

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

The Case for Intercultural Education in a Multicultural World

by Jagdish Gundare

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The Case for Intercultural Education in a Multicultural World, by Dr. Jagdish Gundara, discusses the intercultural challenges to be found in increasingly complex and unstable multicultural societies in the UK and Europe. The central thesis of the book is that the marginalization of minority groups is paralleled by declining educational opportunity among immigrants and poorer social classes, yielding grave consequences. Dr. Gundara's book is a timely publication. In recent years there has been a burgeoning interest in the socio-cultural processes that promote outcome-equity among students who come from conditions of socio-economic adversity or cultural disadvantage (as seen in the work of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Such students are often described as "at risk," a term that means to be in jeopardy of disaffection (at best), and encompasses all aspects of the social and personal that contribute to social dysfunction and academic failure.

As one reads Dr. Gundara's book, one is reminded that the challenges across each nation, community, and case-study are unique. Yet, every public school teacher who works alongside socially disadvantaged families and children plays an identical role as a gate-keeper who prevents the social and economic inequities that threaten and diminish the life-chances of their students. There can be no doubting the credentials and experience

of Dr. Gundara, but the question remains—to what extent does this collection of “essays” do the author justice? This review is written with the greatest of respect for the author’s career accomplishments, but it is of course essential to maintain objectivity where the subject matter is concerned.

For European nations, which are the focus of Gundara’s considerations, the way forward is to reconcile the cultural and social differences in communities, institutions, and societies. For the author, the resolution resides in a trans-historical curricula that creates unifying world-knowledges among people from varied economic and cultural backgrounds. This review was written on the same day that *Time Magazine* and *The Financial Times* awarded German Chancellor Angela Merkel the Person of the Year Award in recognition of her policy on immigration from the war-torn state of Syria. For both Gundara, and for some European politicians, multiculturalism has created something of a bleak social vista replete with oppression, inequity, and social instability requiring reactionary practices by the authorities. Merkel’s recent public condemnation of multiculturalism further clarifies Gundara’s observations on multiculturalism as an unsuccessful social construct. What, then, shall we do? This is the question that the reader would expect Dr. Gundara to answer.

The collection of essays continuously reminds the reader that while the challenges across each nation and community are unique, they often arise from common histories. Of central thematic importance throughout is the need for trans-historical education and social policy agendas that promote open discussion about cultural differences designed to foster inter-subjectivity and consensus. It is also a timely contribution because of an intensification of interest in outcome equity across recent years due to the expansion of enrollment in public education worldwide (United Nations, 2010)—but timing is not everything. Neither individually nor collectively do the essays adequately address how deep divisions born of centuries of conflict and oppression may be redressed by schools and colleges (for example, in the schools of Paris where Muslims rioted in 2005, 2007, and 2013). As one might expect from an accomplished academic, the essays in the collection are well crafted, yet weakened by a lack of transparency.

While theoretically deep, the collection does not drill down to the core of how differences between peoples may be resolved in our increasingly challenging times characterized by uncertainty, states of flux, and cultural fragmentation. It lacks the powerful case-study exemplars required to showcase the flash-points when those who feel

oppressed rise up. The close up “dirty-work” of elucidating the lived experiences of disenfranchised families, women, and children is ignored in favour of sweeping descriptions of those histories and cultures that subordinate them. Accordingly, “national policy” is characterized as a monolithic structure, or a single powerful instrument that can be wielded to bring about cultural harmony.

Throughout his writing there is a sense of distance from the politically disenfranchised immigrants and minorities for whom the author cares. There are consistent appeals to governments and international agencies, reflecting the elite circles in which Dr. Gundara mixes. He emphasizes that communities should be constructed as locally autonomous entities that share and discuss culture, language, tradition, and law. Who would disagree? Indeed, such an approach has been shown to have great potential by studies conducted at Harvard University (see, Sampson, 2004). Yet, this would surely require a radically progressive agenda beyond the author’s comfort zone. There is much talk of “trust and reciprocity,” yet in reality such qualities are not accessible to the other where empathy and cultural inter-subjectivity do not exist (Clark & Dumas, 2015). Drawing from the work of Freud, Gundara suggests that it is the “narcissism of small differences,” historical in origin, which continues to cause injustice and discontent.

This poses the question of what is the school’s role in diminishing distrust and fostering empathy in multi-cultural settings at the community level? This apparently central question remains largely unanswered. If the natural demographic for this collection of essays is high-level politicians and administrators, then the reluctance to discuss and define interventions and initiatives at the school and small agency level are understandable. The collection begins to look like it was written for special interest groups and associates. There is the fragrant aroma of exuded knowledge, but it is knowledge of an “ivory tower” and declarative nature. On the other hand, grass-roots-level procedural knowledge is largely absent, and there is the inevitability that the classroom practitioner may see little relevance. It invites perceptions of elite idealism that marginalize the general readership of educators, and ironically refute the essence of the trans-contextual dialogue (i.e. between peoples) that the author advocates for throughout.

While the quality of writing is high, and the rationale is reminiscent of Peter Senge’s (1990) influential “systems thinking” philosophy—Gundara calls for a joined-up inter-agency response to social inequality—the reader is exposed to an identical ideation process across the essays in the collection. There is an eventual sense of not merely

repetition, but redundancy that may lead readers to question if they have wasted some valuable time. Several of the essays are near facsimiles of each other (for example, essays 1 and 2) in their content. Presenting similar papers at different conferences is not unusual when they are presented months or even years apart or to different audiences. However, here in written form, the replication of content does not add value to overall quality or utility. Some essays could perhaps have been integrated or edited out of the collection completely.

It is always worth remembering that the written word is subject to more scrutiny than the spoken. Passages that may sound eloquent when voiced risk appearing as undisciplined rambles when transposed into words. Furthermore, when writing a serious report to simply write “many studies” is not adequate until those reports have been disseminated with in-text citations. This lack of observance is reflected in the omission of a references section except for a list of the author’s own publications. This intensifies the sense that the collection is yet another summative milestone in an impressive career. As stated earlier, there is no doubting the credentials of Dr. Gundara, or his capacity to reflect on his long experience. The most impressive aspect of this collection of essays is a message of paramount importance in the twenty-first century. The reader is made aware of the existential threats faced by immigrants’ families. To elaborate, the over-arching thematic message addresses the immoral and illegal victimization endured by innocent people in those post-modern societies that fail to recognize the fair treatment of women, children, and non-indigenous peoples. Despite the criticisms relating to audience, applicability, and depth/focus cited here, it is worth picking up this volume and choosing an essay at random as a brief yet meaningful contribution on an issue that should be more accessible to us all.

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