

CRITICAL HUMAN RIGHTS, CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY EDUCATION: ENTANGLEMENTS AND REGENERATIONS

Review by Linda Briskman

Zembylas, M and Keet, A (eds.) (2018) *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy Education: Entanglements and Regenerations*, London: Bloomsbury Critical Education.

In this ambitious collection, the editors have set themselves a complex and at times controversial task. By exposing deficiencies in the constructs of human rights, citizenship and democracy education, the way is paved to integrate the three for emancipatory praxis and enhancement of social justice potential in what they identify as the complex world of the present. These challenges encompass the social, political, economic and environmental. The book is theoretically rich and its field of inquiry can be applied to a range of settings. It is provocative in the way it asks us to extend thinking beyond critical theory, normative human rights approaches and to centre decolonising constructs.

Through the lens of the editors, citizenship education, democracy education and human rights education constitute one another. By building on theoretical deliberations and critical pedagogical work already undertaken, there is potential for advancement or what Rebecca Adami, in chapter five, calls a critical examination of human rights education for its prospective critical value. The notion of critical is at the heart of the project, in order to disrupt received categories, interpretive approaches and delve behind what is produced as truth.

The earlier chapters in the book are largely conceptual, with the latter ones both theoretical and applied. One of the central themes is decolonisation, through challenges to Eurocentrism, particularly from the perspective of silenced knowledges. A number of authors discuss de-institutionalising human rights constructs away from the dominance of

United Nations (UN) systems and what, in chapter four, author Joanne Coysh refers to as the ‘creeping regulation of human rights knowledge’. She alerts us to the way in which power operates through human rights education discourse that reproduces the dominant culture and maintains the status quo. Chapter two by Michalinos Zembylas similarly confronts universal constructions of human rights and hegemony of international instruments and how they inform most approaches to human rights education. A decolonising approach would disrupt western epistemology in order to open up to epistemic diversity.

There are complicated concepts that stretch the mind, including chapter six on the hermeneutics of human rights for deliberative democratic citizenship. Here the authors posit that citizens’ understandings of human rights and participation in public deliberations are complicated by the social fact of cultural and religious pluralism. They make a case for a morally and ethically discursive hermeneutic approach to human rights education for deliberative democratic citizenship. The chapter is not for the theoretically faint hearted.

The following chapter by Felisa Tibbitts enters a different but complementary realm on the long-standing debates on universalism, with a focus on schooling, asking whether there can be a deliberative hybrid solution. Tibbitts is critical of the monolithic approach to human rights education, which sees the values enshrined in international UN instruments as ‘self-referential and aspirational’. Tibbitts’ proposal for a hybrid approach is seen as philosophically based and educationally pragmatic, recognising both universality and particularities of values.

Turning to the case study chapters, chapter eight on intergroup relations broadly draws upon experiences of the Northern Ireland conflict, adopting theoretical approaches from psychology, particularly social psychology. The chapter revisits less than successful pedagogical approaches to creating harmony between Catholics and Protestants in schools, and advancing a case for shared education.

Monisha Bajaj's chapter on children's rights in India is simultaneously "shocking" and hopeful. We hear how children's rights are regularly violated in India, including caste and gender discrimination, negligence and violence. The introduction of human rights education with children has had some successes in overcoming injustices as well as gains achieved through legal protections and monitoring. In tandem has been the rise of social movements that figure prominently in child rights advocacy. In providing the example of the work of the Institute of Human Rights Education in Tamil Nadu, exemplars are provided that show how students become agents of change. One example is solidarity toward a student experiencing caste-based discrimination.

The chapter which follows on Pakistan brings together and extends the conceptual ideas in the earlier chapters while grounded in Pakistan and a specific case study. I found this chapter to be powerful and thought-provoking. Critiquing human rights as the dominant idiom through which injustices are expressed and drawing on critical human rights literature, the authors speak of how local and transnational organisations, as well as activists, deploy the language of human rights to advance the welfare of Pakistani women and girls. Others try to reconfigure language which still maintains ideas of dignity and protection including through an Islamic lens. The use of human rights discourse, although challenged, is often used strategically. In order to excavate the tensions, a case study is presented of a series of human rights education camps for women in Sindh, a small Shia community. The analysis powerfully disrupts as the authors state, 'the hegemony of the discourse on human rights as the only possible language for social justice'.

In chapter eleven, 'Bridging the Values Gap' by Kayum Ahmed, drawn from the South African context, the early part of the chapter highlights the metaphor of savages-victims-saviours, where the human rights movement is seen as a mechanism for transforming savages and helping victims, through the eyes of the west, including the UN. The chapter fills a gap by conducting empirical research to test out, through values, an assumption that

human rights education promotes a culture of human rights. Using three sites of study, the quantitative exploration looks at what three different types of human rights participants uphold as their own values in relation to the Constitution's Bill of Rights. Areas tested include the death penalty and abortion. The results are somewhat surprising, given that the research involved participants whom it would be expected to be strong adherents to codified human rights. From my own perspective I found it particularly interesting, living in a country where many human rights advocates are critical of Australia's absence of human rights legislation, while recognising that legislation remains a limited point of reference on its own.

A chapter that was unsettling for me, even though understanding its intent, is chapter twelve on rights-based schooling. It uses a Hampshire school case study although the chapter is set within a global context. The chapter is somewhat set apart from the others as it exalts a specific UN instrument rather than critiquing. Referential to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CROC), the authors believe that human rights can be made relevant to children at all levels. The authors suggest that the CROC's global legitimacy is 'unquestioned' and that it is of 'critical importance' as a values framework for education in schools. They see that human rights education for children can appeal to their self-interest and suggest that it can apply to understanding and empathy. I am I'm not convinced that such pedagogical approaches would convert students into human rights global thinkers or being equipped to help redress policies and practices in their own countries that may contradict CROC. For example, Australia is a signatory but is a clear violator through immigrant detention. Although the United States (US) is not a party to the Convention, is there space in the curriculum for students to look at their own government's breaches, including President Trump's separation of children from their parents at the Mexican border?

How can the important and at times controversial aspects of the book be seen as a whole? The final chapter provides a synthesis by examining what transformative human rights education might look like. It partially addresses the questions raised, with the authors bringing together

undergraduate human rights education students the day after Donald Trump was elected as US President. They offer up a comprehensive literature review of human rights education, critically examining different forms of such education. Like other writers in the collection, they discuss the concept of critical consciousness, derived from the work of Freire. An important section is the important distinction between learning youth activism and youth civic engagement and the under-studying of forms of protest by students. They importantly argue that human rights education should not just be informative and individually empowering but also oriented toward social transformation and social change. This contrasts with content that relies on laws and international instruments, and instead speaks truth to power, as the authors state.

The text will be of benefit to a number of disciplines and, perhaps most importantly, to human rights educators. There are a number of ideas and challenges throughout but, at the very least, that human rights education must be critical, should challenge the status quo, move beyond legal constructs and extend to controversial issues. It is also self-evident in the diversity of papers that pluralistic and context-driven approaches are crucial. But at the minimum, all forms of human rights education should not privilege western human rights constructs. Human rights, citizenship and democracy education needs to be defiant in opposing dominant discourses around the legal, the political and the ideological.

Linda Briskman is Margaret Whitlam Chair of Social Work, Western Sydney University, Australia.