

Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 45 | Issue 1

Article 8

May 2016

Book Review: Peacebuilding, citizenship, and identity: Empowering conflict and dialogue in multicultural classrooms

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Recommended Citation

Pattison-Meek, Joanne M. (2016) "Book Review: Peacebuilding, citizenship, and identity: Empowering conflict and dialogue in multicultural classrooms," *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*: Vol. 45: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol45/iss1/8>

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Book Review: Parker, C. (2016). *Peacebuilding, citizenship, and identity: Empowering conflict and dialogue in multicultural classrooms*. Rotterdam, Sense Publishers. 222 pp. ISBN 978-94-6300-245-5.

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The ways in which teachers acknowledge or ignore social difference in multicultural classrooms will inevitably shape how students respond to conflicts, injustices, and diversity issues in their own lives as citizens. Traditional approaches to citizenship teaching generally disregard or misrepresent the various identities and inequities that inhabit classrooms and communities. Students, whose realities are not reflected in the dominant group's knowledge, cultural norms, and dispositions, are inevitably marginalized. Curricular content and pedagogy that do not affirm the diversity of lived experiences among students, particularly immigrant youth, close off opportunities to explore what an inclusive, pluralist society might look like. Peacebuilding education, a critical alternative to prescriptive pedagogies, is part of the architecture that provides opportunities for all students to express and include their diverse experiences and backgrounds in the curriculum. Christina Parker's book explores such inclusive approaches in three urban classrooms populated by ethnocultural minority immigrant children in Toronto, Canada.

Democratic peacebuilding is presented here as a process whereby teachers purposely embed various identity-linked political, historical, and religious issues into the curriculum to invite conflict among students as opportunities for learning. "Through eliciting diverse and critical perspectives that question dominant assumptions," Parker argues, "conflict dialogue recognizes and acknowledges difference" (p. 131). The opening chapters describe and justify a framework for inclusive peacebuilding education, to guide the careful analysis of themes and pedagogical patterns that emerged in classrooms in this revealing ethnography. The skillful manner in which vignettes capture critical classroom incidents and conversations throughout the text brings to light how some ethnocultural minority students, introduced in Chapter Three, experienced peacebuilding education. Such depictions, complemented by Parker's astute personal insights, are powerful to show how classroom pedagogies that infuse students' diversities can create democratic learning opportunities to support students to view conflict from multiple perspectives, a necessary element in a pluralist democracy.

In Chapter Four, Parker demonstrates how each of the three teachers implemented a range of conflict dialogue processes "in ways that seemed to contribute to students' critical interpretation and response to various social-conflict issues" (p. 50). The teachers, themselves all having visible minority identities, extended the prescribed (official) curriculum to make it more relevant, accessible, and thus inclusive of the various ethnic identities and citizenship experiences residing in their classrooms. The inclusion of political, religious, and historical events, purposely linked to students' own lived experiences and cultural histories, invited diverse students – many who had arrived in Canada from conflict-affected regions – to think about, share, and listen to their peers' perspectives about past and present conflicts. This is a worthwhile finding to illustrate how identity-linked issues, when positioned as conflictual, can incite students to share their personal perspectives, thus affirming different religious identities and immigration experiences that might otherwise be ignored.

Chapter Five focuses on how implicit and explicit curricula functioned in the three classrooms to confront, as well as to support, prevailing hierarchical social structures in schools and Canadian society. As Bickmore (2014) explains, "peacebuilding is impossible without

attention to the conflicts that otherwise impede just peace” (p. 555). Parker rightly argues that learning activities that take up conflict – to engage students in critical reflection and discussion about differential power relations and social exclusion – are important for newcomer immigrant youth so that they may see themselves as “agents of change in their new society” (p. 96). Teachers’ facilitation of role plays and (electoral) simulations as conflict-learning activities appeared to help students to locate their voices and develop critical consciousness through sharing their own experiences with marginalization. Importantly, this chapter also highlights how all three teachers tended to uncritically support acceptance of patriotic values and Canadian cultural norms in their pedagogies. Such an approach closes opportunities for transnational students to safely explore and discuss any internal conflicts they may experience as a result of holding multiple identities and loyalties (to Canada and their ancestral homelands).

In Chapter Six, Parker reflects on how various factors may (re)shape students’ participation patterns. These consider diverse religious identities in secular public school settings, silence as a mode of participation, the inclusion of diverse voices, and the role of social and academic statuses embedded within small and large group discussions. Participation, in this study, for the most part, centers on students’ contributions through dialogic pedagogies as a key component in peacebuilding education: “Engaging in talk about conflict can be empowering, if safe spaces for such risks are opened and nurtured” (p. 140). Classrooms are rarely, if ever, completely safe for all students to speak. It is here that I wanted Parker to extend on current understandings and practices of dialogue, to include non-verbal, private disclosure strategies (e.g., written reflections or visual expressions) as low risk alternatives to speaking publically. As platforms for students to enter into conflict, such opportunities may elicit a more equitable and inclusive range of diverse and contrasting perspectives in relation to controversial issues, particularly those that may be marginalized, silenced, and/or unpopular.

Much needed in the field, Parker provides compelling classroom-based evidence to support her contention that diverse elementary school-aged students, sometimes thought too young for conflict dialogue (Houser, 1996), can develop the capacity to engage in meaningful discussions around identity-linked, conflictual topics with creative support. She shows us how, in three diverse elementary school classrooms, “Spaces do exist for teachers and students to pause the curriculum and reflect on how different values and beliefs stimulate or escalate conflict, and how alternative processes for approaching conflict can facilitate respect and peace” (p. 117). The final chapter discusses historical, political, and social implications for moving toward an integrative approach to peacebuilding education in transnational contexts. This book is important for teacher education and citizenship teacher theory and practice, offering practical ways to support young students’ diverse identities using culturally relevant content. At a time when school system context factors continue to constrain education for democratization, this work offers a way forward in schools with multicultural populations.

References

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