
Book Review: *The Art of Global Peacebuilding and Excellence in Education: Pathways to Hopeful, Transformational Practice* by Angie Kotler and Jo Westbrook

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BOOK REVIEW

THE ART OF GLOBAL PEACEBUILDING AND EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION: PATHWAYS TO HOPEFUL, TRANSFORMATIONAL PRACTICE

BY ANGIE KOTLER AND JO WESTBROOK

ROUTLEDGE, 2025. IV + 188 PAGES

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The Art of Global Peacebuilding and Excellence in Education: Pathways to Hopeful, Transformational Practice by Angie Kotler and Jo Westbrook serves as an invitation for educators and policymakers to meditate on an intractable question in international education: “what constitutes good, effective, and relevant education?” (p. 1). As Kotler notes, this book arrives against the backdrop of persistent conflicts in Gaza, Sudan, and Ukraine, the acceleration of climate change, and ongoing threats to teacher autonomy. At a time when globalization continues to reinscribe colonial and capitalist paradigms, the book serves as a conceptual intervention in the field of education in emergencies by unraveling and reclaiming the critical concepts that underpin it (p. 3). This book attempts to challenge our understandings of peacebuilding, excellence, and education—three words that evoke, as the authors underscore, a prescriptive, neoliberal, or top-down approach to peace that is divorced from teacher agency, community voice, or participatory action. As the fields of international education and education in emergencies continue to examine how education interventions either perpetuate colonial logics or reimagine education systems, Kotler and Westbrook invite complexity, reflection, and, ultimately, hope for more imaginative schools in the future. Through case studies woven together from their experiences in Rwanda, Ethiopia, Liberia, and the UK, Kotler and Westbrook center the voices, experiences, and pedagogies of teachers whose everyday actions create opportunities for “learning of relationality: to self, other and the planet” (p. 4).

Inspired by British scholar David Olusoga, Kotler and Westbrook begin by sharing their life histories, which reflects a commitment to reflexivity and making their experiences, identities, beliefs, and values apparent. Kotler explores how her Jewish ancestry, early experiences teaching in the UK and Zimbabwe, and later work in France, Germany, South Africa, and Rwanda sharpened her interest in schooling as a mechanism for individual and social transformation. Westbrook draws similarly from her family history and early teaching experiences to understand the role education plays in fostering more dialogic and peaceful communities. Her time spent teaching in the UK and Western Uganda, coupled with her work in Pakistan, Uganda, Tanzania, Liberia, and Ethiopia, underscored the importance of “socially just and creative pedagogies” (p. 14). By weaving in how they grapple with their positionality, the authors remind us that the work of education is a continuous dialogic process of sense-making and reflection.

This book is divided into three parts. In part one, Kotler and Westbrook review previous scholarship on excellence and peacebuilding in education. Scholarship in international education invariably requires critical engagement with questions of power and the role of education aid in extending Western hegemony. “Excellence,” as the authors note, is perhaps a troubling and unexpected word for a book that seeks to reimagine approaches to peacebuilding and challenge capitalist logics. Indeed, the authors note that excellence connotes the dominant neoliberal paradigm of education that is rooted in competition, performance, and measurement. In reclaiming the word “excellence,” Kotler and Westbrook aim to disrupt the rigid conceptual paradigms that define neoliberal approaches to education. In an effort to steer us away from a market-driven understanding of excellence, they draw from Giroux’s (2004) work to offer an alternative definition that frames excellence in education as a liberatory space where discussion, reflection, and curiosity guide learning. Drawing from scholars who critique peace education as insufficiently challenging Western paradigms and power, Kotler and Westbrook underscore the importance of peace education as a local, justice-oriented endeavor intertwined with the broader sociohistorical context. Rejecting the notion that peace education is apolitical or replicable, the authors argue that peace emerges from a deep understanding of local contexts and attention to history.

In part two, Kotler and Westbrook present case studies from Rwanda, Ethiopia, Liberia, and the UK to demonstrate their expanded definitions of excellence and peace education. Their case studies draw from nearly three decades of work and partnerships with schools, teachers, and organizations. Most of the case studies are authored individually, as Kotler and Westbrook weave theory into their own reflections and experiences. In one example, Kotler describes her role collaborating with an international nongovernmental organization and the Rwandan government to develop a model school that could serve as a site for educator development and learning 20 years after the genocide. What this example and others in the book convey is the inherent moral, spiritual, and sociopolitical complexity embedded in each project. Kotler’s analysis of the partnership between the Rwandan government, educators, and international nongovernmental organizations raises critical questions around power, purpose, and positionality: What should excellence look like in this context? What role did the international nongovernmental organization have in supporting this model school? What values accompanied her decision to participate in the creation of the school? However, in each case study, Kotler and Westbrook avoid a singular definition for what excellence should look like. The strength of their book lies instead in their ability to hold the complexity of what it means to engage in educational projects when schooling worldwide remains inextricably linked with systems of power. The authors succeed in conveying moments when they paused to reflect, when events unfolded differently from what they expected, or when projects fell short of their desired aims. As a reader, one might question whether, given the historical and political weight both terms carry, merely reframing the words “excellence” and “peacebuilding” constitutes a radical enough conceptual departure. If words create

conceptual boundaries, perhaps we need to cultivate more creative language for our future visions of education.

Despite the power and promise of the global education movement, schooling continues to maintain social inequalities and existing power dynamics. Critical scholarship examines how structures perpetuate violence and systemic oppression while offering researchers and practitioners opportunities to reimagine how we exist and learn collectively. This book builds on the work of other scholars, including Anderson et al. (2023), whose book *Creating Third Spaces of Learning for Post-Capitalism: Lessons from Educators, Artists, and Activists* explores examples of learning spaces that challenge capitalist logics and center imagination and collective solidarity. In a world where measurement and results dominate conversations around global education, it can be easy to lose sight of the larger purpose. However, as Kotler and Westbrook remind us, “Meaning is made in the spaces between us” (p. 152). This book is a hopeful invitation to redefine how we conceptualize excellence and peace education; by so doing, Kotler and Westbrook create new meanings for ourselves and our communities.

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