

A Review of *Is Everyone Really Equal? An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* by Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo

Michael Cappello

University of Regina

During a recent conference, I found it interesting as I listened to academics and educators struggling to articulate and use the language of anti-racism. One teacher suggested that, often, he has to refer to the dictionary in order to make sense of the words being used in these complicated conversations about anti-oppressive theories. Although the ideas are complex, and the social realities and forces being described demand a complex theorizing, the material can be learned. I need to say without hesitation that *Is Everyone Really Equal?* is a must-read for anyone interested in or teaching about social justice education or anti-oppressive education. The authors should be commended for the clarity and precision; this work is helpful, precisely because of the complexities involved, and how Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) find the language to take difficult and potentially painful conversations and mediate this content in productive ways.

This is a necessary book, if only because of the Appendix, "How to Engage Constructively in Courses that take a Critical Social Justice Approach." The first thing that strikes me about the appendix is the seriousness with which the authors view the students and the work that students must do in order to learn. Not only is this material hard, it often goes against the self-interest and dominant understandings that students bring to class. For these reasons, the authors lay out some basic considerations that students must reflect on in order to engage these kinds of courses (and the book) in ways that are more meaningful. The steps outlined in the Appendix change the conversation about these topics in some significant ways. First, critical social justice work is marked out as a legitimate area of study that, therefore, must be attended to with humility and rigor. Although difficult, the area includes peer-reviewed, theoretical, empirical, and legitimate content that requires serious attention. Second, the authors highlight the personal nature of this learning and some ways to engage in spite of resistance. Given that most of this material will counter the normalized knowledge that students bring to class, it matters how students engage with the material. Students' and readers' identities, as "good" people, as *knowers*, as citizens are called into question, not only because of the ways in which they are located, but also because of how they might be implicated by knowing these things. The Appendix of the book is brilliant and useful as a starting place for both this work and for classes that take up this kind of content.

Is Everyone Really Equal? starts by examining some theoretical ideas, with chapters that carefully explore critical thinking and critical theory socialization, prejudice and discrimination, oppression and power, and privilege and the invisibility of oppression. Each chapter includes succinct definitions, explained and applied carefully to concrete examples. This weaving of clear and concise content with examples in practice enables a richer understanding of the content on offer. The authors credibly and thoughtfully build a knowledge base for critical social justice understanding.

The thoroughness of the earlier chapters sets readers up for a detailed exploration of racism as one form of oppression. Chapter 7 on racism and Chapter 8 on racism as

White supremacy explore in detail how much of the content described earlier can be applied to understanding how racism works. Brief segments contextualize the social construction of race in both US and Canadian contexts. These two chapters enable a nuanced understanding of racism that is rooted in both theory and research, and explained through meaningful examples and stories. More, the misconceptions of students are anticipated and addressed directly. The final section of the chapter on white supremacy includes an excellent section of common White misconceptions of racism, exploring "why can't we all be human" or "playing the race card" or "reverse racism" in ways that allow for these forms of resistance or ignorance to become sites of further understanding. Many who teach in this area will find this "misconceptions" section, along with the broader Chapter 9 on common rebuttals to these conversations worthwhile. The authors take up the resistance to critical social justice through the very common phrases and questions students offer.

I commend the authors for the approach to pedagogy that the book embodies. The book is written as an experience of this content, and is offered intentionally as a way into this material. The use of the language of anti-oppressive theory is modeled in a way that students can try on, and see and hear it being used. Layered with questions and examples, the authors approach the material in a *teacherly* way, exploring the concepts by nuancing theory with relevant examples (from both Canada and the United States—a rarity in itself—without conflating the two locations and without getting bogged down in exploring the large-scale differences). The authors pose questions, highlighting moments where a perspective check might be needed, where the ideas on offer just might require a change in thinking from dominant ideas. Students reading this book are challenged and supported in challenging their own perspectives. Chapter 10 titled "Putting it all together" offers meaningful suggestions and pathways for readers to begin to act on the ideas in the book that are not easily trivialized or reducible. These suggestions bear the marks of experience with this work and do not pretend that critical social justice work is easy or simple.

If I have one issue with the book, it is a small one. Early on, the authors explain that their intention is not to "inspire guilt or assign blame" (p. xxii) and they offer that guilt and blame are not constructive. Engaging in critical social justice work will have this result—readers and students will feel blamed and guilty. And while I agree that it is important to name this reality and invite readers and students to move past guilt and blame, I think the authors could have done more to both anticipate some of the spaces where guilt and blame might show up and reinforce the problems with remaining in that space. In the practice of anti-oppressive teaching, dominantly positioned students do experience guilt and will resist partly because of the blame they sense. Acknowledging this subtly throughout the book might make it less likely that readers can dismiss or resist the important content that the book makes available.

Is Everyone Really Equal? makes a significant contribution to the literature on critical social justice education. It is both an introduction and an extensive resource in support of students and teachers who are trying to go to these difficult spaces in their work.

Reference

Sensoy, O., & DiAngelo, R. (2011). *Is everyone really equal? An introduction to key concepts in social justice education (Multicultural education series)*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.