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## BOOK AND MEDIA REVIEWS

# Power, pedagogy and practice in human rights education: questions of social justice

Zembylas, M. and Keet, A. (Eds.) (2018) *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship, and Democracy Education. Entanglements and Regenerations*. London: Bloomsbury. 240pp, ISBN 978-1-350-04562-0, USD \$79.30 (hardcover).

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### **Power, pedagogy and practice in human rights education: questions of social justice**

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To begin at the end, Lis Lange, in her Afterword, states that 'human rights run the risk of becoming a small ideological component of neoliberal democracies or, worse, becoming complicit with injustice' unless we 'substantially engage' with the causes of 'social upheavals' in the world and the diminution of associated rights. This, the conclusion to a book that is part of a series designed to contribute to 'a platform for genuinely socially committed critical educators to express their ideas in a systematic manner', is a grand ambition, and one to which Zembylas and Keet's collection positively contributes. Their book demonstrates that, as Hughes, Loader and Nelson (Chapter 8) make plain, 'education is not neutral'; that it is, in fact, a political act.

To this end, Zembylas and Keet bring together twenty-one scholars to engage critically with human rights, citizenship and democracy education. The authors are drawn from a range of disciplines; these include Education, Law, Philosophy, and Politics. Importantly, they are also an international team, offering perspectives from Canada, Cyprus, England, India, the Netherlands Northern Ireland, Pakistan, South Africa, Sweden, and the USA. Both the range of disciplines and the spectrum of countries represented are important in the endeavour proposed by the editors; to offer 'a humble contribution toward' raising questions pertaining to human rights, citizenship and democracy education. What they propose is correct; the task of pursuing a 'critical project', as they describe it, is necessary, and this volume goes some way to identifying key concepts and assumptions within policy, practice and academic literature.

The book is in two parts, with the constituent chapters designed to address a list of core questions provided by Keet and Zembylas in their Introduction. They are right to admit that the subsequent chapters do not answer all of the questions posed, but they successfully highlight tensions and challenges, and sometimes propose solutions to the questions and issues highlighted. Chapters 2 to 7 form the first part of the book, a section that has a more obvious theoretical thrust than the second. Part two, Chapters 8 to 13, offers the reader case studies focusing on particular examples where human rights, democracy and citizenship education are central. It is worth noting that the contexts on which the chapters focus provide examples or refer to sites of education beyond the classroom, with a small number focusing on school education. This is helpful in ensuring that the reader does not see education as

focused on the promotion of 'socially just educational praxes' with school-aged children.

One of the strengths of the book is that the authors of each chapter take pains to define their terms. Given the range of technical terms, or words used freely and loosely, in everyday – or even academic – discourse, this is an important and supportive element of the book. In Chapter 2 Keet discusses Critical Theory and critical theories and how a 'critical pedagogical posture' is required to address the 'annihilating influence of neoliberalism's stealth revolution' (p.28). The rise of the neoliberal agenda runs through several of the chapters, but it is in Chapter 3 that Zembylas directs us to the need to decolonise human rights and human rights curriculum and pedagogy, requiring, he would assert, 'important shifts of consciousness' (p.47). Carrying on the theme of colonization, in some way, is Coysh in the fourth chapter, where she highlights issues pertaining to power and the nature of a pervasive and dominant discourse that demands to be challenged. She provokes the reader to reflect by proposing that 'HRE discourse is targeted at sections of society that are often the most powerless' (p.62) and that we need to be cautious of 'reproducing existing social relations' through the human rights education discourse we employ. The theme of power is emphasized in Chapter 5 by Adami, who encourages us to look to narratives other than those that dominate. She advocates that narratives should 'create broader understandings of the structures in which these [human rights] abuses occur, exposing vulnerability of human interrelatedness and the weakness of borders, societies, and jurisdictional protection' (p.75). An hermeneutical approach to pedagogy is advanced by Al-Daraweesh and Snauwaert in Chapter 6. The notion of deliberative democracy is central to their argument that human rights education is a morally-driven endeavour that requires 'ethical-political discourse' (p.94). Chapter 6 leads neatly to Tibbitts' Chapter 7, where she explores the thorny problem of universalism in relation to human rights education. She offers a 'hybrid solution', one where debate and 'fruitful disagreements' (p.115) are encouraged.

Chapter 8 begins the second section of the book. It is in this chapter that Hughes, Loader and Nelson take the reader to Northern Ireland to explore intergroup contact theory. They highlight the tensions between the need to promote harmony while exploring differences when working with groups in conflict with one another. Bajaj, in Chapter 9, explores how children in India's government schools regularly have their rights violated. However, throughout the chapter she considers possible ways to reimagine schooling through curricular and pedagogical innovations. In exploring the 'process of dehumanization' (p.158), Khoja-Moolji and Hakimali Merchant in Chapter 10, 'point to alternative knowledge systems and modes of living where different conceptualizations of justice, human and empowerment prevail' (p.158). In order to 'disrupt the hegemony of discourse on human rights' (p.168) they look to Islam and provide examples of 'alternate framings of justice and dignity' (p.169) from their work in Pakistan. Crossing continents, to South Africa, Ahmed, in Chapter 11, shares his empirical research, evidencing that those who advocate for and support human rights education may find their personal values at odds with the work they do. Chapter 12, authored by Covell and Howe, presents the Rights, Respect and Responsibility initiative from Hampshire, England. They assert that such an approach is 'an example of how schools can, and arguably should, provide human rights education' (p.191). They demonstrate that with rights situated centrally in the life of the school, children can become protectors and promoters of the rights of

others. This notion of transformation is also advanced in Chapter 13. Here, Spreen, Monaghan and Hillary query what human rights education might comprise and how a transformative human rights education might 'address the challenges of the historical moment' (p.209). They are interested in how 'changes in students' consciousness (intellectual and emotional)' might support them to effect change. The need to develop a 'critical consciousness' is key, they say, in considering 'diverse perspectives' (p.220) evident in today's turbulent and troubled society. This consciousness is required if 'a more just, equitable, tolerant, and open society' (p.221) is to be built.

Overall, this is an interesting volume. The questions it presents are challenging, but necessary. If there is any criticism, it is that the notions of 'education' and 'pedagogy' require some further unpacking, most likely because human rights education, citizenship education and democracy education became conflated or used interchangeably and synonymously throughout the book and the political dimension of pedagogy is perhaps under-played. This is something that may not sit comfortably with some readers. However, given the rise of the neo-liberal agenda and that far-right politics seem to be gaining traction, as seen in recent international elections, the political within education cannot be ignored. Education is not neutral. Indeed, it could not be more political in terms of what is done, why it is done, by whom it is undertaken, and whose interests are served in the process. Within the broad notion of education as political, human rights, democracy and citizenship education is indubitably political, and the authors might have addressed this more fully or explicitly.

It is important that people are not taught what to think, but how to think. Educators who are committed to social justice and are able to support learners to raise – and address – political questions of how we can and should live together are required. The notion of the activist teacher is not new, but as certain groups and their narratives become increasingly marginalised, the questions posed in this book are necessary, though not sufficient. One volume cannot surface all the questions that demand answers and associated action, but this book is a good place to begin. The various chapters speak to one another, though not explicitly. They complement one another with clear threads that run throughout the text and offer the reader food for thought – and, hopefully, action.