

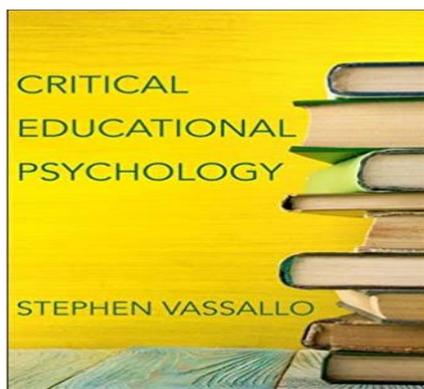


### Book Review

#### *Critical Educational Psychology*

(Stephen Vassallo, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017)

By Lucy E. Bailey



*“A significant contribution of historical ontology relates to the narrative surrounding the emergence of psychological categories and descriptions. This narrative includes the depiction of ideological, political, philosophical, and cultural battles that contribute to the emergence, acceptance, and rise to dominance psychological categories and reasoning about personas as psychological beings”*  
(Vassallo, 2017, p. 18).

### Introduction

I read Stephen Vassallo’s text, *Critical Educational Psychology* (2017), with interest. As a faculty member in an interdisciplinary social foundations unit who often works with educational psychology colleagues and students, I inhabit a kind of epistemological borderlands in which I regularly engage with and support projects animated by theoretical foundations that differ from or conflict with those in my own terrain. Historians Adelman and Arons’ (1999) characterize “borderlands” as having “contested boundaries between colonial domains” (p. 816), a generative metaphor

that might apply to intercultural exchanges in a variety of academic spaces and fields. I wondered whether Vassallo’s text, a recipient of the American Educational Studies Association’s Critical Choice Award (2018), might offer me additional insights for crossing over from my non-positivist and critical spaces to support post-positivist and realist work.

The recent rush to the motivational concept of “grit” (Duckworth, 2016) offers a productive site for illustrating the type of epistemological encounters I experience in my daily work that are salient to Vassallo’s text. Duckworth’s concept seems to have captured various educational fields by storm,

fueling research in fields ranging from psychology to science education (Crede, 2018). The term embodies characteristics of “passion” and “perseverance” that purport to explain why some people are more successful than others. Duckworth’s research in the Chicago Public Schools identified grit as a salient motivational feature for diverse students. As projects focused on this thing called “grit” began emerging in my circles and in the literature, as researchers rushed to figure how to foster and examine it in students, I began wondering about its persuasiveness as a concept. I wondered how it was functioning in discourse; which discourses were making “grit” possible and compelling; how it was serving as a seductive force in shaping research trajectories. Rather than accepting “grit” as a realist concept, or considering how to use the idea in research, I thought about the forces shaping the production, function, and circulation of the concept, as well as its implications. In short, preferring structural to psychological explanations of phenomenon, I gravitate toward scholarship that explores key concepts and phenomenon in their cultural, social, historical, and philosophical contexts.

Vassallo’s text does exactly that. It offers an incisive, organized, critical analysis of foundational ideas in the field of Educational Psychology that he argues directly or indirectly affect every area of education. It is a valuable contribution to the field. It is broadly useful because of the enormous synthesis work the author accomplishes in tracing the philosophical, historical, conceptual assumptions of long-cherished tenets of Educational Psychology. He considers the implications of areas of thought that support concepts such as “grit” and the type of Educational Self that lurks within them. Like other critical scholars, Vassallo refuses the claim that any field of

study is somehow “neutral” or “value-free.” He considers instead how such concepts as “motivation” “attention” and “development” core to the field—and sometimes mobilized as fixed and ahistorical—are in fact, cultural, infused with beliefs, governing assumptions and power relations in different sites and spaces. He maintains this critical mission as he marches topic by topic through the text. Vassallo writes from a generative insider perspective that analyzes and troubles rather than dismisses central ideas animating the field; he is an Associate Professor of education at American University, and the author of *Self-Regulated Learning: An Application of Critical Educational Psychology* (Peter Lang, 2013).

### Structure of the Text

Vassallo first describes educational psychology as the “study of human learning, thinking, and behavior in formal and informal contexts” (p.1). Although the field is diverse, it focuses broadly on creating educational practices, theorizing students, developing pedagogy, evaluating teachers, assessing learning, and exploring student motivation and emotions in the learning process in diverse educational environments. One assumption in the field is that “knowing how student think, what they are likely to do under certain conditions, and how and why they respond in the ways they do are necessary for teaching well” (Smith, 2013, as cited in Vassallo, 2017, p. 2). All of these educational projects of “knowing” and “motivating” and fostering “higher order thinking skills” rely on a range of assumptions about human beings and have implications for their education.

In the introduction, Vassallo presents his three guiding research questions: (1) “How can different theories and perspectives be used to highlight different meanings of psychological phenomena,

terms, and concepts? (2) How is educational psychology entangled in issues of emancipation and constraint? and (3) What are the historical, philosophical, cultural, and ideological underpinnings of educational psychology knowledge?” (p. 8). He details his critical analytic framework of sociohistoricist, polyvocalism, and emancipation that he applies to the 7 chapters that follow. Each chapter focuses on one area of knowledge. The introduction also includes short sections describing each of the topical foci of the chapters: (1) Knowing Your Students, (2) Principles of Motivation, (3) Higher Order Thinking, (4) Theories of Development, (5) Teaching as Management, (6) Attention and (7) Assessment and Measurement. This well-organized structure allows the reader an overview of key concepts and the frameworks he uses to highlight how systems of thought came to be accepted as “truths.”

