BOOK REVIEW

Charest, B., & Sjostrom, K. (Eds.). (2019). *Unsettling education: Searching for ethical footing in a time of reform*. New York: Peter Lang.

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Unsettling Education, edited by Brian Charest and Kate Sjostrom, is a collection geared toward new and practicing educators who wish to think further about the ongoing neoliberal reforms that permeate educational practices and structures in North America. The ten chapters of the collection, as the title suggests, offer readers moments to *unsettle* their assumptions about various everyday practices in education through a lens of neoliberal critique. Situated in a North American context, the experiential contributions of various educators speak to concerns about the marketization of schooling and its drive toward standardization, assessment practices, teacher accountability, and student success initiatives. Of primary concern are the ways in which school practices continue to perpetuate student inequalities while constraining teacher action.

In their introduction, Charest and Sjostrom set the tone by starting with a story of one of Sjostrom's education students, who was bothered by the blind acceptance of dehumanizing attendance and assessment practices he observed during his practicum. Charest and Sjostrom argue that this lack of questioning is part of a facade of neutrality constructed by neoliberal reforms that dehumanizes educational practices. Further, they put forward an alternative vision of education toward equity and social justice involving everyday action, themes woven throughout several chapters. In the words of the editors, "all of us are implicated when we allow policies and procedures to push us away from our ethical commitments to students, to justice, to equity, and to humanity" (Charest & Sjostrom, 2019, p. 7). The editors also recognize, through their selections of experiential chapters written by in-service educators, that teachers are already pushing back in creative and thoughtful ways that ultimately benefit their students. These stories will prove valuable to curious educators who are interested in contesting problematic neoliberal paradigms, but who may be unsure of how to translate these critiques into pedagogical action. Further, individual chapters in the collection may serve as

appropriate course readings for undergraduate learners to interrogate school norms from their own practical experiences, working on personal reflexivity.

The book is divided into three sections: *The Promise of Unsettling Moments*, which shares many teacher examples of unsettling moments and the ways the authors rethink their praxis in response; *Pedagogies of Resistance*, which challenges commonplace practices like the necessity of grading, heteronormative assumptions, and teacher-centred classrooms; and *Unsettling Education Through Institutional Critiques*, which explores teacher evaluation, mental health and motivation discourses, teacher burnout, and deschooling. Lastly, in a rallying call to prioritize students over policies, contributor Jay Gillen provides an *Epilogue*.

In many ways, *Unsettling Education* reads as a unified text. Throughout, the book is characterized as questioning neoliberalism while also centring the goals of educational equity and student relationships. The contributors provide enough personal examples to keep the text engaging; where one chapter might lack a scholarly grounding for their argument, another will provide the theoretical background. For example, Kevin Christopher Carey's chapter on *Motivation, Mental Health, and the Eclipse of the Social Imagination*, situated in the middle of the book, provides a particularly helpful scholarly definition and analysis of neoliberalism, while remaining readable for a wide audience.

Some of the chapters consider the interconnections between neoliberal paradigms and other forms of oppression, such as race and gender normativity. This intersectional lens comes through most clearly in chapters by Angela Whitacre de Resendiz and Will Hudson, Matthew Homrich-Knieling and Alex Corbitt, Noah Asher Golden, and Mikela Bjork, in which the authors respectively consider the privileges acquired through race, gender, and heteronormativity in relation to neoliberal consequences. These chapters share important moments of reflexivity and theoretical understandings of the power of normativity in our society. This reflexivity has its limitations, however, as most of the contributing authors are dominantly positioned white teachers who live within the privileges of normativity, and this is a shortcoming of the text.

Certainly, these dominant voices make up the bulk of teachers in the United States and Canada (see Muso, 2019; Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009), and there are important moments of *unsettling* that can happen through dominant realizations that challenge dominant teachers to rethink problematic assumptions. As a white settler Canadian teacher, I myself am benefitting greatly from the learning of people who are dominantly positioned in societal power structures. But crucially, my learning has been *unsettled* most by racialized scholars such as Howard (2009), Dei (2005), Ahmed (2004), hooks (1997), and Tuck and Yang (2018), who explain that there are serious limitations in social justice projects when the people most directly affected are not heard in the conversation. The experiential knowledges of peoples who are oppressed by dominant structures, be it neoliberalism or racism or heteronormativity, help build invaluable critiques because the structures are made visible through their experiences of oppression. In other words, *unsettling* privileged assumptions requires the understanding of peoples who are oppressed. Mikela Bjork's chapter *Compulsory Heterosexuality* provides a case in point, for she weaves in lengthy direct quotations from the queer women she works with to learn about the hidden heteronormativity

reproduced in schools. This chapter is an exception in the collection, for most of the authors are positioned as cis-gender, middle class, and white; they share about their own experiences in their writing, albeit sometimes through their relationships with non-dominant students. While these reflexive stories are important to hear, there is nonetheless an absence in sharing the experiences and ideas of the many non-dominant teachers in North America who have different personal stakes in social justice projects.

While I consider this scope a shortcoming of the collection as a whole, I still wholeheartedly recommend engaging with it. However, this volume should not be taken as a universal reimagining of schooling, but perhaps as a contribution toward rethinking dominant neoliberal educational practices by mostly dominant educators. In my view, this edition requires supplementing for a broader understanding of educational reform, for example with the explicitly critical racial text edited by Tuck and Yang (2018), which contributes an array of racialized scholars' voices to examine social justice initiatives and further *unsettle* the dominant assumptions that often remain invisible to dominantly positioned readers. Charest and Sjostrom's volume certainly encourages critical reflexivity for educators, and their novel approach toward storytelling helps critique aspects of neoliberalism effectively while also imagining creative responses in education. But in light of the proposed goals of equity and social justice, a reframing of the contribution would prove helpful in contextualizing this discourse as a glimpse of mainly dominant perspectives rather than a universal overview. ■

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

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