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Book Review of *Democratic Citizenship Education in Non-Western Contexts: Implications for Theory and Research*

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Book Review

Serhiy Kovalchuk and Anatoli Rapoport (Eds.) *Democratic Citizenship Education in Non-Western Contexts: Implications for Theory and Research* Routledge, 2021, 144 pages. ISBN 9780367727307

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Democracy today faces challenges globally from growing authoritarianism, the undermining of scientific expertise, and a questioning of the very nature of reality. Do we need new concepts of democracy to respond to these growing challenges? Published by Routledge in 2019, *Democratic Citizenship Education in Non-Western Contexts* raises profound questions about the uncritical application of Western ideals of democratic citizenship education (DCE) in non-Western countries. It argues that while there is a proliferation of research in “post-colonial, post-authoritarian and post-socialist societies” (Kovalchuk & Rapoport, 2019, p. 1), there is a need to critically examine the epistemological underpinnings of this emerging research in both comparative and democratic citizenship education. The book features eight chapters written by critical scholars who advance indigenous theories of DCE to “cross-culturalize the field of comparative and international citizenship education” (Takayama, 2018, p. 1).

This book is a result of a symposium on citizenship education at the 2016 Comparative International Education Society (CIES) conference. Edited by Serhiy Kovalchuk and Anatoli Rapoport, it presents a fascinating examination of DCE across parts of the world often overlooked in mainstream scholarship. Aimed at scholars in the fields of comparative, international education and citizenship education, this book argues that these fields continue to be dominated by Western paradigms and have also marginalized indigenous epistemologies. Furthermore, the contributing authors argue that if we do not accurately capture the complex, hybrid nature of ordinary people’s lives outside the Western world, then our definitions of democratic citizenship are incomplete at best, and dangerous at worst.

In Chapter 1, Kovalchuk and Rapoport propose a very broad definition of citizenship that includes all forms and levels of education (p. 2). They argue that the Western ideal of democratic citizenship is not universal and has been spread to regions where it effectively erases indigenous traditions and practices. Contrary to dominant discourses of DCE, ideas of democracy have existed in non-Western contexts for centuries. As education scholar Iveta Silova suggests, while they have not historically been included in citizenship education, local and indigenous histories, beliefs, and traditions *should* be considered in citizenship (2010, in p.4).

In Chapter 2, Patricia Kubow argues that the result of this Western dominance is not only a silencing of “alternative” paradigms, but also a mischaracterization of the lives of citizens across the non-Western world. Kubow draws on her history of research in a Xhosa township in South Africa to illustrate citizenship practices today, and those that existed prior to a “Western” formulation. Kubow illustrates how an African concept of Ubuntu defines personhood as an idea of a citizen that is interconnected, relational, and contextual. “A person is a person through other people” (p. 12). She goes on to quote activist Bishop Desmond Tutu, “I am human because I belong, I participate, I share” (Tutu in Kubow, p. 15). This notion stands in contrast to the Western definition of citizen as autonomous, mostly White, and mostly male.

In Chapter 3 Laura Quaynor dispels the widely-held notion that citizenship is a Western invention by grounding her examination of DCE in Liberia using a study of the indigenous knowledge systems of Adinkra and the Mande Charter of 1222. These systems date back centuries before the arrival of Western democracy, and conceive of a person as an

interdependent citizen who has both rights and duties that include the notion of “individual action for the common good” (p. 35).

In Chapter 4, Michelle Bellino examines how within the instability of Guatemalan democracy and widespread violence, youth are being socialized into an idea of “waiting for citizenship.” Many youth protest, while others choose to withdraw from the public sphere entirely to protect themselves from the violence. Bellino argues that scholars need new methods to capture the complexity and tensions of citizenship theories and the lived experiences of young people in the violent aftermath of civil war.

In Chapter 5 scholars Heela Goren and Miri Yemini investigate the challenges of teaching global citizenship education (GCE) within the highly intractable conflict in Israel. How can we teach membership in a global space when ethno-nationalist ideologies dominate the school curricula and the society? The authors interviewed teachers in Israel to better understand their challenges teaching GCE when it can be viewed as threatening by the state.

In Chapter 6, Bassel Akar documents how the dominance of Western notions of citizenship has significantly impacted the nature of research conducted in non-Western contexts. Due to the dominance of a quantitative epistemological framework advanced by powerful multilateral institutions, scholars doing qualitative research in non-Western countries may face significant barriers and a general devaluation of qualitative and critical research.

Diego Nieto (Chapter 7) looks at global discourses that shape DCE policies and practices, pointing out that Western policies overwhelmingly portray young people as deviant, passive, and apathetic. Moreover, he suggests that despite the incredible power of multilateral development agencies, much of the work of these institutions in the area of citizenship education ignores the long history of popular education in Latin America and the myriad of forms of political participation and struggle in the region.

Finally, in Chapter 8, Jennifer Otting uses ethnographic methods to investigate the implementation of a new citizenship education curriculum in Kosovo. She interviewed educational actors, including ministers, staff, and teachers about their understanding of the goals of this curriculum, as well as documenting their actual experiences of its implementation. Otting found that many participants could *not* clearly articulate the goals of the policy, nor could they clearly define the role of a democratic citizen. Instead they turned their attention to measurement, often ignoring crucial questions of content. “The curriculum reform became more about changing teachers than changing societal problems” (p. 126). The lesson of this case study, suggests Otting, is how global discourses of standardization can displace—or indeed replace— concerns and the lived realities of educators charged with teaching the new curricula.

The central argument of the critical scholars in this book is compelling, especially as the world faces a growing number of challenges to democratic ideals. This book not only raises important critiques to Western ideals and models of citizenship, but also advances the often unacknowledged indigenous concepts of democratic “personhood” from around the globe. As the world faces incredibly urgent global challenges, such as COVID-19 and climate change, to name a few, educators must indeed take the message that Boyte et al. (2001) suggest in Bellino’s chapter, we need to recognize the diversity of citizenship ideals and activities across the globe and to show young people that “a citizen is the co-creator of the world to which she or he belongs” (Bellino, p. 55). In order to revise or reinvent citizenship, young people must first believe that they are capable of doing so.

References:

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Leigh-Anne Ingram is an educator, researcher and author with over 20 years of experience in the fields of education, gender equity, youth engagement, and international and comparative education. Leigh-Anne has a PhD in Education from the University of Toronto and a master's degree from Harvard University. She has worked in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, and is currently adjunct professor of Education in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University.