

Smyth, J., Down, B., & McInerney, P. (2014). *The Socially Just School: Making Spaces for Youth to Speak Back*. Netherlands: Springer. Pages: 199. ISBN: 978-94-017-9059-8 (e-book)

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The main objective of this book is to discuss the importance of creating safe and socially just spaces in schools for all young people, especially those who have been marginalized. Smyth, Down, and McInerney (2014) argue that a socially just school can empower disenfranchised youth to be positively involved in their communities. One of the book's main messages is that when schools grant young people the ability and power to speak, through the creation of safe spaces, they become able to explore their educational potential, encouraged to attend the needs of their community, and confident to speak to issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, colonization, religion, or politics. Through this empowerment, young people would be able to enact a more socially critical and just educational setting, which would help them feel like they are an important part of society, thereby granting them the courage to work toward a more equitable world.

The book examines how schools can become social institutions where the best interest of the students is fundamental. It offers a depiction of how schools function as social institutions and the impact these institutions carry on youth that are marginalized and have an educational disadvantage. The authors propose three levels to describe the subjective construction of learning identity and its social implications within the school system.

Smyth et al. offer the readers an overview of the ways educational systems around the world are impacting the lives of young people, especially those that have been categorized as disadvantaged. The authors relay the message that students are left out by the outcomes-based approaches endorsed by current school reforms. These reforms are seen to only blame the students, their alleged deficits, their personal histories, their family backgrounds, and their communities for the low academic achievement they may have. The authors provide a working definition of the notion of "socially just school setting" (p. 2) and its importance. They propose that all schools need to "advance interest and life chances" (Smyth, Down, & McInerney, 2014, p. 2) for all students, with a special focus on those students who are most marginalized, so that educators would be able to meet young people's needs, and thus, prevent the increasing rates of school drop out. Smyth et al. articulate how important it is for educators to educationally engage young people: to help regard all youth as being morally entitled to an educationally rewarding and satisfying learning experience, to treat all students equitably, and not to stigmatize them through labels such as "at risk" or "deficient", which represent them as in need of being remedied or fixed.

The first chapter describes where the rest of the book is heading and provides a useful diagram that can help the reader understand the themes and perspectives that emerge through the book. Chapter two introduces the idea that educators need to be prepared to create authentic spaces that allow all youths to participate and own their learning in order to secure meaningful student engagement. The chapter discusses some strategies that can challenge the notion of "fitting into place" (Taylor, 2012, p. 23). The purpose of these strategies is to assist educators at aiding youth to become active agents in their schools and communities and not just "silent

witnesses” (Smyth & McInerney, 2012, p. 24) when pursuing their own education. The chapter introduces the “critically compassionate intellectualism approach”(p. 26), which combines multiple educator-student relationships in one framework, namely, cooperative learning, compassionate educator-student relationships, and social justice consciousness.

Chapter two concludes with the authors’ opinion that schools should not be seen as convenient annexes to our economy as they are far too complex in nature to be placed within that category, nor should they be allowed to be further seen as tools of surveillance and control, which only have helped in labeling classrooms and schools as distrustful spaces. Instead, schools should be seen as socially just settings that allow the “conceptualization of young people in relation to specific economic, political and social conditions, conceiving of youth development as a collective response to social marginalization of young people” (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006, pp. 37-38).

The starting point for Chapter 3 is an examination of the notion of “school culture” in light of the perspectives of critical theory. Smyth et al. (2014) concluded that our current school culture is very complex in nature and required further examination when it comes to the relationships between pedagogy, culture, and power structures. Some of the main concerns the authors brought forth were the ways in which current school reforms, centered on “teacher quality” and “teacher development”, are being dominated by the technical rationality of the School Effectiveness and School Improvement movements (Thurpp & Willmott, 2003). In their opinion, these movements have promoted further social injustices that have transformed schools into inequitable, undemocratic, and oppressive institutions (Burbules & Berk, 1999. p. 47).

