REVIEW ESSAY


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As the title suggests, the book Small cities, big issues: Reconceiving community in a neoliberal era takes a critical look at the complex social issues facing small Canadian cities – namely, Kamloops, Kelowna, Nanaimo and Prince George. Part one presents a reflection of displacement, isolation and Othering, echoing a dominant discourse of diversity as deficiency through communal responses to a variety of issues – specifically, homelessness, the street sex trade, illicit drug use, queerness, deinstitutionalization, the reintegration of parolees and finally, decolonization. While at first glance these issues may appear to be drastically different, they are in fact intimately connected by both the responses they elicit and the actions they can inspire. Individually and collectively, part one is a call to all Canadians – those who are typically silenced and those who are members of institutions, community groups and all levels of government – to collaboratively reframe our notion of community. In doing so, we commit to ensuring that each one of us, regardless of our differences, feels valued and included – a True North reflection of diversity as strength.

Part two focuses on how we can build such inclusive communities by encouraging us to reflect on our social policies and our social responsibilities – thus calling into question the myth of Canada as fair and just. In essence, it is no longer enough to simply talk the talk of social inclusion, we must also walk the walk.

George Dei, a prominent Canadian educator and advocate of equity and anti-racism, reflects on what it means to walk the walk: “Inclusion is not bringing people into what already exists; it is making a new space, a better space for everyone.” (Dei, as cited in Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, n.p.). The authors and editors of this book are striving to promote visions like Dei’s by conducting research, largely through case studies, into shifting current forms of social exclusion. Using focus groups and semi-structured
interviews, they are seeking to understand the perspectives of diverse groups of individuals ranging from drug addicts to First Nations peoples. In discussing and analyzing their stories, these researchers are able to draw connections with theoretical models directly linked to education.

One such example is a Canadian social determinant of health model arguing that “the primary factors that shape the health of Canadians are not medical treatments or lifestyle choices but rather the living conditions they experience.” (Mikkonen & Raphael, 2010, p. 7). Applying that model to drug addicts, author Sydney Weaver guides readers to the conclusion that by acknowledging the conditions at the root of drug addiction, we as a society can begin to reframe images of negativity with the compassion of community – supporting drug users in becoming independent and successful members of society. While advocacy groups and governments are critical to shifting public perceptions of drug users, so too are educators. Teaching and modelling critical thinking, whether through theoretical models or media literacy, not only teaches today’s youth about the impacts of social exclusion but also motivates them to educate others – a particularly impactful lesson given the recent legalization of cannabis.

Another significant lesson is represented by the metaphors of the Circle and the Box – the former representing the spiritual worldview of First Nations communities and the latter, the dominant Western hierarchical worldview. While these metaphors do not capture the complexity of these distinct cultural realities, they do highlight that contrary to popular opinion, the “Western perspective is not universal and can often seem quite alien to an Aboriginal person” (Matthew & McKinnon, 2018, p. 169). Hence, rather than promoting conflict through attempts at assimilation, we can choose to replace conflict with connection, concern with courage, by working collaboratively to see and embrace the beauty of new ways of knowing and being. What might this look like in the classroom? In addition to teaching students about these powerful metaphors, Small cities, big issues promotes a cosmopolitan ethic recognizing “people of all colours and origins as deserving of the same level of dignity and respect” (Sánchez-Flores, 2018, p. 229). In my view, this ethic can best be fostered by engaging with difference. After all, it is ultimately through seeing new perspectives and engaging in new experiences that we can reconceptualize our notions of belonging and community. Small cities, big issues seeks to do just that and while it is a shame that the book does not examine the complexities of small Canadian cities beyond British Columbia, we can nonetheless see the universal in the unique and the unique in the universal. Small cities, big issues thus receives my seal of approval!

REFERENCES
