

## Book Review

### *Redefining the Public Purposes of Schools in an Age of Globalization and Human Rights*

Ali Abdi and Lynette Schulz (Eds.)

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Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008, 248 pages.

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Schools have been guided at various times by various purposes: from building nation states and national and political identities to serving as a socioeconomic ladder for helping the poor; from educating workers and improving national competitiveness to educating citizens and assimilating immigrants. The proposition that schools should be about educating for human rights and global civility competes with these purposes. Yet if as Reimers (2006) asserts, educational relevance is about how educational goals keep pace with important changes in the larger societal contexts in which schools are embedded, then a number of factors necessitate the development of a strong association between educational practice and the larger public purposes that schools are presumed to advance. These factors include: globalization and its effects on local, regional, national, and international communities; postwar international migration, which has increased diversity in most nation states, forcing nations to rethink citizenship and citizenship education; the erosion of national boundaries as millions of people live in more than one nation and have multiple citizenships and others, including millions of refugees around the world, are stateless; and the porousness of national boundaries due to the principle of human rights (codified in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights), which ascribes a universal status to individuals and their rights regardless of the nation state in which they live whether they are citizens of a nation or not.<sup>1</sup> Although it is clear that these trends require students to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and dispositions that enable them to function in a global environment, it is not clear whether schools have realigned their purposes to prepare students to be competent citizens in an age of globalization and universal human rights.

*Educating for Human Rights and Global Citizenship*, edited by Ali Abdi and Lynette Schultz (2008), challenges schools to redefine their public purposes by focusing on human rights and global citizenship education. Three salient arguments are propounded by the editors in support of this challenge: (a) Sixty years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly, all 31 articles comprising the Declaration

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have been violated almost at will in every continent, and such terrible practices as racism, lack of equality, religious persecution, genocide, gender-based oppression, torture, and slavery still abound. Nearly a billion people cannot read or write and between 800 and 900 million lack clean drinking water; half of the world's population lives on less than \$2 per day, and 350,000,000 school-aged children do not have access to education when less than 1% of the money spent on weapons could educate all the world's children. (b) These horrific violations and conditions collectively constitute the diminishment of citizenship and are symptomatic of a global human rights agenda that has betrayed millions of the world's citizens. (c) The potential for human rights as a common vision of human dignity to be the catalyst for change is significant, and we should not underestimate the role of education in instilling in the minds of people core human rights values and the sanctity of a global citizenship ethic. After all, the editors argue,

Schools are reflections of the communities that create them in the first place and it is these communities that continually set the agenda of learning and, when deemed useful, change the policies and relationships that pertain to learning and the attendant possibility for social development. Schools are places where people learn inclusiveness, civil courage, and how to live in communities encompassing diverse relationships. (p. 9)

With this concern for a more inclusive and humanely located global understanding of the rights of all people and the role education can play in achieving this understanding, the editors organized a conference titled *Educating for Human Rights and Global Citizenship* at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, which brought together prominent researchers and activist scholars to create a multicentric forum that highlighted the urgent need to educate for human rights and global citizenship. The 16 chapters of the book reflect various projects linked to the universal struggle for human rights; the chapters locate the human rights issues of our time and by connecting these issues to global citizenship, "indicate how the entitlements of these human rights might be accessed particularly by those who are most marginalized" (p. 4). Contributors address a wide range of topics from a historical perspective that offers a conceptual framework for understanding the evolution of human rights theory and practice over the past half-century (Chapter 3) to a call and response for human rights as a tool for dignity and transformation (Chapter 2); from articulations of exclusions of human rights and full citizenship for particular groups (Chapters 7, 10, 12, and 14) to new themes of anti-racism education as human rights education (Chapter 8); from specific suggestions about creating new spaces of social and educational possibility for students and those who are disenfranchised (Chapters 4, 9, 11, 15, and 16) to the challenges of educating for global citizenship in the face of the persistence of the nation, nationalism, and reinventions and reassertions of nationalist narratives throughout the world (Chapter 5). These diverse topics are a far cry from the usual itemization of the articles constituted in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and prescription of remedies for their failure. Instead, the chapters focus on the analyses of general but important issues of global citizenship and human rights, providing

a more comprehensive and intelligent understanding of these issues and suggesting how to educate people about the issues.

Surprisingly missing from these analyses and understandings, however, is any in-depth discussion of the apparent paradoxes emanating from the institutionalized duality between the two principles of the global system—national sovereignty and universal human rights—and the challenges these paradoxes pose not only for educating for human rights and global citizenship, but also for the realization of universal human rights itself. The same global-level processes and institutional frameworks that codify and ascribe rights beyond national frames of reference also reify the nation state and its sovereignty. As Soysal (1998) explains, “This paradox manifests itself as a deterritorialized expansion of rights despite the territorialized closure of polities” (p. 206). Incongruously, although the basis and legitimation of rights have shifted to a transnational level, the responsibility for providing and implementing individual rights lies with sovereign nation states (which reinforce national boundaries and even initiate new ones), making residency in a state consequential in securing various rights. With the nation state remaining the central structure regulating access to social distribution, the connection between human rights and global citizenship remains tenuous.

A similar paradox is reflected in the incongruence between the two elements of modern citizenship: identity and rights. Whereas rights increasingly assume universality and legal uniformity and are defined at the global level, identities still express particularity and are conceived of as being territorially bounded. As an identity, national citizenship still prevails, but its translation into rights and privileges is no longer a significant construction. Hence the universalistic status of personhood beyond national membership coexists with assertive national identities and intense ethnic struggles. More groups are asserting their “national identities” and alleging statehood on the basis of their acclaimed “nationness” (Soysal, 1998), fed and legitimized by the codification of the principle of political sovereignty and self-determination as a universal human right (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights).

Expressions of the paradoxes embedded in the principles of the global system abound, and attention to their analysis in this book would have added complexity to the new role that schools are expected to play, that is, moving from educating for national citizenship to educating for global citizenship and universal human rights. For example, how do we as educators recontextualize *nationness* in the universalistic discourse of human rights and global citizenship, or has nationness itself become irrelevant in a world where rights, and identity as rights, derive their legitimacy from discourses of universalistic personhood?

Omission of these paradoxes notwithstanding, this is a well-written and accessible book that takes up issues of human rights and global citizenship from diverse perspectives and challenges schools to “achieve more inclusive, socially responsible, and pedagogically transformative spaces” (p. 8) by including these issues as part of their public purpose. The book is a major contribution to the ever-expanding categories and definitions of human rights.

*Note*

1. Human rights have also expanded beyond conventional civil rights to include such economic and social rights as employment, education, health care, nourishment, and housing; the collective rights of nations and peoples to culture, language, and development have also been codified as inalienable human rights; and women's rights have become "women's human rights" as freedom from gender violence and certain traditional and customary practices, cultural prejudices, and religious extremism. In short civil, political, and social rights have been transferred from the domain of the nation state to that of international bodies like the United Nations and the European Union.

*References*

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