

Burke, A. M., Johnston, I., & Ward, A. (2017). *Challenging stories: Canadian literature for social justice in the classroom*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars. Pages: 224. ISBN 9781551309736

Reviewed by: Pamela Malins & Bronwyn Johns, Western University

A Pedagogy of Discomfort: A Review of *Challenging Stories: Canadian Literature for Social Justice in the Classroom*

We the reviewers would like to begin by acknowledging the Indigenous land we live on, which is now called Canada. As the reviewed text elicited a reflection of self and teaching for social justice, we would also like to call attention to our respective identities. I am a member of the LGBTQ community and a white female educator of kindergarten through graduate level education. I have taught in many diverse classrooms and have experienced a pedagogy of discomfort in negotiating critical literacy instruction with concerns from the community regarding content perceived inappropriate. I am particularly passionate about including literature and dialogue in the elementary classroom about LGBTQ identities and families. My colleague, Bronwyn, identifies as a privileged heterosexual Caucasian of English and Irish ancestry who is an early childhood educator exploring the use of Indigenous children's literature in early childhood education settings. Through her experiences in the field, she has approached children's literature as a tool for social justice to introduce children to accurate yet difficult histories such as the past and ongoing effects of residential schools (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). In acknowledging aspects of our identities and programs of research, we highlight our perspectives in approaching this book review.

The text, *Challenging Stories: Canadian Literature for Social Justice in the Classroom*, edited by Burke, Johnston, and Ward (2017), offers a fantastic collection of narratives from educators that not only discuss a pedagogy of discomfort, but also strategies to overcome the challenges that teachers face in the 21st century Canadian context. The teacher accounts shared in the book attempt to illustrate some constraints and powerful learning moments educators experience when engaging in inquiry groups and facilitating critical literacy with their students, through Canadian texts that address diversity and injustice.

Bainbridge and Heydon (2013) suggested that the purpose of critical literacy is to “empower educators and learners to actively participate in a democracy and move literacy beyond text to social action” (p. 13; see also Cadiero-Kaplan, 2002). Specifically, they argued, “To truly be critical, a consideration of action toward equity and social justice is a must,” and that this action can be in the form of “a change in attitude or the development of a new understanding” (Bainbridge & Heydon, 2013, p. 13). In this way, critical framing and critical literacy are components of a transformative paradigm which aims to expand identity options through asking questions such as, how does schooling offer cultural and material access to institutions of power? (Law, 1992). Additionally, Bainbridge and Heydon (2013) claimed, “Many educators new to the profession are nervous about approaching what could be perceived as difficult topics in elementary classrooms” (p. 43; see also Glazier, 2007; Johnston, Bainbridge, Mangat, & Skogen, 2006; Leland & Harste, 1999). Britzman (1998) labeled these classroom conversations about diversity and difference as “difficult knowledge.” In this thoughtful new text, Burke, Johnston, and Ward (2017) share the accounts of several teachers involved in their study as they navigated difficult knowledge in the classroom, and as Johnston wrote, “For those teachers who encountered student resistance to this difficult knowledge, the inquiry groups provided a welcoming environment to debrief how to address student concerns” (p. 146).

The main argument of the book is to embrace a pedagogy of discomfort in the hope of supporting students in an environment where they can immerse themselves in the reality of the emotions and challenges many Canadians experienced and continue to face due to injustice, ignorance, and discrimination. In par-

ticular, many of the stories shared throughout the inquiry groups acknowledge the histories and ongoing experiences of Indigenous populations. Often, teaching for social justice is accompanied with a call for action where students can realize their own place in contributing to or disrupting hegemonic practices and bias. One teacher shared the importance of this work, suggesting,

new ideas emerge and the discussion goes in unexpected directions because of the richness of student opinions, past experiences, and prior knowledge. Young adolescent students are in a perfect position to examine social justice issues as they are making sense of themselves and how they fit in the world. (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 41)

The book is a response to a review of the literature conducted by the editors that indicated the reluctance or discomfort many teachers experience in addressing “critical or uncomfortable issues” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 1; see also Philpott, & Dagenais, 2013). Acknowledging the challenges and hesitations teachers face in initiating these conversations, the authors offer various recommendations, including establishing collaborative inquiry groups among colleagues so teachers have support systems to implement their goals of social justice.

