

Critically engaged learning: Connecting to young lives, by Smyth, J., Angus, L., McInerney, P., & Down, B.; Peter Lang Publishing, New York, 2008, \$32.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4331-0155-7

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Critically Engaged Learning: Connecting to Young Lives by John Smyth, Lawrence Angus, Peter McInerney, and Barry Down celebrates the stories of successful teachers and communities who engage young people in real-world learning and provides revitalization and recharged zeal for educators struggling to reach disengaged youth. In *Critically Engaged Learning*, Smyth et al. explored how to engage multiple constituencies around issues of “disadvantage, social exclusion, marginalization and social justice” (p. 7). Examining such central educational issues as student poverty, drop-out and push-out rates, student retention, and disengagement, the authors purposefully move beyond school contexts to discover “the institutional and community processes of capacity building that lead to improved learning for students” (p. x). Chapter One sets the background by situating the study in a cluster of schools located in excluded and disadvantaged communities in Australia. The multi-school project involves an elementary and a middle school in the small suburb of Wirra Wagga and a group of senior high schools in the larger community of Bountiful Bay. The project schools were all government (public) schools regulated by administrative and curriculum guidelines prescribed by both state and commonwealth governments.

Chapter Two, situated in Wirra Wagga, focuses on making complex connections between and among socially critical educators, community activists, excluded communities, and popular youth culture while addressing the wider issues of pedagogical, relational, curriculum, and educational policy. In this chapter, Smyth et al. emphasized the ubiquitous undemocratic practices and policies that can pervade research, institutions, society, politics, and the lives of adolescent youth. As an alternative to abandoning hope for reform, the authors urged their readers to consider undemocratic spaces and places as mediums for positive change rather than mere empty expanses waiting to be occupied. In other words, the authors viewed “space [as] socially produced, it is not innocent, but rather invested with power relating to age, gender, social position and relationships with others” (Tilley, 1994, p. 11). Based on such a belief, the authors identified the act of neutrality as a barrier to critical-democratic engagement.

Chapter Three smoothly transitions to Bountiful Bay where the authors painted a picture of shared power. In this chapter, educators and schools use the connectionist pedagogical approach—one that values inclusion—to better understand how to collaboratively extend and improve classroom learning that is relevant to the diverse backgrounds and aspirations of students from excluded communities. Gulson, Symes, and Sumsion (2007) identified exclusive practices in these terms: “The language of exclusion is, by and large, spatial: who’s in, who’s out, at the heart, on the margins” (p. 99). The authors, in collaboration with students, engaged in dialogue about how power works, for whom, and what a more egalitarian view of power might look like.

It is in Chapter Four that I question whether this book is actually another institutional “quick fix” or an additional compilation of methodological approaches in response to the struggle to reach disengaged youth. In this chapter, the authors claimed that there is evidence of an emerging “inclusive deliberative democracy” (p. 111) in Wirra Wagga. They also sought to unpack the basic assumptions and language associated with neighbourhood renewal and school effectiveness in disadvantaged Australian communities. However, this chapter fails to provide the reader with a more robust conceptualization of critical pedagogy and critical-democratic engagement. A clearer conceptualization is needed to address the taken for granted and powerful assumptions embedded in policy documents (Joshee, 2008).

Chapter Five responds to a concern I have long held regarding the vital need for educational reformation that is relevant to the lives of young people in today's popular culture. During the reading of this chapter, I began to pay close attention to the complex aesthetic dimensions salient to the authors' calls for deeper and broader theoretical perspectives of organizational change. As a result, I conceived the notion of *institutional aesthetics* to signify the bio-networking of organizations with the engaging appeal of critical democratic practice (Portelli & Solomon, 2001). Interestingly, this chapter helps to remedy my concern. It blends the ideas of *institution* and *aesthetics* well in several ways. First, Smyth et al. actively involved multiple stakeholders to address how exclusion, poverty, and other forms of inequity are socially and politically produced. Second, the authors used a closely-knit and interlacing orientation to magnify the value of educational institutions and their role in enhancing student engagement and critical democratic practices. They drew upon Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2005) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis' (1997) notion of *portraiture* as a creative and poetic form of textual representation as well as a method of documentation, analysis, and narrative development.

This technique is significant because young people often attribute meaningful school culture and memorable lived experiences with aesthetics through the arts (i.e., storytelling, poetry, music, dance, theatre, design, and spoken word). By using this aesthetic approach to inquiry (storytelling and portraiture) and liberating young peoples' voices, Smyth et al. reinforced a vital connection between organizational change and critical democratic practice. In an effort to encourage adolescent youth to tell their stories freely and without censorship, the authors were able to capture an array of living, authentic, and courageous voices. The generativity of creatively expressed thought uncovered exclusionary breaches in educational practice and policy that often infringe on students' freedom of expression.

Third, the blend of portraiture and the "multi-locale critical ethnographic approach" (p. 18) adopted in this study lends itself to a poetic and intellectual fusion where "[creative and] organic life processes [merge with diverse] social systems" (Danesh & Clarke-Habibi, 2007, p. 1). This poetic and intellectual phenomenon is supported in the work of Bate (1994). Bate made no distinction between an organization and a living and complex organism. He maintained that culture is organization and organization is culture and, therefore, educational institutions are living entities having the potential to influence, shape, and affect students' life experiences and to generate critical democratic spaces where diverse narratives can be discovered. The wide range of interconnecting vernacular and everyday youth narratives presented in this chapter offers, what Willinsky (1991) called, "a knowledge ecology" (p. 72).

Finally, in Chapter Six, the authors summarized their findings and reviewed the vital importance for all stakeholders "to produce the conditions for breaking the debilitating cycle of educational disadvantage and social exclusion" (p. 24). In their effort to erode pathologizing disadvantage the authors espoused meaningful dialogue, reflection, innovation, and hope. After reading this book, one can no longer remain in a position formerly declared as neutral. Overall, while the book's approach of creating narrative portraits is impressive, the authors' submission is modest and transparent—both of which I think are convincing qualities for the reader. It offers sound recommendations to anyone seeking to deconstruct the barriers facing excluded young people living in undemocratic communities today.

There are two final thoughts about this book that are worth my mention. First, despite the book's length, an in-depth read is highly recommended as this book gives every critical democratic educator a comprehensive body of work from which to draw fresh insights from the field. Second, the authors do not make use of quantitative methods nor do they gesture in an attempt to appease the scientific and positivistic inquirer. On the other hand, there is no claim to knowledge, and their rigorous qualitative data speak volumes regarding the benefits of pursuing ways to offer life chances to young people in difficult circumstances.

There is a great deal more to this book than I have been able to mention, especially as it pertains to the broader-reaching role of the community in forming new storylines that foster a student-focused and supportive school environment. The question this book—like all the best books on democracy, inclusion, and critical engagement (e.g., Portelli & Solomon, 2001; Ryan, 2006; Woods, 2005)—leads us to ask is: Can educational institutions reflect the qualities of thriving living organisms or are they mere edifices of brick and mortar disconnected from real-world engagement? *Critically Engaged Learning: Connecting to Young Lives* is a substantive book that challenges mainstream work on engagement and is a refreshing antidote to the plethora of studies tarnished by neoliberal beliefs and deficit thinking. It is a timely contribution when philosophical liberalism and the neoliberal ethic of the

marketplace compete for supremacy in the academy. If a portrait of institutional aesthetics were to be recognized among the fine arts, this book could certainly serve as a model for such visual rendering.

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