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## Book Review: Children's Rights Education in Diverse Classrooms: Pedagogy, Principles and Practice by Lee Jerome and Hugh Starkey

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# Book Review

*Children's Rights Education in Diverse Classrooms:  
Pedagogy, Principles and Practice*

by Lee Jerome and Hugh Starkey

Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 289 pages.

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\* **Junko Tanaka** was born and raised in Japan, where she taught at a public elementary school for four years. She immigrated to the United States in 1999 and obtained a master's degree in Teaching English as a Second Language. Junko began teaching in California in 2001. Engaged in teaching Japanese language and culture in addition to the core curriculum in English, Junko has been promoting human rights education through ethnic studies. The highlight of her curriculum is the Fred Korematsu biographical play project, and she coordinates a school-wide civil rights assembly every year to teach the principles of democracy and equal rights through the life of Fred Korematsu. In 2020, Junko received the Elgin Heinz Teacher Award for her contribution to the education of diversity and social justice through Japanese language and cultural education. Currently, Junko teaches fourth grade and is raising three children while pursuing a doctoral degree in human rights education at the University of San Francisco. [jtanaka@dons.usfca.edu](mailto:jtanaka@dons.usfca.edu)

I began reading Lee Jerome and Hugh Starkey's book in the summer of 2021, right after ending the most challenging period in my teaching career, caused primarily by the Covid-19 pandemic. At that time, I witnessed how children's right to education was degraded during a year-long shift to virtual learning across my Northern California school district. The delay in coordinated efforts to provide humanizing, in-person instruction led to severe mental health issues and academic loss among students, which exacerbated long-standing educational inequities. What finally broke my heart was seeing how the unprecedented political polarization in the United States worsened this situation, often fueled by former president Trump's dangerous rhetoric. As a result, children's needs were - and still are - regularly ignored. Even after Trump left office, lingering political conflicts continue to interfere with efforts to rebuild the nurturing educational environment that children deserve.

Looking into this disappointing moment, Jerome and Starkey's *Children's Rights Education in Diverse Classrooms: Pedagogy, Principles and Practice* (2021) provides a comprehensive, humanistic framework for educators and adults who work with children, offering a guide for teachers to interrogate their roles and responsibilities within the vision of a student-centered, rights-based school system while advancing scholarship in human rights education and children's rights education. Based principally on the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which is the mostly widely ratified international human rights treaty in history, Jerome and Starkey offer theoretical and empirical insights into teachers' individual and collective work in education, relationships with students, understanding of human rights and children's rights, and the agency and activism needed to fully realize children's rights education. The book's premise that students are rights holders and teachers are the main duty bearers serves to encourage educators to reevaluate their stance in schools.

In the first section, "Definitions and Developments," Jerome and Starkey (2021) argue the UNCRC is the best foundation for a rights-based classroom. They focus on the three principles of children's rights: provision, protection, and participation. Through the efforts of the United Nations,

the vision of human rights education (HRE) and children’s rights education (CRE) has been expanded and redefined, but the implementation of CRE often creates tension in schools because existing norms and practices do not conform to this vision. In order to further the objectives of HRE and CRE, Jerome and Starkey emphasize the importance of (1) providing teacher training to adopt a rights-based approach, (2) placing HRE and CRE in the curriculum or school activities without fragmenting or distorting its principles, and (3) creating a network of collaborating stakeholders to sustain CRE. These suggestions led me to reconsider how some of my own HRE projects can be expanded beyond my classroom. For example, engaging my fourth-grade students in a Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) poster presentation has heightened their human rights awareness and helped them use the UDHR as a lens to analyze real-life issues of in/justice. While networking and collaborating with other teachers is challenging without district-led HRE training, Jerome and Starkey argue that a bottom-up approach makes a difference. After reading this book, I felt encouraged to forge greater alliances with my colleagues to share my work.

In the second section, “Ideology and Interpretations,” Jerome and Starkey (2021) clearly paint their ideal role of teachers within CRE, as well as drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Célestin Freinet to construct a pedagogy of CRE that “[challenges] economic inequalities resulting from globalization and the resurgence of far-right identity-based politics” (p. 143). They adapt Freire’s concept of transformation<sup>1</sup> to form the core of CRE pedagogy and to encourage teachers to seek ways to engage students with real-life human rights issues in the classroom, while inspiring and empowering them to take action for transformational change in their community. Similarly, drawing upon Dewey’s educational philosophy of democracy that sees children as equal citizens with the same rights as

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<sup>1</sup> See the conclusion in Chapter 5 for the major aspects of Freire’s concepts adopted in CRE (pp. 118-119).

adults, Jerome and Starkey suggest that a trusting and respectful community should be built where children can collaboratively learn a new set of values, knowledge, and properties by binding their own knowledge and perspectives with others from diverse backgrounds.

