

Book review

Megan Watkins (2012). *Discipline and learn: Bodies, pedagogy and writing*.
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<https://www.sensepublishers.com/catalogs/bookseries/other-books/discipline-and-learn/>

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Large scale comparative assessments of literacy, such as PISA and NAPLAN, ignite sweeping reform agendas in contemporary education systems around the globe. These agendas target cognitive skills and competencies on the one hand, and dispositions to (life) learning on the other, to shape a productive workforce for prosperous and internationally competitive economies. With the emphasis on cognition and affective dispositions, the body in teaching and learning, and particularly in literacy learning is rarely considered in these reforms, and whenever it is, it is understood as the origin of undesired and therefore non-learning practices that divert attention from learning and therefore are unproductive (Millei & Petersen, in press). According to this rationale, bodies need to be managed for learning to take place, therefore body and learning and body and mind are portrayed dominantly in their Cartesian dualism. Engaging somewhat remotely with this context, Megan Watkins, in her book titled *Discipline and learn: Bodies, pedagogy and writing*, adopts this dualism as the starting point for her theorising and reconceptualises the notion of the 'learner' as 'mindful body' in which mind and body mutually co-constitutes the learner. Watkins in her ground-breaking book focuses especially on those pedagogic practices, corporeal and cognitive, that shape or precede literacy practices and produce desires for learning to write.

In a carefully crafted theoretical part (Section 1) Watkins combines considerations of Foucault, Bourdieu and Spinoza, to theorise the 'mindful body' emphasising the embodied nature of being and processes of embodiment in relation to the role of teaching and learning. She argues that by frequenting a social space, such as the school, "bodies need to conform to particular rules of motility; schemas which, while somewhat flexible, dictate speed, comportment and spacing between animate and inanimate bodies" (p. 22). The production of "useful individuals" through techniques of disciplines (regulation and knowledge) (Foucault, 1977) assembles to a 'scholarly habitus' that not only "predisposes students to the regimen of academic work" but also generates an 'ongoing' desire to write. Through the disciplinary regimes children habituate a literary practice and a relation between the body and the object (pen, crayon etc) that they perform with a sense of flow. As Watkins continues: "It is only with the incorporation of this bodily know-how, and the disengagement from the very physicality of writing, that children possess the necessary cognitive capacity to focus more directly on the content of their work; the form and content of what to write" (pp. 27-8).

The innovative theorising of the ‘mindful body’ is followed by the examination of the ‘body’ in relation to teaching and learning in New South Wales English syllabus documents to provide a “yardstick of pedagogic practice” (p. 63) (Section 2). Moving through these documents historically, Watkins ‘traces’ how the body is constituted in these documents as ‘habituated’ (1900s-1920s), as assigned a secondary role to rational action understood in psychological terms (1930s-1960s), the body as reformed through student-directed learning and fostering desire through interest (1970-1980s), and disappearance of the body with the focus on cognitive development (1990s - today). Watkins arrives to the conclusion of her genealogy: “Contemporary pedagogy, however, still operates within an ontological framework that privileges the mind and ignores the corporeality of the learning process” (p. 91).

In the following section (Section 3), through ethnographic studies in two schools and by focusing on six teachers in kindergarten, Year 3 and 5, Watkins explores teachers’ pedagogical practices and the ways in which they produce literacy outcomes for students in a highly engaging, detailed and accessible manner. The observed pedagogical practices, that addressed both the corporeal and cognitive, included pedagogies of classroom space and regimen, the implementation of the curriculum and each teachers’ overall pedagogical approach. In her analysis of case studies of teachers and their classrooms, Watkins discusses disciplinary mechanisms’ productive effects in literacy practices on the corporeality of children that rather than limiting students’ autonomy opens up spaces for literacy learning and produces desires to write. In this way she argues that child-centred and progressivist pedagogies, if understood by teachers as offering *laissez faire* teaching methods and learning environments with the misinterpreted intention to provide children freedom and agency in their learning, can curtail students’ engagement with and benefits from the curriculum. However, Watkins also distances directed or intentional teaching from drill. She understands directed teaching as educators utilising pedagogical theories to deliberate, and become purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions with explicit considerations of the ‘disciplinary force’ (here understood as enabling rather than repressing) and the corporeal in their pedagogy that produce in children a capacity to learn, a capacity for ‘scholarly endeavour’ or empowerment to learn (p. 7).

While Watkins clearly connects pedagogical philosophies, syllabuses and practices performed by teachers and evaluates those in relation to literacy outcomes, she pays no attention to how the difference in teachers’ reasoning around ‘desirable’ pedagogies are products of larger societal contexts and reasonings. Perhaps this is one possible realm where Bourdieu’s theorising could be extended and at the same time address some critiques levelled at Bourdieu’s social critique. As Delanty (2011, p. 79) argues in his article on the nature of social critique, it is “the existence within the cultural constitution of society of what can be termed regulative ideas of reason” where “the domain of culture cannot be reduced to practices and related strategies of accumulation and exchange” motivated by the pursuit of capital, or as in this study ‘scholarly habitus’. In other words, what more is there in the social world than the accumulation of this particular cultural capital that shapes the view of the world and determines scope of actions?

Although Watkins only remotely engages with the testing regimes of the current global educational context, by taking the case of learning to write, she provides us with a timely reminder that literacy outcomes are produced through particular and complex pedagogies that concern both the mutual co-constitution of body and mind in learning, and that far exceed recently voiced 'back to basics' approaches that associate learning with the drilling of the body and mind. Interestingly however, by misreading Watkins' text one could also conclude that returning to 'basics' by focusing on the inculcation of 'scholarly habitus' in students offers a strategy to catch up on the global educational race constituted by neoliberal rationalities and accountability measures.

References

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