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Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality

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Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality, by Wayne Au, Abingdon, Routledge, 2009, 189 pp., US\$ 34.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-99071-4

Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality is a forceful scholarly manifesto. Author Wayne Au states that his 'hope is that the work completed here serves to highlight the deleterious effects high-stakes tests are having on the educational experiences of children' (p. 105), especially under the onerous dictates of the US federal policy of No Child Left Behind. With tight analyses of underlying societal and schooling processes, *Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* attains Au's hope and provides transformative space to consider solutions.

In this well documented, relatively concise text Au contributes mightily to moving the conversation forward on the significant rise of public policies for standardized testing in primary and secondary public schools. His work is likely to serve as an important and critical baseline upon which critical scholars and practitioners can reflect and build. Au takes readers through 'a series of critical analyses of the relationship between high-stakes testing and educational inequality that embody several approaches' (p. 14). These approaches represent an ambitious, coherent, and theoretically rich synthesis of critical educational theory in the context of historical scientifically managed education and its relation to structures of capitalism *before* the author delves more deeply into 'the overt relationship between [US] federal education policy and the interests capital, linking these relationships to ideologies of inequality, social efficiency, and neoliberalism' (p. 51). Hence, his first three of six chapters provide a foundation for what is to come.

For some critical theorists of educational policy the first half of *Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* might be the primary approach for investigation. Au, however, takes his historically based approach to political economy and begins a process that melds with a critical sociology of education or what Zeus Leonardo labels in the 'Afterword' as an exemplary example of 'Critical Social Theory ... [that] utilizes interdisciplinary knowledge ... [where] criticism is not only deconstructive but reconstructive' (p. 147). Au does this in part through two successive chapters that diligently expand on the works of, among others, critical educational theorist Michael Apple (one of Au's mentors) and the late sociologist and linguist Basil Bernstein. To make this analysis accessible to a wide audience is no small task, but Au's methodical and nuanced reconceptualization is exceptional in interpreting and extending both Apple's and Bernstein's concepts and applying them to the eventual effects of high-stakes testing on both teachers and students at the classroom level. His synthesis demonstrates how the current testing regime not only distributes knowledge differentially and reduces recognition of multiculturalism but

also how standardized tests ‘inherently (re)produce inequalities associated with socio-economic relations external to education through the *selective regulation and distribution of consciousness and identities*’ (p. 136, emphasis added).

To accomplish this task, Au regularly tries together the content of his chapters by cross-referencing and reiterating previously described information in the context of newly introduced concepts. *Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* skillfully interweaves macro and micro perspectives on the implications of the twenty-first century creation and application of standardized tests. This co-editor of *Rethinking schools* – a quarterly publication originally initiated by public school teachers concerned about issues of equity and access – moves intrepidly throughout this book from ‘particular level[s] of abstraction ... in order to work downwards toward the materiality of classroom practice’ (p. 124). Thus, he is not one-dimensional and reductionist in meeting one of his stated goals ‘to consistently side with complexity over simplicity because the relationship between schools and social reproduction is complex’ (p. 142).

At the end of his text, Au pauses to explain why he chose *Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* as the primary title for this book. He explains,

Design implies conscious action. It denotes a process. It implies actors and relations between actors, and therefore simultaneously implies groups (classes, communities, cultures) and social relations. Design, then, frames the creation of inequality as a process, as a product of human social and material relations. (p. 143, emphasis in original)

Au adeptly accomplishes this task by expanding on a detailed meta-analysis on standardized testing he has presented elsewhere (see Au, 2007) and incorporated in part here.

This book holds obvious applicability for theorists and policy practitioners. Faculty who wish to use this text with their students must be willing, as necessary, to provide their students with a foundation appropriate to engage with Au’s concepts that underlie practices associated with material consequences on the life opportunities of millions of children and youth and the agency of their teachers. If equity and transformation of current schooling conditions are to be attained, *Unequal by design: high-stakes testing and the standardization of inequality* is a beacon to help realize ‘the potential to be *equal by design* should we so choose’ (p. 145).

Reference

- Au, W. 2007. High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher* 36, no. 5: 258–67.

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