REVIEW ESSAY


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Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education is a project developed and written by educators for educators. This educational resource is not only a response to the Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy put forward by the Ministry of Education in 2009, but also a resource that contributes greatly to the scholarship of teaching practices in the province and the country in general. This project fits well in the series of Ministry Programs related to equity and inclusive education and draws upon such initiatives as the Ontario’s Aboriginal Education Strategy, Special Education Programs, Safe Schools Strategy, and the New Teacher Induction Program.

Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education is designed on the philosophy of inclusion and unity and advocates for diversity and multiculturalism. It explores the concept of equality within the classroom space that encourages dialogue between student and teacher to ensure a safe and inclusive environment. This resource takes ideas from the concepts of inclusion and unity introduced by such pedagogical theorists as George J. Sefa Dei and Paulo Freire. The authors of the book, however, take it even further by stating in the introduction that “true equality moves beyond tolerance and acceptance” and by advocating “meaning-making and learning” that is not dependent on the intervention of teachers in the classroom but instead encourages an equal exchange of knowledge. A need for such action research stems from general concern over the overwhelming social issues of today, such as discrimination, homophobia, racism, intolerance, psychological and physical abuse, to mention but a few, to which students try to adjust by adopting behaviors that often result in isolation and hostility. Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education
equips educators with necessary strategies for successfully addressing challenges that marginalized groups of students face in schools today.

The book is organized into seven independent chapters covering the following topics:
- sexual orientation and homo-negativity;
- low socio-economic status and academic achievement;
- sexual harassment, gender identity and gender violence;
- students with physical, emotional and intellectual disabilities;
- aboriginal communities and respect of indigenous ways of knowing;
- visible minorities and racism; and
- model minority stereotyping.

Within each chapter, the format is standardized under sub-headings in the following manner:
- identifying our pre-conceptions;
- understanding theoretical concepts;
- practicing diversity in our profession (in the halls and in the classroom); and
- transforming classroom environments.

Under the last sub-heading one can find two lesson plans that are ready for use in the classroom, including a terminology list, informative slides, detailed activity instructions with designed flashcards and visual aids and, most importantly, teacher assessment and student self-assessment tools. The resource includes extensive terminology list and bibliographical references. Additionally, Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education includes a 4¾ in. CD-ROM of the book that provides electronic templates of all charts and classroom-ready materials.

The first chapter on sexual orientation and homo-negativity discusses such concepts as sexual harassment, heterosexism, and homophobia and based on Nucci’s research argues that schools constitute a microcosm of the larger culture. In other words, schools mirror discriminatory practices found in the community. In an effort to create a safe space within the classroom setting that would later translate into the community, the authors of the book developed two lesson plans that address the issues of homophobic slurs and anti-LGBTQ behavior, as well as focus on the ways to practice tolerance and diminish the differences between heterosexual and homosexual students.

Similar to the first chapter, in the second chapter on low socio-economic status and academic achievement the authors discuss student success and variables that affect it. Poverty, low access to social capital, physical deprivation, and food insecurity are among them. These factors often lead to social ostracism that is viewed in this resource as a passive form of bullying. To increase students’ awareness of these issues, the lesson plans proposed in the book address the nature and usefulness of social capital and invite students to discuss the reality of poverty and consider the socio-economic climate of their schools.
In the third chapter on sexual harassment, gender identity and gender violence, the educators can find useful tools on how to start a discussion with their students about gender roles, biases and stereotypes, and means to prevent sexual harassment as it is found not only at the work place but in schools as well. The authors of *Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education* expand on the concept of harassment and bullying in the chapter on students with physical, emotional and intellectual disabilities. The objective of this chapter and the proposed lesson plans is to educate ourselves and generate awareness of what it is like to live with a disability. Students are invited to reflect and share their own experiences and the way they respond to others with physical or mental disabilities. The lesson plans found in this chapter focus on the value of inclusion and encourage students to develop soft skills needed for meaningful interaction with their peers.

The chapters about aboriginal communities and visible minorities elaborate on the concept of systemic racism and show how deeply institutionalized it is in our society. The Ministry of Education in Ontario identifies Aboriginal students as a group in need of inclusive education. Failing to provide an equitable and inclusive environment to these students will lead to their exclusion and estrangement. The urgency in this is justified by the fact that between 2001 and 2006 Ontario’s Aboriginal population grew nearly five times faster than the non-Aboriginal people. Similar to these groups, visible minorities experience prejudice, discrimination and overt racism that, as the authors of the book claim, are embedded in instructional strategies, curriculum, assessment practices, discipline policies, and schools cultures. Not only does the chapter on visible minorities and racism aim at moving students beyond tolerance and towards acceptance as well as generating a candid and open discussion about racism, but it also gives the educators necessary tools to ensure that their students develop strong critical thinking and analytical skills and use them when assessing resources for bias and become active in social justice issues. The discussion on racism and racial bias is continued in the last chapter of the book, where a more subtle form of racial bias—model minority stereotyping—is introduced. The proposed lesson plans are designed to help students explore the issues of racial stereotyping and religious tolerance, as well as address their own misconceptions about students that represent minority groups in their schools.

To conclude, *Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education* is a valuable resource for educators that is ready for use in the classroom and would need minimum adjustment to the curriculum. Teachers would be, however, required to conduct additional research and background reading on the proposed topics as the theoretical context is not always exhaustive. The references to other provinces in Canada and the USA are very sporadic and inconsistent, denying the reader the chance to see the urgency of these issues country wide, as well as internationally. Additionally, not many references were made to the Canadian Multiculturalism Act and multicultural initiatives of the Government of Canada and how they tie in with the initiatives and strategies introduced by the Provincial Government of Ontario.

I applaud the authors on such an ambitious effort of covering a lot of burning issues that educators face in schools today. A suggestion would be to expand on the topic of globalization and immigration and post-traumatic stress disorders associated with it.
Methodologically speaking, the resource is well built but lacks focus in that it introduces approaches and theories of an array of scholars and researchers from various fields. Even though *Creating Spaces: Embedding Equity in Education* was initially designed for educators in Ontario, it can be easily adapted to teaching practices in other provinces—and it should be.