

GLOBAL JUSTICE EDUCATION IN CRITICAL VIEW

Gerard McCann

O'Toole, B, Eburn, J and Nyaluke, D (2020) *Challenging Perceptions of Africa in Schools: Critical Approaches to Global Justice Education*, London: Routledge.

This book is based on a challenge, the challenge of addressing perceptions of change and our understanding of the complex post-colonial world that people have had to deal with on the continent of Africa. Historically, the global North has had a distinct and patronising view of the people and development of countries in the global South. It is usually framed with a sense of detachment and othering, distancing former colonial powers and their peoples from ongoing highly exploitative policies and activities. The narrative is essentially about shaping mentalities and objective retrospection in analysis, culture and perception. The outcome of this has been systemic and historic stereotyping; discrimination that is so commonplace across the global North that it has generated 'syntagmatic chains' of discourse – a cultural, social and political whisper – leading to much of the racism that exists in society today.

This hegemony has not evolved without resistance. The Black Lives Matter campaign of 2020 brought this residual racism into sharp focus and served, among other things, to highlight an Afrophobia that has been so ingrained across these societies that even the perpetrators of some of the most vexatious crimes against humanity, such as slave traders, have been casually celebrated with historic elevated reputations enhanced. What this book confidently states is that education and, particularly, social justice education, should be focused enough to take on these issues; to take on the whole range of mentalities that has led to a cultural and political perception of Africa and Africans that, in effect, continues to facilitate underdevelopment, racism and the othering of African people.

Transformative learning is about viewing the world differently. A pedagogy of critique is at its core, revealing an understanding of human

development through the lens of social justice. Often education as a subject is so protective of the ideology it emerges from that it foregoes the universal potential of learning and the humanising effects of knowledge sharing. In this, Professor Kehinde Andrews from Birmingham City University, gives a powerful salvo into this philosophy and indeed provides the rationale for this book:

“It is only by stepping out of the ivory tower that we can appreciate and educate ourselves in the wealth of knowledge that exists in the world. The world can only be as equal as the knowledge through which it understands itself” (O’Toole, Egun, and Nyaluke, 2020: x).

Our view of the world has been shaped by our history and in this regard the history of the global North has been lamentable. Its backstory is one of exploitation and its worldview today remains one of denial. Education has not escaped this ideological amnesia. Racism is a legacy of this, as is the ongoing systemic stripping of the continent of Africa to sustain the consumer binge and privilege the global North has become accustomed to. Within the education establishment, across the spectrum of disciplines and subjects, we need to be honest with ourselves about how we learn and teach about issues pertinent to the people of the global South - the simple truth being that our wealth depends on their poverty.

This collection of articles helps to give substance to transformative learning with specific reference to how the global North views Africa. ‘Decolonising education’ is maybe a term that could be used to summarise the various contributions, but it is primarily about providing a voice to critical minds on this highly sensitive issue. In this, it demands a change to our understanding of African countries and African people. Contributors from a range of disciplines present a case for an alternative way of viewing Africa, the collective academic weight of the arguments presented being worthy of a university department in its own right. The arguments are concise and pointed and begin a conversation about topics we need to scrutinise as areas of change: ‘unlearning’, trade justice, critical pedagogies in education, teachers’

experiences, representations of Africa, meaningful action, knowledge justice, race and the future of critical learning. In the opening chapter, Barbara O’Toole, David Nyaluke and Eburn Joseph state clearly what is intended:

“We make the case here for ‘critical’ global education, one which involves recognition of historical processes and contemporary inequalities (including economic realities), which encompasses critical and political dimensions of thinking and practice, and which, in the process, impacts on race relations in the local context” (O’Toole, Eburn, and Nyaluke, 2020: 5).

The drive is for process and formation, changing not only the mindset but the context of learning. And the goal is social justice.

In this International Decade of People of African Descent (2015-2024), this text is a fitting and radical interjection. It also premises a wider call to educators and social influencers from Africa to inform and change perceptions and stereotypes and to empower the African sense of self and place without the all too common dismissiveness that permeates educational and cultural reference points around the world. In Xhosa, the saying ‘umntu ngumntu ngabantu’ (we are human because of our humanity) may give some insight into the wealth of education and learning that is being neglected by not inviting African minds into the education system in the global North. Maybe it is time for Ubuntu, the African philosophy of humanity, to be rolled out across the education system.

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