

## Book Review

# Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education

Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo  
New York: Teachers College Press, 2012

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Public discourse surrounding such events as the Syrian refugee crisis and 2016 United States presidential election, highlight a continuing need for educators to provide pedagogical spaces for critical conversation about contemporary global issues. These educative efforts can be complicated by gaps in students' knowledge of current events, media literacy, and critical vocabulary needed to query systemic and ideological underpinnings of persistent patterns of violence and oppression. Educators seeking a course textbook that introduces discourses of critical social justice literacy can find an encouraging resource in *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* by Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo. This volume is an addition to the Teachers College Press *Multicultural Education Series*, edited by James E. Banks.

A wide range of students, including high school seniors, undergraduates, and pre-service teachers will find it a challenging introduction to key social justice issues and concepts.

Sensoy and DiAngelo open with a discussion of critical thinking and critical theory, the pedagogical and theoretical anchors for conceptual explorations in subsequent chapters. "To think critically," they write, "means to continuously seek out information that lies beyond our commonsense ideas about the world" (p. 2) and to inform oneself of the historical and cultural contexts of knowledge and socialization. Readers are encouraged to move beyond anecdotal and "popular knowledge" (p. 9) to a critical examination of the social construction of knowledge and positionality. For educators steeped in critical theory and anti-oppressive teaching strategies, this call can seem obvious. However, given the authors' extensive teaching experience and encounter with resistance to social justice approaches across a broad range of public schools, private institutions, and postsecondary degree programs, they prudently make no assumptions about readers' initial critical orientations.

In Chapters 3 through 8, Sensoy and DiAngelo discuss several major social justice concepts, which include prejudice and discrimination, oppression and power, privilege, invisible or institutional oppression—specifically sexism—and racism. These core chapters include boxed side notes explaining relevant vocabulary and *perspective check points*, alerting readers to the authors' particular point of view of a given passage and acknowledging the importance of multiple perspectives inherent to any dialogue. Each thematic chapter ends with discussion questions for further reflection on the authors' arguments, suggestions for extra activities, ideas for further reading, writing, film/media viewing, and action projects, which are easily adaptable

to a broad range of senior secondary and postsecondary classroom settings.

As a postsecondary instructor in teacher education, I found three additional aspects of the book particularly helpful. First, Chapter 9, 'Yeah, but ... ' *Common Rebuttals*, anticipates and provides possible responses for common student reactions and resistance evoked by critical conversation, such as citing exceptions to patterns of inequality or dismissing social justice issues as the "left-wing" rhetoric of certain professors (pp. 132-133). Educators who engage in social justice conversations should be prepared for potentially uncomfortable rebuttals that can compromise students' space and willingness for critical dialogue. I recall several uneasy moments where the authors' sensible advice would have bolstered my own unsteady facilitation efforts.

Second, the book's glossary (pp. 180-188) provides readers with a succinct list of key social justice terms and a discussion of how the "evolving nature of language" (p. 180) both constructs categories of identity and makes it "nearly impossible to escape being pressed into rigid social categories" (p. 181). The authors make it clear that they wish to avoid "essentializing" (p. 181) categories of race, gender, and class by providing a dictionary of terms and instead encourage readers to continue to educate themselves about the "politics of language" (p. 181) and the relationship of discourse and thought. The glossary further cautions why certain phrases may be considered derogatory or inappropriate in particular contexts.

Third, the book's appendix presents a framework for *How to Engage Constructively in Courses That Take a Critical Social Justice Approach*. The authors acknowledge that unsettling dominant ideologies can be "politically and emotionally charged" even within a well-intentioned scholarly context (p. 165). They provide a list of "principles for constructive engagement" (p. 166) for students and instructors, including striving for intellectual humility, which moves beyond anecdotal defensiveness and recognizing one's own positionality.

Sensoy and DiAngelo target the book for audiences in Canada and the United States. Although most themes translate fluidly across international contexts, as a Canadian educator, I would have appreciated more detailed discussion of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit issues, given the focus on indigeneity and indigenous pedagogies in both teacher education and social studies education in many Canadian faculties of education. Striking a balance between breadth and depth when introducing a wide range of social justice subjects, issues, and concepts is challenging.

Sensoy and DiAngelo close their book with a clear message to students and teachers alike: to develop critical social justice literacy requires lifelong commitment to "an on-going process," and to engage in such transformational work compels—demands—that educators begin to "take risks, make mistakes, and *act*" (p. 162, emphasis in original) no matter how tentatively or imperfectly. Investigating social justice issues within an educational context remains a complicated yet vital pedagogical endeavour. "Transgressing boundaries" of positionality and identity can be disturbing, even "frightening" (hooks, 1994, p. 9). *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* serves as a solid primary course textbook for postsecondary and secondary educators who are committed to activating social justice pedagogy within their practices while preserving the classroom as a "radical space of possibility" (hooks, 1994, p. 12) within the academy.

## Reference

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as a practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

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