

Book Reviews

SLEETER C., Upadhyay, S. B., Mishra, A.K., and S. Kumar (eds.) (2012) *School Education, Pluralism and Marginality: Comparative Perspectives*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, ISBN: 978 81 250 4531 1 (Hard Cover), Pages: 480, Price: Not mentioned

In one of the examples in his book *Social Character of Learning*, Krishna Kumar perceptively analyses how a tribal boy has to *inevitably* align with the dominant discourse of being 'backward' through the pedagogical processes in the mainstream education system in India. It is not as if India can be singled out for such examples; this is more the predicament of marginalized and minority groups across the world. The edited volume under review, emerging from an international conference organised a few years back by Deshkal Society, places the educational deprivation and discrimination faced by such marginalized and minority groups across different geographies as its central theme. The 17 essays, comprising the volume, are divided into four broad thematic concerns – marginal communities, social exclusion, and schooling; hegemonies, formal schooling systems, and the child; pluralism, citizenship, and school education; and developing teaching and learning methods – the social context.

In the first section, R. Govinda and Madhumita Bandyopadhyay set the tone for the overarching theme by analysing how, despite increase in the provision of education facilities in recent decades in India, inequities continue to persist. Such a picture emerges from the figures of enrolment and drop-out rates, evident from the large-scale data sets such as the AIES and the NSS, among traditionally disadvantaged groups. These figures underscore the cumulative disadvantages that occur across caste, gender, geographies and minority status. However, these are arguments that the authors have already elaborated upon in another recently edited volume (Govinda and Bandyopadhyay 2011), and it would have been more insightful to see some new directions emerging from their work. Using Dalit autobiographies and his own experiences of discriminatory practices at school, M. Murali Krishna provides insights into the multi-layered nature of exclusion that Dalits have to face. In a context, where there is an increasing social distance in government schools between children from marginalised groups accessing these schools and the teachers, whose aspirations are oriented towards middle-class values, the essay has important implications for the nature of teacher education programmes in the country.

The third essay, by Angela W. Little, focuses on the educational experience of Indian Tamils in the plantations of Sri Lanka. Little covers the period from around 1850 till the mid-1990s, and traces factors that both facilitated and constrained education expansion for this specific community. Drawing upon a neo-Weberian approach, Little's historical analysis underlines the importance of 'broad politics' – influences arising from spilling over of socio-political life of the plantations beyond their immediate boundaries – to explain how an uneven education expansion did take place even in the presence of strong economic forces that impeded such expansion. Understandably, the analysis comes with a tone of optimism in contrast to structuralist education theories that only emphasise the role of education in

social reproduction. In the next chapter, Subhash Sharma undertakes a case study of a school in the Champaran district of Bihar and unravels, in minute detail, the ways in which an unaccountable school system is possibly constituted. The study shows how both macro-level factors, such as indifference and vested interests of the political class, irrespective of caste affiliations, and micro-level complexities, such as a nexus of mutually beneficial internal arrangements between parental groups, contract teachers and regular teachers, implicates almost one and all in the way unaccountability is sustained at the school level.

Engaging with some popular misconceptions, Imtiaz Ahmad attempts to provide a somewhat different analysis of Muslim educational backwardness in India. The author, quite correctly, contests both religio-cultural stereotypes about education of Muslims and modernist assumptions about cultural homogeneity and educational values that might be applicable universally. His main argument is that such modernist assumptions underlie the choices of only a small proportion of the entire social strata of the Muslims, specifically the middle class; a middle class that has grown little since Independence because of low enrolment into its ranks from the lower classes that have remained steeped in poverty. However, such an argument, and the policy prescriptions it generates – '[p]erhaps, a second and a decidedly better strategy would be for the community to rely upon its own internal resources and private initiative for developing educational facilities' (p. 140) – tend to devalorize the structural dimensions of inequality which even the Sachar Committee Report highlights and, possibly unwittingly, align with a neo-liberal discourse. The last chapter of the first section is a historical analysis of the education of the Dalits in colonial India. Shashi Bhusan Upadhyay shows how the purportedly more inclusive educational policies, that came about with British rule, were also inherently biased in favour of the social elite from the sub-continent. Upadhyay sees the opportunistic alliance of British colonial interests with the local elite as hampering any real translation of the benefits of the modern colonial education system for the Dalits. This, as the author emphasises, takes place in spite of the efforts emerging from those of the missionaries, independent social reformers such as Jotirao Phule, and the nascent nationalist movement, which articulated a strong demand for a more mass-based education system with a focus on the socially downtrodden.

Only two essays, quite distinct in their approaches and geographies of interest, comprise the second section of the book. Dave Hill draws upon a body of research, primarily from Britain, to emphasise how economic disadvantage is the main reason underlying differences in educational attainments across different social groupings. Indeed, for Hill, an orthodox Marxian analysis well suffices and is better positioned to explain inequalities among social groups, than theories which indicate the importance of other factors such as race, gender, or caste. Such an over-determined position, however, neglects both issues of intersectionality and the rich ethnographic work which show not only how class and caste might overlap, but also work differentially in terms of educational and labour market outcomes (for example, Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008). In the other essay, Manabi Majumdar and Jos Mooij explore the effects that trends of excessive orientation to examinations and the increasing standardisation of teaching-learning processes have had on education. The authors, in their analysis, concede that while such trends are qualitatively harmful for an overall vision of education as individually and socially empowering, they are more debilitating for the disadvantaged groups due to their lack of alternative and home support mechanisms.