Also, in illustrating a variety of teacher experiences about the study’s inquiry groups, the reader is provided various entry points to consider the rewards and challenges when teaching for social justice. As the editors wrote, “This book invites you, the reader, into the professional worlds of teachers across Canada as they collaborated in lively discussions about teaching for social justice and explored recent Canadian children’s literature to introduce to their students” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 1). The text is organized well, with frequent headings, making the read easy to follow and digest. The teachers’ stories are accessible for educators and scholars alike, and academic citations throughout the book are meaningful and enhance the teacher accounts by grounding their experiences in the literature. Furthermore, the quotations shared by the teachers are descriptive and capture the challenges many faced when critically engaging with histories, multiple perspectives, and intersectional positioning. One teacher openly shared the nuanced responsibility of being a social justice educator, noting, “I am especially sensitive to both the obligation and the privilege of choosing ‘appropriate’ literature” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 64). It is this autonomy that can be viewed as a luxury as well as a burden for some. The book also addresses how choosing new literature can also mean replacing canonized British or American literature, which can also receive resistance from communities.

Each chapter in the book features participants from the study spanning eight sites across six provinces of Canada. The qualitative research investigated how literacy teachers both selected texts and implemented curriculum that promoted understandings of social justice. The book is divided into three sections: *Unsettling Our Sense of Place Through Canadian Literature*; *Encounters between Readers and Challenging Texts*; and *Opening Minds: Pedagogies for Social Justice*. At the end of each chapter, reflection questions are provided that offer the reader rich opportunities for a continued dialogue in personal teacher inquiry groups.

In the first section, two chapters, respectively, “describe a context where First Nations and settlers share spaces in schools and communities” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 13). Chapter one features research from rural communities that are home to various Mennonite settlers. Additionally, there is a strong presence of Colombian refugees and Indigenous children residing with foster families. The dynamic of the towns is described as conservative, shaped by the predominance of European Christian immigrants. As such, one participant articulated, the challenge is to “choose literature that promotes social justice awareness without offending conservative sensibilities” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 21). Balzer, the author of chapter one, echoes, “Challenges to literary texts grounded in religious beliefs are common in North America, and teachers have to be prepared to defend their text selection on pedagogical grounds” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 22). The rest of the chapter addresses pedagogical considerations and the importance of having the courage to open dialogue in the classroom for students to reflect upon identity and multiple world-views.

Similarly, chapter two explores the power of stories in a town populated by Indigenous peoples and settlers. Seven classroom teachers, one librarian, and one researcher met twelve times over a two-year school period. One teacher commented, “We were challenged by the difficulties of exposing students to historical events that might make them uncomfortable, without ‘blaming’ mainstream students for their relatively privileged lives” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 33). However, teachers shared that, “Discussing historic racism against First Nations peoples, for example, made it easier to talk about what

students had noticed in their own schools” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 45). Issues of racism, oppression, and privilege exist, regardless of whether teachers provide students the space to discuss and reflect. The stories shared by these teacher-participants provide inspiration to educators that may still fear the consequences of lifting the silence.

Section two focuses on “teachers’ approaches to working with difficult knowledge” and “recognizing their own privilege in the contexts of their classrooms and communities” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 49). In chapter three, two teachers share detailed accounts of selecting and reading potentially controversial texts. Teacher Karen Jacobson chose the graphic novel *The Listener* by David Lester (2011), which addresses historical events during Hitler’s political influence. The text is not classified as canonical literature and has sexual content. Jacobson pleasantly reported maturity from her students and rich engagement with multimedia presentations, particularly in, “students’ demonstration of visual literacy through exploring the stylistic choices in Lester’s art” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 59). The narrative shared by the other teacher, Bill Howe, also focused on the artistic possibilities in the classroom and the corresponding emotion that can emerge from an impactful play, such as *Scorched* (Mouawad, 2009). He wondered “whether or not we can actually end up doing more harm by avoiding the pain of experiencing certain works” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 65). He also shared how engaging the students with the text resulted in creating a safe space where a student confided in him that she survived the trauma of sexual assault and felt free to talk about her experience. Howe contemplated that perhaps the whole point of education is to change students through “pedagogic violence” (Bracher, 2006), and also cited Walker (2014) stating, “If I stick to the raw information, it’s not interesting as art. I want to be able to move you, challenge you, touch you. I want to be able to irritate you, provoke you; that’s a political task” (p. 68). Similarly, curriculum theorist, Apple (2004), suggested,

a basic assumption seems to be that conflict among groups of people is *inherently* and fundamentally bad and we should strive to eliminate it *within* the established framework of institutions, rather than seeing conflict and contradiction as the basic “driving forces” in society. (p. 81)

