

Book and media reviews

Enriching peace and human rights education discourses - the case of Myanmar

Wong, M. S. (Ed.) (2022). *Teaching for Peace and Social Justice in Myanmar: Identity, Agency, and Critical Pedagogy*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing. 264 pp., US\$35.95 (Paperback) ISBN: 9781350226975; US\$117 (Hardback) ISBN: 9781350184077; US\$28.76 (Ebook - PDF) ISBN: 9781350184084; US\$28.76 (Ebook - Epub & Mobile) ISBN: 9781350184091.

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In the edited volume *Teaching for Peace and Social Justice in Myanmar: Identity, Agency, and Critical Pedagogy*, an ensemble of scholars and activists present a collection of studies into efforts to promote peace education and human rights education in Myanmar. Edited by Mary Shepard Wong, the nine chapters draw upon the experiences of their respective authors in supporting education in Myanmar. These experiences are varied, with the scope of the chapters reflecting the diversity of the authors in terms of geographic location, ethnic identity, professional affiliation, and academic background. Such a scope is appropriate for the nature of the book's subject matter, with the chapters revealing the complexities in Myanmar's identity politics and their persistence in Myanmar's ongoing conflicts. The book's contents are organised in three sections: the first looks at the agency of educators in applying a pedagogy that encourages social change, the second considers work to alter identity discourses towards greater peace and human rights, and the third engages in critical reflection on pedagogies appropriate for peace and human rights in the context of Myanmar.

The volume constitutes a valuable collection of scholarship that adds to the body of academic and non-academic literature that directly addresses peace and human rights. The focus on Myanmar highlights one of the most persistent conflict zones in the world. With chronic hostilities that are now extending into a seventh decade, Myanmar calls for scholarship and activism (alternatively labelled as ‘scholactivism’) into pathways out of its problematic history. The ensemble of chapters engages in scholactivism by placing education as a critical element in advancing a positive peace, one which seeks to resolve the underlying causes of conflict through the promotion of human rights.

In addition, the volume illustrates the efforts of decolonisation discourses to ‘decentre’ scholarship by moving away from academic trends of predominately Western researchers addressing non-Western issues. Such trends enable an ‘othering’ of diverse cultures that decontextualises research from the endemic realities affecting each culture. In the present case, the book avoids the aforementioned risks by involving Myanmarese voices in discussions of Myanmarese issues, with first-person participant-observer methods that provide reflection on the lived experiences of students, teachers, and communities in Myanmar’s disparate cultures. Moreover, those voices come from a range of ethnic groups from different locations, providing a variety of perspectives reflecting the difficulties of Myanmar’s identity politics.

The intended audience for the volume is indicated by its placement within the ongoing book series on Peace and Human Rights Education, for which Monisha Bajaj and Maria Hantzopoulos are series editors. The series summary asserts that it aims to reach undergraduate and master’s students in peace education and human rights education. The book, in covering the efforts to advance the teaching of peace and human rights in Myanmar, meets the needs of this readership. There are, however, other potential audiences. A number of the authors draw from their experiences working within non-government organisations implementing development aid programmes, and their insights will aid practitioners, donors, and policy-makers, as well as scholars involved in disciplines of development studies, area studies, comparative studies, and international relations.

In reaching out to broader audiences, there are several notes to observe for readers outside peace education or human rights education. First, a methodological note is necessary to make the volume’s respective chapters accessible to readers from different analytical backgrounds. In employing participant-observer methods, the researchers write about their individual experiences in the first person. Scholars unfamiliar with ethnographic or anthropological research may be discomfited by the subjective nature of participant-observer methods, especially in their declaration of author positionality and attention to author perceptions. Participant-observer approaches, however, embrace subjectivities to delve deeper into lived

experiences, in the sense that reflexivity vis-à-vis activities in events helps to uncover issues unseen by more distant observers. When tied to field work, the exploration of subjectivities facilitates a 'bottom-up' understanding wherein theoretical discourse is grounded in lived experiences, and hence becomes more relevant to the complexities of reality. Further, situations of conflict and human rights violations often feature divergent viewpoints, making the need to discern subjective perspectives paramount in advancing the goals of positive peace. As a result, readers bereft of ethnographic or anthropological training may need to refer to methodological literature on participant-observer methods to fully appreciate the insights provided by the chapters in the book.

Second, it would be helpful if additional information about the context were provided for readers unfamiliar with Myanmar. These readers should be informed about two topics: the country's ethno-nationalist issues, and its education system. To a degree, the book's various chapters work in turn to give particular details regarding both of these topics. However, full appreciation of the authors' insights requires placement of the book within broader overviews of Myanmar's ethno-nationalist struggles and educational challenges, both past and present. There has been burgeoning scholarship on Myanmar in both topics. While largely conducted before the February 2021 military coup, such literature helps to assess the scale of the reform efforts presented by the authors in the book relative to the scope of conflict occurring in Myanmar now.

Last, the book's empirical grounding in field work presents an opportunity to use each author's commentary to make interventions in multiple areas of theory. This brings a potential enrichment to scholarly understanding, not just to discourses of peace or human rights but also to the previously referenced literature on development studies, area studies, comparative studies, and international relations. To some extent, the chapters in the book reference diverse scholarship. However, the book has an analytical framework tied to a '4Rs' approach based in social justice literature: redistribution of inequalities, recognition of differences, representation in participation, and reconciliation to address injustices. As a result, scholars from outside social justice discourse will need to exercise their own initiative to extend the book's findings to other bodies of theory.