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Book Review

*Critical Human Rights, Citizenship, and Democracy
Education: Entanglements and Regenerations*

Edited by Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet

Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018. 234 pages.

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Poverty, violence, and discrimination persistently dictate the lives of the majority of the world's population. Manifestations of inequalities are continuously becoming more pronounced on a global scale, despite extensive efforts in human rights, citizenship, and democracy education across the world. The goals of these educational initiatives are to create empowerment in order to secure justice and dignity for all human beings. In *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship, and Democracy Education: Entanglements and Regenerations*, the editors, Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet, have compiled the research of international education scholars and experts that seek to critique and renew these critical pedagogies in pursuit of a disruptive impact on ever-increasing inequalities.

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In their introduction, Zembylas and Keet (2018) embark on their critical project by establishing that programs of citizenship, democracy, and human rights education (CDHRE) have (a) converged to the extent that renders distinction difficult—thus they have been collapsed into CDHRE—and (b) need to become more self-reflective and self-critical. At a time when these educational initiatives have proliferated and governments have integrated them into formal education curricula, Zembylas and Keet (2018) call for the advancement of CDHRE. The editors argue that in a field where practitioners believe in the “good” of their educational praxes, there will be a resistance toward acknowledging that their professional efforts not only fail to work toward their objectives, but very often go against them. However, in order for these educational endeavors to respond more effectively to the social injustices we are facing today, critique and renewal are urgently necessary. In a reader-friendly manner, the editors premise their contributors’ chapters with five sets of questions that the chapters engage with, which adds value to the clear structure of their compendium.

The introduction is followed by twelve chapters that are divided into two equal parts: Part one consists of six chapters treating key theoretical issues, and part two highlights six case studies. The theoretical work reconsiders existing educational frameworks to the advancement of educational praxes with a social justice focus. The common thread in the first six chapters emphasizes that because human rights are so closely intertwined with democracy, and in fact “form the core of democratic political conceptions of justice”, and since democracy has been corrupted by neoliberalism and Eurocentric standards, CDHRE needs to be regenerated as *critical* CDHRE in order to fulfill its main objective of empowerment (Al-Daraweesh & Snauwaert, as cited in Zembylas & Keet, 2018, p. 87).

In each of the six chapters the reconfiguration strategies approach CDHRE from a different vantage point, which shifts from historical and decolonial to discursive and narrative to a philosophical approach. These multiple perspectives give the reader a comprehensive understanding of where both CDHRE’s deficiencies and its potential power lie. All of the chapters in part one critique CDHRE. However, some of the chapters leave

the reader with a more pessimistic or even destructive outlook on the future of CDHRE than others that are more constructive in their criticism.

In the chapter “Toward a Decolonizing Approach in Human Rights Education: Pedagogical Openings and Curricular Possibilities”, Zembylas (2018) argues that the contradictions within human rights education (HRE) emanate from the colonial condition we live in today. The most obvious contradiction is that everyone is guaranteed human rights by the United Nations, but in reality most people do not have them. Zembylas asserts that HRE “has not only failed to address these contradictions, but it has also legitimated a narrow and uncritical type of human rights discourse in education” (Zembylas, 2018, p. 35). Therefore, the human rights field needs to be renewed by way of decolonizing strategies in order to redirect HRE away from Eurocentric universals toward becoming the social justice project the UN had conceived it to be. Zembylas (2018) goes on to discuss strategies of how to decolonize HRE, and in the last section of his chapter, conceptualizes a decolonizing pedagogy and curriculum in human rights. This praxis-oriented approach especially stood out to me as a teacher because Zembylas (2018) offers an alternative theoretical concept and consequently demonstrates how it could potentially be implemented as a pedagogical practice. Furthermore, Zembylas (2018), along the lines of Jonathan Jansen’s post-conflict pedagogy (2009), emphasizes the importance of considering the emotional implications of HRE, which I believe should generally be given more space in the discussion of pedagogy and practice.

In the second part, the groundbreaking case studies indicate a direction of where critical CDHRE could be headed when implemented successfully. The contributors offer a wide range of innovative and critical implementation strategies of CDHRE, thus advancing emancipatory praxes, and in some cases even countering some of the arguments made by contributors in the first part. The social-justice focused projects include an interdisciplinary approach, child-centered objectives, a discursive alternative, intradisciplinary critique and comprehensive school immersion in HRE.

As a student and teacher of HRE, I found this multifaceted compilation of critical studies on educational theories and praxes to be an

extraordinarily rewarding read. The contributors do not accept the status quo of formal accomplishments of CDHRE (the proliferation of educational praxes, the inclusion of the pedagogies into school curricula and constitutions, teacher education programs or the promotion of programs furthered by the United Nations), but rather challenge how all of these efforts have not yielded more results for the many who cannot take human rights for granted.

In my personal reading experience, the largely optimistic case studies with examples of thriving critical CDHRE were helpful in reestablishing my faith in the emancipatory potential of social justice-oriented pedagogy that had been somewhat shaken by part one, which was sometimes critical of CDHRE to the point of being destructive. However, the unforgivingly discerning studies of this volume's contributors have challenged my own complacency as far as my HRE practices and studies are concerned. I highly recommend Zembylas and Keet's (2018) book as an inspiring read for practitioners and academics alike that offers a kaleidoscopic critique of CDHRE and serves as a valuable resource for those working with human or citizenship rights. Whether in education, law, sociology, social work, or international development, this book encourages us to maintain a critical attitude toward our own praxes and challenges the reader to work toward the advancement of critical CDHRE.

References

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