

Comparative and International Education Éducation comparée et internationale

Abdi, A. A., & Misiaszek, G. W. (Eds.). (2022). *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*. Palgrave Macmillan. 611 pages: illustrations (some color). ISBN 978-3-030-86342-5

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Volume 52, numéro 1, 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107174ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v52i1.16673>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of Western Ontario

ISSN

2369-2634 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Menon, J. (2023). Compte rendu de [Abdi, A. A., & Misiaszek, G. W. (Eds.). (2022). *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*. Palgrave Macmillan. 611 pages: illustrations (some color). ISBN 978-3-030-86342-5]. *Comparative and International Education / Éducation comparée et internationale*, 52(1), 106–108. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v52i1.16673>

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Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 52 | Issue 1

September 2023

Book Review of *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*

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Recommended Citation

Menon, J. (2023). [Review of the book *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*, by Abdi, A. A., & Misiaszek, G. W., (eds.) (2022)] *Comparative and International Education/Éducation comparée et internationale*. 51(2). 106-108. <https://doi.org/10.5206/cie-eci.v52i1.16673>

Book Review

Abdi, A. A., & Misiaszek, G. W. (Eds.). (2022). *The Palgrave Handbook on Critical Theories of Education*. Palgrave Macmillan. 611 pages: illustrations (some color). ISBN 978-3-030-86342-5

Reviewed by Jinny Menon, *MacEwan University*

Introduction

The opening lines of the foreword, articulated by Peters centres a timely message which is upheld in the curated chapters contained in this handbook. It aims to decolonize effects of contemporary hegemonic Western-centric systems of education, to critique cultural and cognitive imperialism of neoliberal technocratic regimes of performativity while at the same time fostering critical pedagogy as a means of achieving a world of social justice, sustainability, and community well-being (p. v). Divided into nine parts, one of several strengths of this handbook is that the chapters are grouped across a wide array of topics. In what follows, I briefly touch on the considerations critically taken up by the authors.

Important Issues Considered

General Critical Theoretical Perspectives and Philosophies of Education

Early in the first section, Misiaszek, Popoff, and Abdi powerfully contend, “Critical work in education is intrinsically radical in that it epistemologically disrupts long held and rigid ideological justification of oppressions and forms of domination” (p. 7). Their perspective is upheld by the other authors in this section, and indeed the authors in subsequent sections. Signifying the import of digital literacies, Kellner and Gennaro acknowledge the need for multiple literacies. Jackson advocates for the “politics of educating emotions [which] considers how different people are expected or encouraged to feel and express emotions in social contexts” such in and out of schools (p. 56). Highlighting the special case of young people, Abdi illuminates, “Africans are fully connected to the world and to all its desires and aspirations for better lives, even when they are not economically so endowed” (p. 74).

Critical Race Theories of Education

In the second section, Dei and Adhami pose the provocative question of what the implications are for schooling and education when decolonization and anti-colonialism are being advanced while anti-Blackness is being fought (p. 89). Bassey builds the case “that we should prepare teachers for human rights and transformative justice agenda in American schools” (p. 98). Opini argues disabled students in British Columbia, Canada, grapple with ableism and oppression in schools and proposes “B.C. special needs policy adopt an intersectional approach to disability” (p.118).

Critical International/Global Citizenship Education

Guo and Guo, considering the lived experiences of international students, commence section three with a strong condemnation “of Canadian exceptionalism as a myth in contrast to the actual policies and practices of the internationalization of Canadian higher education” (p. 131). Extending the discussion on global citizen education (GCE), Kim and Yoo explore teachers’ perceptions and experiences of GCE in South Korea through in-depth interviews. El Bouhali draws attention to “the marginalization of immigrant teachers in Canada” (p. 164). Turning to mainland China, Zhang discusses a “four-year ethnographic study on democratic education ... in two Chinese public

schools” (p. 182). Extrapolating from their multiyear study with students and teachers in Canada, Bangladesh, and Mexico, Bickmore and Fathallah focus on “the lived social conflicts experienced by marginalized youth” and the relationship between their “daily schooling” and “citizenship agency for transforming those conflicts” (p. 202).

Critical Pedagogy/Critical Literacy Studies in Education

Tierney and Morgan offer a critique in the ways in which universities (continue to) fall short in their policy and practice for the recognition of Indigenous knowing and understanding. Proposing a Marxist education policy, Hill outlines five questions that need to be asked regarding: curriculum and assessment, pedagogy, organizational culture, organization of the students and school, and the ownership, control, and management of schools. Brunette-Debassige and Viczko articulate the urgent need for universities to “interrogate its deeper allegiances to global capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy and nationalism” (p. 263). Emphasizing the import of localized language, Babaci-Wilhite provides an innovative model for STEM that integrates the arts. Misiaszek explicates “ecopedagogical literacy is for deepening and widening understandings of environmental violence to determine necessary transformative action” (p. 303).