Chapter four is about the challenges of creating safe spaces for LGBTQ literature. Burke and Young (2017) commented, “In the case of LGBTQ/ Two-Spirit students who are already marginalized, critical literacy offers the chance for differences to be valued and upheld without one identity being prized above others” (p. 77). This corroborates Luke (1995) who argued, “In an educational context in which all schools are being called upon to provide access to equity to increasingly heterogeneous student populations, the tensions between official discourses and minority discourses should be principal focuses for educational research” (p. 38). This text does exactly that, by highlighting the affordances of critical literacy to address intersectionality and injustice and establish a space for communication and change.

Chapter five explored the conceptualization of *recognition*, rather than understanding, when discussing the shameful and horrific histories of Canadian residential schools. The teacher acknowledged that when engaging with unimaginable histories that defy understanding, recognition as a pedagogical orientation may be more responsible when working through stories of trauma with students. This recognition is not solely situated in the past but strives to bring awareness of ongoing injustices Indigenous peoples in Canada continue to face due to institutional and systemic racism. The chapter closes announcing that the students “now recognize between what to listen for, and how to enter a difficult but vitally important conversation” (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 100).

The last section, *Opening Minds: Pedagogies for Social Justice*, delves deeper into how to develop pedagogies for social justice, such as how to support respectful discussion and negotiate controversies. The inquiry groups in the research study proved vital during this stage of the research in particular. Chapter six discusses the value of using children’s literature as a tangible entry point for students that can be more immersive in its storyline and provide more imagery and opportunities for multimodal teaching practices. Students, in turn, responded to the literature with multimodal narratives, such as character postcards, which connected with the character’s emotions in the story *Fatty Legs* (Jordan-Fenton, & Pokiak-Fenton, 2010). The story is a recount of a personal narrative about an eight-year-old Inuit child and the abuse she experiences at a residential school.

The last chapter in the book, chapter seven, shares two teachers’ struggles to work among conservative schools and world-views when striving to support students in dialoguing about social injustices. Through their experiences, the teacher inquiry groups supported them in moving out of their comfort zones regarding unfamiliar literature selection and engaging with students in discussing social and struc-

tural inequalities experienced in Canadian society. From our perspective and positioning, this book is very current and relevant to the issues facing today's educators.

Overall, this text makes a significant contribution to the field of education in calling attention to what occurs in a classroom when educators help students to question privilege, intersectional positioning, and oppression. It is expected that sensitive topics will raise challenging conversations and teachers need tools, as presented in this text, to be prepared for potential resistance and strong emotions in their classrooms. In Kumashiro's (2002) work on anti-oppressive education, he argued for a "pedagogy of crisis" suggesting,

education is not something that involves comfortably repeating what we already learned or affirming what we already know. Rather, education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world. The crisis that results from unlearning, then, is a necessary and desirable part of anti-oppressive education. Desiring to learn involves desiring difference and overcoming our resistance to discomfort. (p. 63)

Challenging Stories: Canadian Literature for Social Justice in the Classroom (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017) offers educators a chance to reflect upon their own identities and practices while being thoughtful of what they wish to strive for in future practices. The authors also support educators in becoming aware of what is required when we teach social justice education while recognizing the uniqueness and contextual nature of classrooms, schools, and communities. The editors noted, "This includes the representation of minority students' culture, language, and identity in textbooks and classroom learning" (Burke, Johnston, & Ward, 2017, p. 2). When students are given the chance to see themselves reflected in text and in the classroom, we open a world of dialogue and difference that has the potential to enrich and embrace the students in our classrooms.

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