

Reviews / Comptes rendus

Cultivating Social Justice Teachers: How Teacher Educators Have Helped Students Overcome Cognitive Bottlenecks and Learn Critical Social Justice Concepts

*Edited by Paul C. Gorski, Kristen Zenkov, Nana Osei-Kofi, and Jeff Sapp
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“I enjoyed your course, but you are going to burn in hell for being . . . (gay, a communist, an atheist . . . fill in the blank).”

Responses like this are symptomatic of the challenges described and explored in *Cultivating Social Justice Teachers: How Teacher Educators Have Helped Students Overcome Cognitive Bottlenecks and Learn Critical Social Justice Concepts*. The 12 chapters in the book examine different aspects of the difficult task of raising social justice issues in teacher training courses. In today’s world, this mission is especially important, not to mention difficult, given the vehemence and pervasiveness of extreme right-wing ideologies. What shines throughout the book is the tremendous dedication of the different contributors. In their approaches to teacher training, they epitomize what Antonio Gramsci called “organic intellectuals,” who challenge the “common sense” of the status quo in which neo-liberal ideas are taken for granted and assumed to be universal givens.

Each essay in the book deals with pedagogical techniques designed to encourage students to reflect on different aspects of injustice and dominance in the classroom as well as in society as a whole. While each chapter treats a different topic, the two underlying themes that link each account are threshold concepts and cognitive bottlenecks.

Threshold concepts are literally cognitive transitions in which we come to understand how something really works and thus see it in a new way; for example, becoming aware of how the theory of meritocracy camouflages the fact that economic success is more often due to race, class, or gender than to any merit of the wealthy. Cognitive bottlenecks are situations where established ways of seeing the world conflict so

much with new ideas and information that moving into the threshold space becomes more difficult or even impossible. In their foreword, the editors refer to a study that suggests most teachers only pay attention to delivering their course content and essential concepts in their fields. They rarely try to overcome the cognitive bottlenecks that prevent students from really understanding these very same concepts.

While each chapter has something to offer, the two dealing with the issues of white privilege and Christian privilege are particularly thought provoking. The section on white privilege is of special interest in that the two authors are Canadian and so refer to their own context as well as that of the United States. They note a common attitude among some Canadians that dismisses problems like racism as something that only happen south of the border. Although many white people acknowledge the evils of racism, the reverse side of the coin, i.e., the benefits of being white, are often left unspoken. Moreover, in the Obama age, there is a discourse that racism is now a thing of the past and that there is an equal playing field for all. This is certainly an essential argument of the backlash discourse that seeks to dismantle affirmative action programs. To engage students in what can often be an uncomfortable, disconcerting exploration of 'whiteness' and what this terms means, the authors employ "disruptive" techniques and activities designed to promote critical reflection.

In one of the most challenging chapters, Warren Blumenfeld describes his experiences getting student teachers to explore Christian privilege, which, in the current U.S. context of aggressive Christian fundamentalism, is no easy task. In the author's view, understanding the deeply entrenched hegemony of Christian privilege in Western culture is essential for really grasping the roots of white and male privilege.

This is a very inspiring book by dedicated teacher educators. In a non-dogmatic way, they share their experiences of getting student teachers to think about power and how it is used to create inequalities and injustices. It would be interesting to monitor the results of their efforts and hear about the experiences of some of their former students who are now teachers themselves and seeking to apply some of the principles they learned from the authors. The focus of this book is on how to teach social justice concepts in a meaningful way, and the results are engaging and inspiring. Moreover, the authors' innovative strategies for addressing cognitive bottlenecks are applicable to most areas of education and make this book a very worthwhile read for any educator.

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