

2018

Book Review: Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Action by Maria Hantzopoulos

Emma Fuentes
University of San Francisco

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre>

Recommended Citation

Fuentes, Emma. (2018). "Book Review: Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Action by Maria Hantzopoulos," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 2(1).
Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol2/iss1/9>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Human Rights Education by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Book Review

Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Action by Maria Hantzopoulos

Teachers College Press, 2016. 180 pages.

\$37.95 (paperback)

ISBN 978-0-8077-5742-0

Review by Emma Fuentes*
University of San Francisco

According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), hate crimes in the United States reached a five-year high in 2016 and have continued to rise steadily since the presidential election of that same year (Barrouquere, 2017). SPLC, along with other civil rights organizations, make the explicit link between the spike in hate crimes and the current administration's use of fear and dehumanization (of women, Black and indigenous peoples, immigrants, trans and non-binary communities, and people of Muslim and Jewish faith) as a tool to ignite their base. This administration in many ways relies on this fatal coupling of racism and ignorance to advance its objectives and in the process adds to an increasingly divided nation. Against this backdrop, the role of a critical and

* Emma Haydée Fuentes is an Associate Professor in the International and Multicultural Education Department at the University of San Francisco. As an educator and researcher, she is engaged in understanding how race, gender, socio-economic status and language intersect to shape experiences in and out of school. Her work also investigates the role of education in movement building, particularly the ways in which people build and use knowledge to bring about social change. Overall her scholarship has two key objectives: 1) to conduct research that is local and collaborative and leads to socially just education, and 2) to expand theoretical and conceptual lenses in the areas of critical race studies, movement building, popular education and participatory action research.

engaged citizenry takes on an extra important role. In fact, as the structures of state violence and institutional forms of oppression are being unveiled, there is an increasing sense of urgency for an approach to education that is centered on notions of justice, dignity, and human rights. By activating a critical agency in youth, especially those who have been most marginalized by the inequities and injustices of U.S. schools and society, we can actively build a more just future for this country. Maria Hantzopoulos' *Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Action* is an example of the type of schooling and scholarly intervention we need.

Drawing on over ten years of experience as a classroom teacher in New York City schools and over 20 years of familiarity and involvement with educational reform movements, Hantzopoulos engaged in a longitudinal study of public schools that were enacting human rights education (HRE) in both principle and practice. This compelling ethnography focuses on the participatory forms of education at Humanities Preparatory Academy, as well as other HRE-centric public schools in New York City, and the role of HRE in advancing a humanizing and dignity-centered approach to schooling. The results of this study serve as a much-needed and powerful example of a transformational model of HRE grounded in a US school context. In essence, the HRE-centric schools highlighted in this book illustrate the ways in which public schools can actively create rich spaces of learning that center on the dignity of students and teachers alike by positioning intellectual rigor and participatory culture not as separate processes but as two essential threads. In this book, Hantzopoulos offers readers an engaging visit into complex sites of micro-liberation where human dignity and academic rigor frame educational experiences. In fact, this book pulls into focus ways in which school communities can be transformational and offers teachers, students and administrators a model for which to fight.

Restoring Dignity in Public Schools also serves as a powerful counter-story to the dominant narratives of neoliberal education reform seeking answers to “failing” public schools while at the same time inching towards privatization. HRE *in action* rejects a market-based approach to schooling and offers a rich alternative vision of schools as thriving centers of learning

rooted in a “culture of care, respect, critical questioning and participation” (Hantzopoulos, 2016, p. 33). HRE-praxis, where students are learning the values of human rights and practicing these rights with others, then serves as a powerful intervention that can have tangible outcomes like fostering tolerance, respect and solidarity; leading to an increase in student social and political engagement; and directly impacting student achievement and retention.

Hantzopoulos’ timely book helps to reposition public schools not only as sites of transformative potential, but also as academically rigorous spaces where youth are motivated to do well and stay in school. It is important to be able to point to an educational project that is centered on affirming and upholding the human dignity of students and teachers, which then leads to successful academic outcomes within and beyond the school itself. For example, according to NYC Department of Education data, schools included in this book maintain higher graduation and college acceptance rates and lower dropout rates than other NYC public schools. *Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Practice* positions HRE into the larger educational reform arena where it is currently mostly absent, yet urgently needed. The book offers a way for readers to link their radical imagination to concrete examples of ways in which this approach has real and transformative impacts on student and teacher experiences, and on overall academic outcomes.

This book joins a growing body of work that focuses on transformative models of HRE in US school contexts (Canlas, Argenal, & Bajaj, 2015; Katz & Spero, 2015). In reading the rich testimonies of teachers and students, it becomes clear that essential lessons of HRE, such as the recognition of human dignity and a responsibility to others, are woven into the culture and curricula of schools. We are able to see the practical and concrete ways that HRE is effectively operationalized. Whether teachers and students name these processes as HRE or not becomes less important than the tangible ways a culture of care, respect and human dignity permeate their daily lived experiences. Some may argue that since the school itself does not label what they do as “HRE,” it may not be accurate to define it as such. I argue that this book shows a rich portrayal of HRE in

action, above and beyond the articles listed in the UDHR, and thus allows for an important analysis of HRE and social justice models of education. *Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Action* offers an opportunity to explore and unpack the ways that HRE and social justice educational models are positioned in relationship to each other. This book reminds us that these fields are not separate but inform one another and are enriched when we see them as overlapping models of educational praxis, which we so desperately need.

Hantzopolous' writing in *Restoring Dignity in Public Schools: Human Rights Education in Action* is concise and engaging, making it interesting and accessible to a wide audience. Scholars in the field of education, specifically those interested in HRE and social justice praxes, will appreciate how her book moves us toward more dynamic understandings of how these two fields enrich each other and interact. Educational researchers will also find this text an important addition to the ongoing conversation about neoliberal educational reform and effective models centered on human dignity and educational equity. Teachers will find the student and teacher testimonies useful openings for greater reflection on their own practices and school cultures. Parent and community organizations will also find inspiration in the accounts of student agency and community transformation that can, in turn, fuel their own struggles for educational justice.

References

Barrouquere, B. (2018, November). Midterm elections in Trump era bring high engagement from racists, extremists. Southern Poverty Law Center. Retrieved from <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/11/07/midterm-elections-trump-era-bring-high-engagement-racists-extremists>

Canlas, M., Argenal, A. & Bajaj, M. (2015). Teaching human rights from below: Towards solidarity, resistance and social justice. *Radical Teacher*, 103, 38-46.

Katz, S. & Spero, A. (Eds.).(2015). *Bringing human rights education to US classrooms: Exemplary models from elementary grades to university*. New York: Palgrave