

ANN ELISABETH LARSON

30. SHIRLEY STEINBERG

Unwavering Commitment to Social Justice

Teacher, intellectual, scholar, innovator, provocateur, improviser, and champion for social justice, Shirley Steinberg has demonstrated a long-standing, unwavering commitment to examining how power is situated within social and cultural contexts. Indeed, through her scholarly work and socio-political action, Steinberg is a powerful advocate for just change, possibility, and improvement of the human condition. Currently, a professor of Youth studies at the University of Calgary and Director and Chair of The Werklund Foundation Centre for Youth Leadership, Steinberg's pro-active engagement in the global community is nothing short of remarkable. She is the author and editor of numerous books and articles which focus on themes related to cultural studies, critical pedagogy, urban and youth culture, and popular culture. And, many of these publications have been with her beloved late partner and collaborator, Joe Kincheloe, both of whom are co-founders of *The Paulo and Nita Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy*.¹ Steinberg is a frequent media contributor and has been honored with numerous national and international awards.

CRITICAL THOUGHT

As one who studied Steinberg's work in graduate school and as a participant in her sessions at a variety of international conferences, what is strikingly clear of Steinberg's disposition is her ability to inspire those of us in education and other disciplines to embrace the role of what it means to be an agent of change. A significant aspect to Steinberg's thought is to take seriously the notion of what it means to be "critical" and its link to pedagogy, praxis, and educational thought, all of which is sometimes not deeply explored in teacher education programs. In other words, Steinberg's work provokes contemplation and a commitment to action that transcends traditional boundaries of theory-to-practice orientations in education and certainly in teacher education.

For example, as a response to conventional societal achievement norms such as the bell curve which have unfairly and inaccurately differentiated cultural groups, Steinberg's extension of multiculturalism to what she characterizes as critical multiculturalism is a call for teachers to adopt pedagogies that push the intersection of power, identity and knowledge and move learning and experience

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to emancipatory change (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Gresson, 1997). Her edited text, *Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood* (2011a) coined the term kinderculture, which has become part of the popular cultural lexicon and is based on a critical theory critique of the extremity of capitalistic influences on children in contemporary society. Kinderculture also critically describes the commodification of early childhood, violated by a corporate culture that emphasizes consumerism over nurturing children's genuine interest, choice and independent thought in their interaction with a world where privilege is often confused for ability.

Media Literacy: A Reader (2007), co-edited with Donald Macedo, has proven to be a popular text in teacher education language and literacy methods courses and in applied English courses (National Council Teachers of English, 2012). The text promotes a position that while many believe that humans exercise and adopt agency, they are, in truth, recipients and agents of a myriad of social, cultural, and political influential forces. The media is a powerful contributor to these forces and affects how humans make sense of the world and act through behavior and decision-making. Media literacy creates a participatory culture in which people who live in a global society experience opportunities for civic engagement, artistic and cultural expression, fluid dialectical exchange, and informal mentoring. Through these interactions, Steinberg emphasizes the power of social connections, which are formed in multiple media modalities through affiliations, expression, collaborative problem solving, and circulation of knowledge and ideas, thus resulting in a more highly empowered conception of what it means to be a citizen in the modern world (Steinberg, 2010). Moreover, Steinberg challenges educators to consciously attend to the dynamics and complexity of education in a democratic society, which is under continuous threat in a policy environment that pushes simplistic political views and approaches for reform (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006).

In their compelling work, *A Tentative Description of Post-Formal Thinking* (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1993) and *The Post-formal Reader* (Steinberg, Kincheloe, & Hinchey, 1999), the authors argue a theory of post-formalism, contending that although 20th century psychology, including Piagetian and post-Piagetian theory, is acknowledged for significant advancement in the field of psychology, "a time for reassessment" has arrived. That is, while neo-Vygotskian theories and analyses and situated cognition have risen as primary tenants within the discipline of cognitive psychology, the texts claim that the interactions and connections between social and psychological dimensions of learning theory and educational psychology are essential in educational studies. The authors point to post-formal thinking as a theory that concerns questions of meaning and purpose, multiple perspectives, human dignity, freedom, and social responsibility. Building upon the work of numerous scholars in the field of curriculum theory and curriculum studies, post-formalism calls upon teachers to guide learners to critically inquire, to uncover hidden assumptions, to observe relationships, to deconstruct what they observe and experience, to connect logic and emotion, and to attend to context. To be sure, an infusion of post formalism theory into educational course activities, experiences,

and assessments holds promise to bring communities of learners together around what is, and what could be right with the world.

Other of Steinberg's works and collaborations, *Teaching Teachers* (2004); *Teen Life in Europe* (2005); and, *Cutting Class: Socioeconomic Status and Education* (2007) have collectively illuminated the powerful point that those who work in education in whatever capacity should embrace with full awareness and grounding of what critical pedagogues are compelled to do in their work, which is fundamentally to examine, unpack and reconstruct the curriculum they teach, creating a critical culture for learning where students are active agents in their striving toward the making of a more hopeful, democratic world. It is in that context, that classrooms become empowering spaces for both educator and student.

CURRENT FOCUS

Continuing on with a common theme that has threaded the trajectory of her life's work, Steinberg's most current scholarly efforts have been intensely focused on the cultural, social, and education development of youth. Using leadership as a framework to enhance the capabilities and life successes of young people, Steinberg's work, through *The Werklund Foundation Centre for Youth Leadership Education*, shows promise for impactful, translational scholarship and practice that may well turn the tide of numbers of disaffected and disassociated young people in our troubled, complicated 21st Century world. Her work and advocacy for youth and her concerns about how society views young people is a clarion call particularly for educators to positively and constructively support young people to participate more fully as democratic agents within society.

Finally, with Steinberg's examination related to research methodology, it is clear that she has significantly contributed to the thinking of qualitative research (Steinberg, 2011b; Steinberg & Cannella, 2012). Her scholarship encompasses provocative intersections of educational theory and thought, making stronger the opportunities for researchers to employ complex single and mixed-methodology studies, which enhances communities of practice within the field of educational research, all of which naturally coalesces around civic, cultural, scientific, anthropological, ethnographic, and other areas of the human condition. Indeed, Steinberg's desire to promote more diverse forms of qualitative research, and to deeply emphasize sociocultural context is a natural response to the positivist ideology that has for so long dominated mainstream policy-making.

Steinberg's scholarship is ultimately based on an exploration of culture, social issues, and education, provoking consideration on how educators teach, communicate, and critically reflect upon their work so that the learner and educator move toward a deeper understanding of self in the collective movement toward a more liberated world. Uniquely provocative and influential for education studies and a wide-range of other disciplines, Steinberg's scholarship illuminates ambiguities and contradictions. She interweaves historical, philosophical, cultural, and social

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thought to contextualize education, with the goal of posing an emancipatory and transformative perspective for educators to transform their work in schools. Indeed, Steinberg's unwavering commitment to social justice continues to challenge and inspire educators the world over.

NOTES

- ¹ The Paulo and Nita International Project is a virtual and literal archive of global initiatives in critical pedagogy, deeply committed to the study of oppression in education and how issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and colonialism shape the nature and purpose of education. Rooted in the thinking and spirit of Paulo and Nita Freire, the project supports an evolving critical pedagogy that encounters new discourses, new peoples, new ideas, and continues to move forward in the 21st Century. Indeed, the project has established itself as a global community of researchers and cultural workers who collectively possess as their aim to promote a more just and democratic world for all (<http://www.freireproject.org/>).

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