

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Leon Feinstein, Kathryn Duckworth, and Ricardo Sabates**, *Education and the Family: Passing Success Across Generations*. Foundations of Futures Education Series. New York: Routledge, 2008, 240 pp. \$US 47.95 paper (978-0-415-39637-0), \$US 150.00 hardcover (978-0-415-39636-3)

**R**esearch consistently finds that the more education parents have, the lower the probability that their children will experience undesirable outcomes, such as unemployment and mental health problems. Feinstein, Duckworth, and Sabates' book explores the relationship between parents' education and children's outcomes, especially between parents' education and children's outcomes, especially their educational outcomes. The book is an effort to integrate existing literature in a single conceptual scheme, and a clear and simple theoretical framework is the book's strength. Applying human ecological theory (which addresses human development and the interaction of individuals with their social environments) Feinstein et al. have thought carefully about many factors that could link parents' education to children's outcomes and the various pathways through which these factors may have their effects.

However, both readers interested in original analysis on this important topic and readers interested in finding out how important a role education plays in intergenerational mobility will find this book disappointing. Of the 9 chapters, only one (Chapter 8) includes original analysis. In this chapter, Feinstein et al. predict who will experience one or more undesirable outcomes later in life, but they fail to demonstrate that any particular policy intervention might be effective. Indeed, Feinstein et al. argue that a wide range of variables are important, but we do not really know if all of these variables collectively would explain the relationship between parents' education and children's outcomes, or even if they would explain an important proportion of the relationship. It is not the stated aim of the book to make these determinations, but some readers will be surprised that it lacks a meaningful attempt to empirically engage the questions it raises.

Returning to the book's strength — a theoretical synthesis of a large body of research — Feinstein et al. distinguish between distal factors and proximal processes. Proximal processes, which are processes that have a direct effect on children's outcomes, are interactions between individ-

uals. In the family and education context, Feinstein et al. treat proximal family processes, such as parenting styles and language use, as important proximal processes. Distal factors are social, economic, and demographic features of the environment that are more removed from actual interaction, but that influence interaction. These distal factors include family background measures that have long interested sociologists, such as parents' occupation and income. Understanding the connections between education, distal factors, and proximal processes is necessary because parents' education cannot sensibly have a direct effect on children's outcomes. Education influences children's outcomes, but the effects are mediated by distal and proximal processes, only the latter of which have direct effects on children's outcomes. (Their simple path diagrams add clarity to their proposed model, and they demonstrate the links between the different types of variables in a straightforward manner.) Feinstein et al. also include a useful category of factors, called "internal features of the family environment," which is a type of intermediary between distal factors and proximal processes. Examples include the availability of resources and parent mental health.

The ecological framework serves as the basis for an integration of a considerable body of research in Chapters 4, 5, and 6, which address proximal processes, internal features of the family environment, and distal factors, respectively. The literature review focuses on the United Kingdom, but knowledge of education in the United Kingdom is unnecessary to fully understand the arguments and benefit from the review of the literature. Many of the mechanisms are of a social psychological nature, and the human ecology model and literature reviewed are likely applicable to the Canadian context. However, while the strength of the book is a synthesis of a vast body of research, the review of literature was not completely satisfying because — despite focussing almost exclusively on quantitative research — the review generally fails to disclose estimates provided in the literature reviewed. We are told, for example, that children's perceptions of their own ability are important, but not how important they are. Instead we are told that inferring causality is fraught with difficulties and that it is unclear what portions of various relationships represent causal effects.

Chapter 7 considers other nonfamilial contexts, such as schools and neighbourhoods, and how they might interact with familial contexts. Chapter 8 examines the ability to identify children who will experience undesirable outcomes as adults. Chapter 9 considers implications of the ecological model for public policy.

Sociologists of education will find the extensive references valuable, and may see value and novelty in the theoretically informed framework

that categorizes important causes and effects of education and clarifies the multiple pathways through which various factors can influence outcomes. More broadly, sociologists interested in educational attainment and/or intergenerational mobility (especially class reproduction) would likely profit from this short book. The book is also intended for members of the public policy community, who will welcome the authors' sensitivity to their concerns, which sometimes differ from the concerns of researchers.

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