Moreover, Freinet's pedagogical model of cooperation<sup>2</sup> refines this CRE approach to develop citizenship and democracy through collaborative learning. This section innovatively combines these theories in guiding teachers to connect their lived experience and knowledge of human rights education to their contexts, pushing them to envision new possibilities for more democratic and culturally relevant classrooms. The most valuable lesson that I learned was how incorporating students' voices into the decision-making process can empower them and activate their agency to protect and defend their rights.

The third section, "Pedagogy and Practice," pairs practical advice for implementing CRE with successful examples of how these principles are realized in the learning environment of the individual classroom, across the whole school, and in the larger community. From my vantage point as an elementary classroom teacher, the most immediately useful takeaways include identifying pitfalls for applying CRE, especially the authors' notes on how excessive adult authority can limit or depoliticize children's rights. One common hazard is centering CRE only as a tool to manage students' behavior, which made me realize how detrimental the popular use of approaches like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is at schools like mine: it tokenizes students' participation to follow school rules for free toys. We can easily distort CRE without careful critical reflection.

Furthermore, after reading this book, I also came to reevaluate a school-wide civil rights assembly that I coordinate annually in which students in my class create and perform a play to tell the story of Fred

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 6 for three crucial characteristics of Freinet's pedagogical model of cooperation (p. 130)

Korematsu.<sup>3</sup> This project has bolstered my students' agency as citizens to raise racial justice awareness in our community. After eight years of coordinating this event for my class, last year all classes in the school actively participated in this event. But a question occurred to me about students without Japanese heritage related to whether the event has been able to spark their connection to these issues of injustice and foster solidarity. Jerome and Starkey (2021) argue that the teacher's agency is vital to "devise realistic next steps to address weaknesses and promote greater depth of engagement and criticality in implementation" of CRE (p. 211). Reading their words spurred my critical examination of my own positionality, potential biases, and relative privilege to transform my HRE projects to be more inclusive, intersectional, and impactful for diverse groups of students and their families.

In the last chapter, Jerome and Starkey (2021) summarize a set of principles and standards of CRE and conclude by asserting that students' capacity to realize human rights can be supported by the use of effective CRE strategies and positive interactions with their teachers and school staff. Thus, the teacher's agency is critical to share the CRE vision and, through collaboration, to challenge inequity and injustice while also engendering hope and optimism.

Reading this book challenged me both personally and professionally. I often paused and reflected, frequently with regret, on my own inconsistency as a children's rights advocate, but I also grew frustrated with my school's decision-making processes as I learned about CRE. For example, when several positive Covid-19 cases were confirmed in the school and I witnessed their negative consequences, my frustration peaked. At first, the strict quarantine policy shocked students from the affected

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<sup>3</sup> Fred Korematsu is a Japanese American civil rights activist who fought against Japanese American incarceration during WWII. To teach about Fred Korematsu's life, see *Fred Korematsu Speaks Up* written by Laura Atkins and Stan Yogi (2017). To teach Korematsu's case, see *Korematsu v. United States: Japanese-American Internment Camps*, written by Karen Alonso (1998).

classrooms because they, mostly healthy children, suddenly had to stay home without interaction with their teachers and classmates for a week or more. The district's poor leadership did not permit a modified quarantine, which would have safely allowed continuity of in-person learning despite clear recommendations to this effect by the state and local health department. Moreover, the district did not provide specific procedures for affected classroom teachers to continue to stay connected to their students during the quarantine. To mitigate this situation, some of the affected classroom teachers conducted Zoom sessions to minimize the harm. Without discussing how to better protect the children's right to education at school, other teachers criticized this move at a staff meeting under the guise of teachers' freedom and equity. It was sad to see how these teachers' mindsets reverted to selfish motivations as they encountered more and more stress as the pandemic progressed.

This small incident confirmed how important it is for individual teachers to commit to CRE and maximize their capacity for collective, positive change. A critical analysis of our own positionality, privileges, and oppression within neoliberalism is also vital to understand how teachers themselves maintain an inequitable and unjust status quo. To combat this kind of scenario, Jerome and Starkey's (2021) volume is a timely and much-needed contribution to today's academic research that hopes to advance human rights and children's rights education, while laying a foundation for teachers to transform their institutions into rights-respecting spaces. After finishing the book, I had a clearer vision of the teacher that I want to become and the relationship that I want to build with my students; I became filled with hope and excitement for creating my classroom that is a rights-respecting space.

## References

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