Critical Media/Information Studies and Education

Opening the fifth section of the handbook, Jandrić and Hayes assert “critical pedagogy” must consider “digital technologies, data, algorithmic culture, and biodigital aspects of the postdigital condition that diverse individuals now experience differently” (p. 331). Samek shares the historical roots and contemporary contributions of critical library and information studies (CLIS) and the transformative role it and librarians play in promoting social justice. Popoff elucidates how photography enhanced a critical methodology and participatory research with international students studying in China. Contextualizing their work in Finland, Suoranta, Teräs, and Teräs examine national educational policy documents and make the distressing argument that digitalization and myth-making have disenfranchised students to the extent that they can no longer “act as active agents, transformative intellectuals, and dissidents in their field of expertise” (p. 384).

Critical Community-Engaged Learning/Research

Jenkins explains why critical peace education in schools has been challenged and exhorts the value of leaning that “is elicited from within, rather than imposed by an authority from above” (p. 408). Taylor foregrounds the tensions faced by undergraduate students seeking to succeed in higher education (HE) which upholds neoliberal values and suggests that “developing capabilities beyond qualifications for specific professions” (p. 425) can better assist students. Focusing on specific social movements situated in South Africa, Ismail uncovers the limits placed on radical pedagogy for social justice through community-engaged research work conducted over a span of 20 years.

Critical Perspectives on Science and Mathematics Education

Rooting his discussion on research work conducted in Kenya for the last 15 years, Nashon offers a window into how science curriculum and pedagogy can be decolonized when local contexts are ascribed value. In a similar way, Shizha undertakes a discussion on the import of Indigenous Knowledges (IK) and fiercely affirms, “African Indigenous researchers and scholars should aim to decolonize and disrupt the false superiority of Western science” (p. 477). Adopting a critical race theory (CRT) lens, Davis interrogates mathematical education for Black students noting that

systemic racism and Eurocentrism continues to oppress African Americans and advocates for a liberatory mathematics education. Wattar and Le Pichon share exciting results from their research looking at the Syrian math curriculum alongside the Ontario, Canadian, math curriculum and their subsequent workshops with teachers and families in decolonizing curriculum.

Critical Gender/Feminist Studies in Education

Somewhat discombobulating, there are only two authors whose work is in this penultimate section. “Re-invigorating the African academy” for Okeke-Ihejirika is an exploration of gender as an “entry into collaborative research initiatives,” to “open up critical sites for the production of feminist knowledge,” and “to enhance graduate training” (p. 522). Decrying a colonial legacy, Mianda asserts that is by “questioning the Eurocentric coloniality of gender model ... in the colonial education system in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa ... African decolonial feminists are well positioned to claim for the decolonization of education” (p. 546).

Critical Indigenous and Southern Epistemologies of Education

In the last section of the handbook, Tannis draws upon research which explored participants “practices as leaders, teachers and help providers” (p. 554) in postsecondary education and explains how anti-racism policies can be further analyzed through critical phenomenology. Kapoor conducts “an anti/decolonial critique (critical theories) of Euroamerican racial/colonial capitalist ontologies of land” (p. 572) in relation to adult education. “Embrac[ing] Shinto as an alternative source of knowledge” (p. 601), Takayama “documents how [he has] done Southern Theory over the years, with the hope of inviting others to pursue this line of knowledge practice” (p. 591).

Some Concluding Thoughts

Eschewing a simplistic survey, the topics compiled in this handbook allow for a richer consideration of meaningful educational issues. Each part contains two to five works which serve to grapple with their associated theme with several chapters containing images. Echoing the strength in the diversity to be found in the book’s themes, the editors and the authors come from different backgrounds and have varied experiences (personal and work) reflecting the differing academic and geographic places they occupy. Opting for thoughtful dialogue, the topics they delve into foreground the complexities and multifaceted nature of educational issues. As the editors of this handbook eloquently share:

In our conceptualizations of putting this reader together, one major question was the role of education as effecting active transformative change for a better world and sustainable planet ... With contemporary, dominant Western-centric systems of education basically reproducing societal contexts in their hegemonic and colonial ways, new critiques of the situation are as important as ever. (p. v)

While the handbook may not necessarily place the same degree of emphasis in each of the sections, it does allow for the authors to introduce unique perspectives and deeper engagement with the readings. Akin to the global community we live in, not all of the stances taken will resonate with everyone. However, in brief, the wide range of readings will be of interest to anyone who is interested in education, pedagogy, and practice as sites of reflection, disruption, and change.

Jinny Menon is a postdoctoral fellow at MacEwan University in Alberta, Canada, and part of a research team narratively inquiring into the experiences of diverse children, youth, and families waiting for mental health support during this time of COVID. Jinny’s innovative doctoral work with South Asian girls, mothers, and teachers has been recognized in particular, for drawing attention to issues of identity, gender, and race.