

2023

Book Review: Critical Human Rights Education: Advancing Social-Justice-Oriented Educational Praxes By Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet

Lori Selke

University of San Francisco, lselke@dons.usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Selke, L. (2023). Book Review: Critical Human Rights Education: Advancing Social-Justice-Oriented Educational Praxes By Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 7(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol7/iss1/10>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Human Rights Education by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Book Review

*Critical Human Rights Education:
Advancing Social-Justice-Oriented Educational Praxes*

By Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet

\$119.99 (Hardcover/Softcover), \$89.00 (eBook).

ISBN: 978-3-030-27197-8

Review by Lori Selke*
University of San Francisco

It is hardly much of an insight to state that human rights are most often honored in the breach than in the observance. As an abstract concept, human rights are much admired; on the ground, however, they operate more as an ideal that too often seems to fail to persuade. Certainly, it would be hard to argue that in the 70-odd years since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations in 1948, that there has been a substantiative reduction of human rights abuses around the globe. The Declaration gave us the language to talk about those abuses, and the field of Human Rights Education (HRE) was supposed to provide the tools to implement those articulated ideals. However, though we may call human rights “universal” and conceive of them as inalienable, the truth is that is a convenient fiction in the same way that “born this way” is: a shortcut to bypass fruitless debate over basic principles. Human rights, in other words,

***Lori Selke** is a doctoral student in the International and Multicultural Education department at the University of San Francisco. They live in Oakland, California and work as an adult ESL/ELL educator, editor, and writing coach. Their research interests include writing pedagogies and LGBTQIA+ issues in language education. They have been active in queer, feminist, and gender-expansive cultural circles for many years. lselke@dons.usfca.edu

like any other idea, is a human construction, bound in time, and subject to the limitations and shortcomings any human idea is bound to possess.

This is not to say that the concept of human rights – and HRE – is not important. The UDHR is in fact a much more impressive feat if you recognize that it was created through a massive cross-cultural convening of minds and hearts intending to craft a document that would survive the social and political upheavals of the late 20th century and beyond. But it is to say that perhaps HRE has for too long been lacking in one of the essential pillars of social justice praxis: critical self-reflection.

There are reasons for this. Authors Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet suggest in their new book *Critical Human Rights Education* that on more than one occasion, HRE has been captured by the neoliberal agenda and, as a result, is primarily administered in a top-down and invasive fashion by powerful Western-based international agencies who are invested more in maintaining the imperialist and post-imperialist status quo and/or extending the project of globalized capitalism than in their titular human rights missions. The authors outline in their introduction how they began as energetic advocates for the idea of HRE, only to be confronted with the field's contradictions and limitations. They intend *Critical Human Rights Education* to provide both a diagnosis and a cure. The key word here, then, is obviously “critical.” Zembylas and Keet do not mean, in this case, to refer only to a Freirean lens. Indeed, they lean on Tuck and Yang's (2012) critique of Freirean critical pedagogy as being too deeply rooted in Western intellectual traditions to fully address key areas of social justice. Most notably, Tuck and Yang argue that postcolonial and anticolonial praxes are neglected in classic Freireanism; Zembylas and Keet concur. In the concluding section of the book, they advocate for a “pluralistic” human rights approach that allows “other geographies and historical thinkers who approach rights from perspectives beyond Europe (i.e., Third World, South, indigenous)” and embraces complexity and multiple points of view (p. 150).

Critical Human Rights Education is as dense and theory-heavy as they come; expect discussions of plasticity, “affect and counter-conduct” (p. 105), and aopretic inquiry. Nonetheless, this slim volume may be poised to become

a cornerstone for thinking about not only the limitations but the future directions of HRE. The authors thoroughly explore both the theoretical groundwork for alternative approaches to human rights pedagogy as well as suggesting directions for implementing the resulting insights in practice. This book should appeal to anyone interested in integrating HRE with other social justice schools of thought. For me, it dispelled once and for all the lingering doubts I had retained about this field as a fruitful avenue for advancing social change. In particular, the discussions of neoliberal capture as well as what the authors term “counter-hegemonic distrust” let me know that I was not alone in perceiving certain gaps—what the authors would call “chasms” (p. 152)—between theory and praxis. For this alone, I would recommend this book to any serious student of the field. Zembylas and Keet have provided a solid example of how to love an idea so much you cannot help but thoroughly address its flaws in the hopes that it can reach its true potential as a positive force for social change.

Zembylas and Keet are hardly the only voices with a cogent critique of HRE as it stands today—see, for example, Argenal (2022), Coysh (2014), Cranston and Janzen (2017), Echeverría and Cremin (2019). But the authors clearly welcome a full-throated and polyphonous critique of HRE. Their stated purpose in writing *Critical Human Rights Education*, after all, is to offer an opening for a more grassroots, pluralistic, and fluid conceptualization of human rights and human rights pedagogy, one that is grounded in a bottom-up rather than top-down approach and can be responsive to local concerns. This necessitates the inclusion of multiple, including and especially decolonial, points of view, many of which they draw from extensively within the text. The authors of *Critical Human Rights Education* are clear that they consider this volume as the beginning of a much-needed conversation—one that they convincingly illustrate began before their publication, and one that inherently has no end.

References

- Argenal, A. (2022). Human rights narratives from Myanmar: Decolonial and relational approaches to solidarity. *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 6(1). <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol6/iss1/5/>
- Cranston, J., & Janzen, M. D. (2017). A critical approach to teaching about, through, and for human rights. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 8(3). http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cjsotl_rcea/vol8/iss3/2
- Coysh, J. (2014). The dominant discourse of human rights education: A critique. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 6(1), 89-114. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jhuman/huto33>
- Echavarría, J. & Cremin, H. (2019). Education for territorial peace in Colombia: What role for transnational peace? *Journal of Peace Education*, 16(3), 316-338. DOI: 10.1080/17400201.2019.1697068
- Tuck, E. & Yang, K.W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education, and Society*, 1(1), 1-40.