The third section deals with multi-cultural education and rights-based education in four different geographies. In the first of these, Crain Soudien directs our attention to the social

changes amidst which the youth of post-apartheid South Africa, particularly the black youth, are negotiating a precarious sense of identity; one in which there is a sharpening of a sense of individualism and, at the same time, a distancing from a traditional set of values. While inherently not problematic, such a trend is often accompanied with stronger identification with peer groups and peer values that are seen to have negative social and individual consequences. Soudien, unfortunately, does not elaborate on the implications of these trends for school education specifically, and, consequently, leaves us with the platitude that we should recognise learning as a complex social activity. The second essay builds its arguments on a primarily qualitative study focusing on questions of diversity, difference, and education in Ghana. George J. Sefa Dei emphasises the need to treat minority status in terms of cultural status of population groups rather than only statistical numbers and quite aptly points out the importance of tracing out differences that could exist along the categories of ethnicity, religion, language, and culture, even though these categories might overlap in local narratives.

The remaining two essays engage with human rights education, one foregrounding the Roma – a minority population group primarily inhabiting Central and Eastern Europe- and the other having, as its backdrop, the experiences of Croatia since its transition to democracy. Lynn Davies underlines that the strength of a human rights approach to education lies in its multi-dimensionality – incorporation of legal frameworks, normative-cultural dimensions, and economic and political entitlements. She, however, concedes that there are in-built tensions within such an approach, such as instances where specificities of cultural values and practices conflict with a more universal notion of rights. In the other essay, Vedrana Spajic-Vrkas outlines the policy and institutional level complexities and problems that a rights-based approach encounters, specifically in the face of a transition from a history of communism and large-scale ethnic violence in a country like Croatia.

The last section brings the reader closer to the school context and discusses how inclusive practices can translate into specific classroom settings marked by social and cultural diversity. Russell Bishop uses Maori metaphors to locate teaching-learning processes in a culturally situated discourse in which self-determination of learners, interdependence among students and teachers and home-school inter-linkages form the backbone. The author demonstrates the relevance of such an approach through an action research project that uses the dissonances in the narratives of primary stakeholders in schooling – students, parents, principals and teachers – to inform changes in teacher practices. In the second chapter of this section, Dhir Jhingran presents the findings from a research study, covering the states of Assam, Gujarat, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh, and brings us face to face with the poor pedagogic strategies and efforts that prevail in the varied language environments across classrooms in the country.

Examples of engaged teacher practices are not only inspiring; they also provide ways to connect to complex and innovative pedagogic frameworks. Christine Sleeter manages to achieve this through the portrayal of experiences of teachers in the USA who use multi-cultural curriculum and pedagogy in classrooms marked by diversity. Through this, she draws out a number of significant implications – the feasibility of incorporating marginalised views into the curriculum and classroom transactions, the advantages of using exemplary teacher practices for teacher education, the relevance of learning through diverse peer environments in teacher education and, finally, the importance of connecting such critical pedagogies with broader social movements. The next essay, by Raymond Nichol, through a

scrutiny of a range of ethnographic work on indigenous education in Australia and Melanesia, also pursues the importance of incorporating local knowledge systems into mainstream education catering to indigenous population groups. In the final chapter, grassroots efforts, to engender an alternative pedagogy for historically marginalised groups, finds expression in the endeavours of a voluntary organisation – the Gram Nirman Kendra – which works with the Musahar community in Bihar. Sanjay Kumar and Rafiul Ahmed highlight how this alternative pedagogy imbibes not only a vision of transformation of more immediate education practices but also an imagination of socio-political change through education. The question, however is, how successfully do such efforts integrate with mainstream education processes while, at the same time, retaining their radical transformative potential.

As most edited volumes emerging from conferences, the essays are uneven in their foregrounding of the thematic concerns central to the book. Undoubtedly, many of the chapters provide us a preview into the ways in which exclusion/inclusion is manifest for indigenous or historically marginalized groups across different geographies. However, there is hardly any essay that uses this opportunity to interrogate the purportedly ‘universal’ characteristics of educational ideas such as ‘pluralism’, ‘marginality’, or ‘multi-culturalism’. More importantly, the usefulness of comparative perspectives lies in their ability to use the insights from a particular context or geography to illuminate our understanding of a distinctly different context. The Introduction to the volume rightly emphasises how one of the important endeavours of a project such as this book should be ‘a broader exchange of intellectual frameworks for conceptualising difference and marginality in post-colonial and neoliberal contexts’ (p. 14). However, it is on this count that this edited volume disappoints – first, in terms of a thin engagement with the key concepts framing their discussions, and second, in terms of the absence of any substantive gestures that could help us understand differences and commonalities across diverse geographies and/or in the specificities of the post-colonial and neo-liberal contexts. On the other hand, the volume derives its strength from its unequivocal emphasis on how educators should be able to use difference and diversity, both as a generative device – a means of responding to and incorporating different social groups, and as a critical pedagogic tool – a way of engaging with questions of power that underlie such differences. Overall, the book provides a useful entry for educationists and researchers into the nature and characteristics of exclusion and marginalisation in a number of countries across the globe, albeit with a predominant focus on India.

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