The text offers readers with varying familiarity with core concepts an overview in each chapter. Vassallo opens each chapter using a teaching voice, explaining the components of the topic, pointing to key scholars and ideas, then raising critical questions about the assumptions and implications, particularly their neoliberal influences. This style reflects David Bartholomae and Anthony Petroky’s (1993) idea of reading “with” and “against” the grain, first teaching and summarizing, then engaging, critiquing, and extending.

### **Critical Stance of the Text**

The opening epigraph for this review demonstrates Vassallo’s critical stance in examining and unsettling the taken-for-granted stasis of central ideas guiding the field and their neoliberal contours. In drawing from historical ontology to animate

his analysis, he suggests that all ideas governing educational psychology, as with any field, emerge in specific historical and cultural contexts. The production of ideas, knowledge, and conceptions of educational subjects are always culturally-situated, dynamic, and political. Yet, iterative practice both concretizes these ideas as normative and, significantly, erases the historical and dynamic context of their production. Such terms then perform a disembodied, ahistorical, authoritative stance that enact relations of power in education and direct the educator’s gaze: how to “know” one’s students, how to “regulate” their learning, how to “motivate” them to accomplish learning goals.

He considers and unpacks the ontological assumptions underlying various cognitive and non-cognitive in the discourse of the field—from intelligence to self-control, attention, and character (p. 20). He asks questions in each chapter that invite readers to ponder along with him: What does “knowing” students mean? What are the implications of regulating student learning? How is “knowing students” accomplished? How are students imagined as educational beings? What governing beliefs dictate appropriate “attention” in learning (p. 144)? What ideas of the self are embedded in these concepts? (p. 23). What are the variables constituting a “student” that one can parse, identify, and target to shape teaching and learning in schools? What are the implications of such goals? What meanings are wrapped up in constituting students as “data” subject to shaping and influence with the correct strategies of intervention (pp. 28-29)?

His critical allegiances will be familiar to some readers. Vassallo draws from a range of theorists—Adorno, Freire, Foucault, Giroux, Marcuse, among others—

who interrogate structural relations of power. He raises concerns about the power of educational structures, including psychological constructs, to imagine and foster docility. Various concepts such as the “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1995 [1970]) and the “discipline and punishment” of institutionalized subjects to relations of power (Foucault, 1979), lurk throughout his analysis and link his ideas to a broader set of concerns about institutional and discursive power in education. Readers familiar with critical theories will appreciate the direction of Vassallo’s analytical gaze to the field of educational psychology and the persistent scrutiny—the “grit,” perhaps, in psychological terms—with which he interrogates core assumptions in the field. In critical work, no ideas are beyond scrutiny for their assumptions and implications, including those emanating from a critical stance, and none are ever innocent. They serve various power relations and often occlude the origins of their construction at the moment of their absorption.

### **Implications and Applications**

A central theme in Vassallo’s work is the importance of analyzing assumptions about human beings and the types of subjects educational psychology imagines and creates in the field precisely because of their power in informing a range of educational practices, pedagogy, and assessments. The ideas proceed from particular conceptions of the Self that become fixed and accrue ideological power. Moreover, he argues that the contemporary assumptions governing educational psychology are susceptible to the infusion of neoliberal thought and the project of creating neoliberal subjects who are “individualistic, efficient, productive, and able to regulate” their achievement and outcomes (p. 10). As many critical scholars

argue, neoliberalism coopts liberal ideas and language—meritocracy and freedom, among others—to support a free-market ideology that renders all educational, social, economic institutions servants to competition and profit rather than growth and collaborative relationships that serve democracy. While all educational sites and processes are vulnerable to such cooptation, Vassallo describes how it manifests in educational psychology.

The text is useful for a range of readers and courses, both within and outside the field of educational psychology. He wrestles to compress vast areas of thought in a diverse field to convey core ideas from a critical perspective. And to occupants of interdisciplinary borderlands like me, the detailed investigation of concepts that are more familiar to insiders of the field allow me greater understanding to foster my collaborations. The text provides clear examples of critical theoretical analysis to renders visible the assumptions and implications of key ideas. He highlights neoliberal ideologies lurking in ideas treated as “neutral” and “value-free” that would concern educators with emancipatory aims.

However teachers-scholars-students construct the subjects of their educational gaze, Vassallo suggests that we should all understand that “categories are rooted in historical moments, emerge for particular reasons, are not objective representations, serve particular ideological purposes, and contribute to the constitution of persons” (p. 24). Such claims have weighty implications. From a critical perspective, the belief that we can separate people into discrete variables (desires, motivation, identity) based on a set of assumptions about the educational self so we can examine and orchestrate our/their educational potential for our/their “own good” has paternalistic and colonizing outcomes worth pondering.

Preparing students to discipline themselves to neoliberal compliance and competition may be one of them. He sees his text as a “starting point” in this critical work (p. 200), implicitly inviting others to join the conversation.

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