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BOOK REVIEW

CRITICAL PEACE EDUCATION AND GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

BY RITA VERMA

ROUTLEDGE, 2017. 160 PAGES

\$37.00 (PAPER)

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Rita Verma's *Critical Peace Education and Global Citizenship* is simultaneously inspiring and terrifying—inspiring in the accounts it offers of highly interactive peace education outside the normal curriculum and in possibilities for activism, and terrifying in its exposure of the “Trump Effect” and how this legitimates racism. Tying together themes of violence, political climates, school contexts, and bullying, Verma provides readers with both warnings and lessons about turning peace education into peace activism through the notion of interruptive democracy.

The juxtaposition of inspiration and forewarnings makes a valuable contribution to the field of peace education. The opening chapters spell out the vital critiques of peace education and of a “toolkit” approach, while beginning to demonstrate the power of emotion in learning about violence and conflict. Awareness of the up-to-date political context necessitates a cautious approach to the impact of any peace curriculum. I write this review from the UK, where we are experiencing the “Brexit Effect” (also mentioned in the book), which parallels the Trump Effect. The Brexit Effect refers to how Islamophobia and anti-migrant racism rose significantly following the vote for the UK to leave the EU, after a campaign mired in questions of immigration and similar “nationalist imaginaries.” Ironically, it is therefore something of a relief to find a book that does not paint too rosy a picture of the possibilities of peace pedagogy. When there are billboards shouting, “JIHADISTS OUT—CHRISTIANS IN” (as in Pennsylvania in 2015), we do need the stark and dark realism that characterizes this book.

This includes realism about the state of schools in the United States in terms of the symbolic and real violence, the segregation, the bullying and racism—and the denial of these things. Chapter 4, “Dignity for All Students and Critical Peace Activism,” is perhaps the most disturbing. It is interesting that New York’s Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) did not always have the required effect; instead, schools actually suppressed the data they were supposed to provide on incidents

of violence, in order to maintain their reputations. Anyone who has worked in a competitive school environment could have predicted this, but strangely, it appears not to have been foreseen. There are lessons here for any country about how to draft, implement, and inspect national legislation on questions of harassment, abuse, or corporal punishment. Schools are handling such incidents on a case-by-case basis, not addressing them in the curriculum or the classroom. Verma notes that DASA has all sorts of potential, but it could become just “gift wrapping.”

The surrounding global political context is that there has been an unprecedented rise in hate crimes and Islamophobia since the Paris attacks in 2015. As we in our organization ConnectFutures find from our own work and training on the UK government’s Prevent strategy, teachers as well as students can exhibit kneejerk reactions, such as unduly suspecting Muslim students of radicalization.¹ But the U.S. is in a far worse position, with a prominent leader to cite, not just a political decision. The way Trump is being invoked in schools is cause for concern. White students are chanting “Trump” and “mini Mexico” and “build a wall” at rival Latino sports teams. One fifth-grader told a Muslim student “that he was supporting Donald Trump because he was going to kill all of the Muslims if he became president” (69).

The biggest warning is of the trajectory of violence. Verma makes the initially outlandish claim that “everyday bullying is a first step to genocide,” but the logic is clear, circling around the normalization of violence. She invokes the term “bullycide”—the suicide of a student who had been bullied. Bullying should not be viewed a normal part of growing up. We know from history that failure to act leads to greater atrocities. Analyses conducted in Europe demonstrate how the economic and social contexts that underpinned votes for Trump parallel those in Nazi Germany that generated support for Hitler. Verma points out how, in the U.S., Trump solicits “membership” in his group by denigrating others: “By similarly denigrating, one seeks membership where he is the leader and he preys on people’s desire to belong and to be part of a group, therefore you push others out to gain entry and acceptance” (70).

In the UK and internationally, we see similar mechanisms of group acceptance and “othering” at work along the pathway to joining extremist groups. In providing numerous examples of hate from kindergarten upwards, Verma does not claim that racism begins and ends with Trump’s rise to popularity. She instead provides examples “to illustrate the incredible swiftness with which the larger

1 See www.connectfutures.org.

political climate and events permeate and become part of school settings” (70). This “incredible swiftness” is the biggest danger.

Yet a critical counter voice and acts of interruption are rare. What would this look like in schools? Verma acknowledges that peace knowledge rarely results in peace activism, yet the aim is to find a way to generate such activism. It was heartening to see the book beginning with my concept of “interruptive democracy”—the predisposition to challenge injustice. Verma points out how a simple lesson plan on race or hate may not be enough. She tells the story of asking her students whether they had seen hate rhetoric on the media after the Paris attacks. They all raised their hands. Then she asked how they might have disrupted hate:

There was a pin drop silence in the class. Students shifted around in their seats and were reluctant to answer. I waited and waited. It was disheartening to understand the complacency, the lack of anger and the lack of activism. (30)

A key part of critical peace education, then, is surfacing the intersectionality between historical events, current-day injustices, and personal identities. There are excellent examples in the book of how this can be done in the classroom, including using photographs, role plays, human rights education, discourse and media analysis, teachable moments, narratives of activists, and lesson plans on Syria. The chapter on Soledad, a former gang member and now a critical peace activist, is a fascinating contribution to the book. Soledad reveals her reasons for becoming a gang member—related to both her family and her navigation of “the culture of punishment” in school—and why she left. This account would be useful for teaching and teacher training.

But such activities are about more than just raising awareness. The task is to try to galvanize students into some sort of action. This is Freirean critical pedagogy, made even more relevant by the current events in the world. Some version of global citizenship and responsibility ideally surrounds this unofficial curriculum. Where does dehumanization take place?

I remind my students time and time again, that one has a choice not to hate, a choice to interrupt a racist comment, and ultimately a choice not to mobilize around hate. One can choose a different response, and sometimes one can choose to walk away. (30)

BOOK REVIEW

In the conclusion, Verma asks whether there are any real victories for peace educators, whether there are any great causes anymore (e.g., civil rights, women's rights). The problem is that anti-hate, anti-racism, and anti-extremism are not causes with a recognizable end, and yet they are even more important to tackle and keep tackling because of their long-term, ever-present threat. A significant confession came from one of Verma's students: "We have stood still in time because we have never learned not to hate" (59). This book graphically shows us that the key task for our time is not learning about peace but learning not to hate. Verma's contribution to this learning is both important and convincing.

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