

Book Review

Grappling with Diversity: Readings on Civil Rights Pedagogy and Critical Multiculturalism. Schramm-Pate, S. & Jeffries, R. B. (2008). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. 282 pp. ISBN- 978-0791473283

This book provides an overview of issues related to diversity in the United States of America. A good part of the book tackles the issue of racism and the history of white and colored peoples' relations, especially African Americans, in the United States. However, a number of chapters/authors try to go beyond racial discrimination to touch on issues of gender, sexual orientation and stereotypes regarding rural Americans in the Appalachian region.

The book is organized into two sections. The first is titled "Theoretical and Historical Contexts: Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation." Chapter one presents a strong critique of the dominant narratives of the actions of Rosa Parks. The author, Dennis Carlson does not ignore the value of Park's act in objecting to racial segregation. He is, however, concerned with the way her image as hero is constructed in texts as well as in media. The reader can use this chapter to think critically about "heroic tales and mythological narratives" (p.16). Carlson worries that the way Parks is portrayed in current literature entails hidden messages: the overemphasis of powerful white people in supporting Parks, and the way she fits the dominant notion of a "good" black person. The implications of this chapter can be extended beyond the issues of African Americans to touch on minorities and their struggle as they try to "fit into" the dominant culture.

Chapter five touches on similar issues by discussing the movie and television series *Dangerous Minds* and the book, *My Posse Don't Do Homework*, on which the movie is based. Suellyn Henke critiques the notion of teacher as savior in the movie, and questions the role of public education in the lives of inner city students. In addition, Henke notes how racial stereotypes are reinforced in the movie. For example, the troubled students are mostly "colored". The charismatic teacher is a white while the principal, who is indirectly responsible for the death of a student he turned away, is an African American.

Ironically, chapters two and four bring up new heroes and the tone in these two chapters is very different from chapters one and five. Chapter two provides examples of women who worked within socially accepted norms to bring change and help educate students in their communities. Chapter four, tells the story of a white man, Willie Buffington, who realized the value of books and worked hard to construct libraries for African Americans at a time when racial segregation was still in place. Clearly, these two chapters provide stories of courage and depict some men and women as heroes who helped their communities despite hardships. Chapters one and five are thoughtfully placed in relation to chapters two and four, with the chapters presenting examples of people's achievements, and the other two reminding the reader to think critically about the way heroic figures are constructed and presented.

Chapter three, by *Pepi Leistyna*, provides an example of action research, links historical problems with current globalization problems, and connects Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School, with other educators in the field of critical pedagogy inside and outside the United States. In chapter six, Esposito and Baez discuss how our bodies speak even when we are silent. They explain how social norms and conditions affect the way people express or “speak” their sexuality and who gets to do so in society. Finally, the authors use this discussion to help educators understand homosexual students and help them in schools.

PART II is called “Methodological and Pedagogical Contexts: Curriculum, Culture, Relevance”. Rhonda B. Jefferies opens chapter seven with a reminder of how educators should think critically about curriculum. She suggests there is a lesson to be learned from tricksters who often challenge social taboos and reconstruct realities through their work. She tackles Virginia Durr’s journey as she moves from someone who looked down at African Americans to becoming an activist who used her social and political connections to support the disadvantaged, including African Americans. Interestingly, Rosa Parks was one of the people who had Durr’s support (Sullivan, 2003).

Susan Pate urges educators, in chapter eight, to examine their teaching of topics and symbols of “the south” and “the north” of the United States. She suggests that teachers should deconstruct current curriculum and provide a critical understanding of history. She focuses on three main points that are relevant to the history of racism in the United States: Dixie, Blackface minstrel, and Jim Crow. She feels that understanding and thinking about these issues will assist teachers in deconstructing the curriculum.

Following this chapter is an excellent chapter by Richard Lussier. It is in this chapter that examples of how some students “grapple” with diversity and feel threatened by different people joining their community are presented. Lussier finds teaching languages, such as Spanish, providing a good opportunity to teach students about others and to give them a firsthand experience of what second language learners go through. The chapter illustrates some of the strong opinions that some students hold toward certain minorities, and examples of how he worked with his students to evaluate these understandings.

In chapter 10, Adam Renner, describes The Cincinnati Freedom Center, its location, history, and role in educating students. Renner lays out what the centre has to offer and suggests that the centre takes a “more emancipatory praxis”. Although slavery is now part of history, racism is still alive in society and the centre is a good resource to teach about tolerance and respect.

Written by Mary Jean Ronan Herzog, chapter eleven tackles the issue of media and its role in spreading a stereotypical image of rural Americans in the Appalachian region. The author suggests starting with something that is relevant to students when teaching them about diversity and oppression. By discussing stereotypes and rural citizens in the Appalachian region, Herzog tackles larger issues of stereotypes and the essentializing of identities. I find a number of Herzog’s statements very relevant to the negative images that are often used to represent certain minorities. Teachers can build on this chapter to show how every disadvantaged group can be misrepresented, and how many people often consider this misrepresentation and generalization a true description.

Chapter thirteen adds a good touch to this book. Even though the ideas in this chapter are not necessarily novel or new, the chapter is a good reminder that the issue of diversity is not the concern of social studies and language teachers only. Those teaching mathematics should take a proactive approach in acknowledging the diverse needs of their students. The research conducted by Kent and Caron affirms the need to build on students' knowledge when teaching them mathematical concepts. Mathematics should be made relevant to the experience of all students including African American students and minorities.

Chapter 12 is based on the experiences of six women who consider themselves of mixed race/ethnicity. Silvia Bette presents an insight on the lives of these women. In particular, she looks at identity and how these women view themselves and are viewed by others. She also looks at the benefits and challenges that come with being of mixed race/ethnicity and family background. I highly recommend this chapter for teachers as well as pre-service teachers, as it will improve their understanding of students of mixed heritage. A clear message is sent to the reader of this chapter: do not force women, or other people, to identify with or choose one group or race over the other. The value of people and their background and experiences is so complex that it is not always possible to "fit" people in predetermined categories.

Overall, I feel that this book tackled important issues of diversity. A good portion of it is about the history of racism and people of color in the United States. However, one gap is that no part of this book discusses religious minorities, or stereotypes about people perceived to belong to certain religions (even though this is a rising problem in North America). Also, there is no reference in this book to Native American or Aboriginal students. Despite its shortcomings, though, this book provides a good overview of issues of diversity, the struggles that teachers and students go through, and some pedagogical and methodological contexts that are useful for teacher and pre-service teachers, in particular those teaching in the United States.

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References

- Sullivan, Patricia. (2003). *Freedom Writer: Virginia Foster Durr, Letters from the Civil Rights Years*. Taylor & Francis. Retrieved 26 February 2010, from <http://lib.mylibrary.com/login.ezproxy.library.ualberta.ca/Browse/open.asp?ID=8001&loc=96>