this second edition, the authors have addressed some of the concerns I had with the first edition. With the theoretical section more robust, and better organisation of the material, I believe that this book is now a useful resource. The text is still rather uncritical of the implementation of educational reform in South Africa, and the treatment of some issues is rather cursory, however, as an introductory text, it has potential to play a valuable role. It is to be hoped that it will make a contribution to building a better foundation in educational psychology for teachers, and might lead more to become interested in the field, study further, and play their part in reform in South African schools.

REFERENCES.

Buzan, T (2003) **How to mind map: Make the most of your mind and learn to create, organise and plan.** London: Thorsons.

Woolfolk, A (2004) **Educational Psychology** (9th ed). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.