In chapter four, Smyth et al. introduce us to the concept of “socially critical school/community relations”, which demonstrates the importance of building critical communities and sustainable relationships within them. Here, the authors inform us that in order to build a democratic and socially just school, students should be taught what it means to be part of a democratic community: a community where there is an acknowledgment of the value of the students’ learning experiences. This chapter touched on the importance of having a curriculum that acknowledges the students’ interests, concerns, and aspirations. To further this point, Smyth et al. introduce three ethnographic cases: Wattle Plain School, Plainsville public school, and Amanda’s story, all taking place in the Australian education system. Through the exploration of these accounts, the authors depicted how working and employing a socially critical approach to school/community engagement, can positively benefit the students’ educational success. Smyth et al. (2014) also discussed the importance of respectful relationships and how these should be the prevailing norm of the school culture. They advocate for an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity that not only assists in carrying a large measure of trust and goodwill, but also grants a strong sense that the school belongs to the community, acknowledging the community’s strengths and assets, rather than its perceived deficiencies.

Chapter five describes what “socially critical pedagogy” is and how this approach to teaching should be included in a socially just school setting. Throughout the chapter, a critique of the transmission models of teaching is discussed, showing how our current models of teaching were set up as a lead-and-follow learning setting, where students only banked their education (Freire, 2000/1970). Chapter Six then proceeds to outline the theoretical implications and practical possibilities of a socially critical approach to developing a curriculum. The authors discuss different orientations to curriculum and focused on three main orientations: the vocational/neo-classical orientation which aims at preparing students for skill/trade work and is mainly focused on marketization and skill formation in response to current economic needs; and the liberal/progressive orientation that carries a humanistic overtone and aims at preparing

the student for life rather than work through a constructivist view of learning. This perspective sees the student as a whole person rather than an instrumental purpose for the economy. Finally, the authors discuss the socially critical orientation, which focuses on collective action that confronts any unjust and inequitable structures, placing the community as a central point of reference for curriculum development. This orientation assists students in developing a critical reflective attitude to better understand their culture, histories, and societies.

Key features and roles of educational social critical leadership were then introduced in Chapter 7. This discussion provided further clarification on the importance of the involvement of social-critical leaders in the attainment of a socially just school setting. The authors examined the roles and responsibilities of school leaders in the increasing marketed approach to education, due in part to the widespread adoption of neoliberal policies in OECD countries. A major theme that was discussed in this chapter was the idea of “educational leadership for social justice” (p.139), which was introduced through the Wattle Plains School ethnographic study.

Chapter 8 argued the importance of pausing and reflecting critically on the ways the school system causes significant damages to the lives of young people. Smyth et al. attempted to demonstrate that “the commodification of education is a societal sickness” (Standing 2011, p. 71), that only creates a disconnect between the school system and the needs, desires, dreams, and aspirations of students. In this chapter, the authors advocate for an integration between academic and vocational education (Kincheloe, 1995) in ways that “provide the academic and real-world foundations students need for advanced learning, training, and preparation for responsible civic participation” (Oakes & Saunders, 2009, p. 6).

The final chapter is used to summarize all key points, as well as to present a platform to act on and use when attempting to construct a critically just school. In this chapter, Smyth et al. draw on Freire’s (1998) notion of “critical hope”, as expressed in the *Pedagogy of Freedom*, to explore what it might look like for young people to be able to “confront the ruthless pursuit of rampant individualism, materialism, consumption, and personal acquisition” (Smyth, 2011, p. 3). The authors highlighted the importance of these issues for contemporary education and stressed how they are negatively impacting our youth today. The authors note that the theme of a socially just school is very complex in nature and acknowledge that this idea carries diverse meanings, and could be interpreted in many different ways. They believe that as long as the end result is the developing of a critically just school system, any method used would be welcome to help young people, which is what truly matters in the end.

Although the last chapter attempted to bring closure, it lacked further elaboration for the reader to form their own judgment of whether or not socially just schools were the answers to the problems related to the education of youth; however, the authors neglected to include any possible challenges that could arise from the adoption of their ideas, which could have strengthened the argument. This book presented great ideas and strategies for educators that aim at constructing a critically just school. Throughout the book, the authors reinforced how socially just schools can help our youth become more involved, not only their education but also in their life projects. This book could be used as a starting point when looking for ideas to address the increasing drop out rates in secondary schools and to increase the involvement of other key social actors in our youth’s education.

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