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Book Review


Refugee Education: Theorising Practice in Schools by Joanna McIntyre and Fran Abrams. London and New York: Routledge, 2021.

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The plight of increasing numbers of refugee and asylum seeking children attempting to journey to Europe in recent years has been well documented in the media. The discourse that surrounds refugees is emotionally charged as well as highly politicised. Research has shown that young people whose families have become forcefully displaced from homes and cultures as a result of societal conflict are likely to be negatively affected in terms of the equality of educational and life opportunities. What is less talked about is what happens to these young people as they establish new lives in culturally different and sometimes hostile environments. We know little about the narratives, struggles and successes of refugees in the context of schooling.

This book on the challenges and possibilities of refugee education, written by the academic Jo McIntyre and the journalist Fran Abrams, is therefore a very timely and internationally significant book. It both challenges misconceptions of what the right to education should entail and offers an ethical and social justice imperative for the inclusion of refugee children in schooling. The book begins with a stark reminder that more than half of the 25 million refugees across the world are children. Children who under international law have a right to a decent and dignified education. However, education does not operate in a political and social vacuum and a child's ability to develop academically, socially and emotionally is dependent on complex and shifting contexts as well as their encounters of schooling. Refugee children have often experienced trauma and many will have significant mental health difficulties. Family, school, friends and neighbourhood constitute major influences on identity formation and the basis of the social support system for children and adolescent. However; forceful displacement (or immigration) as a result of a violence or other forms of social conflict and the resultant complete change of social environment pose additional challenges for the young people's identity formation and their integration into the possibilities of a new community. Displaced young people and their families also face challenges in their adaptation to new systems of education and the public sphere. This book aims to help us to understanding these challenges and to think of ways to overcome them.

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The major strengths of this book are its interdisciplinary focus and its development of a theory of inclusive education for refugee children. Theorising inclusive practice in schools working with refugee children is essential if societies are to meet their need. The theorisation uses the context of England and is done in conjunction with educational practitioners and informed by Nancy Fraser's concept of 'participatory parity' and Ravi Kholi's theory of the resumption of ordinary life'. These theoretical underpinnings capture the imperative for social justice for refugee children going to school in a highly performative system of education with unequal access to resources.

The authors' voices and perspectives remain distinct. Jo McIntyre is a well known educational researcher and teacher educator with a background as a teacher in schools. Fran Abrams has a wealth of experience as a journalist reporting on education amongst other social and political issues. These perspectives help inform the debates and structure of the book. The first part, written by Jo McIntyre, uses the method of case studies to illustrate theory and practice and is drawn from empirical research conducted in English schools. The case studies pick up both teachers' practice and refugee children's experiences and perspectives in order to explore the social reality of schooling for refugee children. These stories are told in the context of England but has international resonance for the creation of inclusive national education systems. The second part, written by Fran Abrams, focuses on the history, conceptualisation and policy development of refugee education in England. These chapters use both documentary analysis and interviews with teachers and refugee children and young people. Vignettes provide context to the analysis. The authors then come together in the conclusion to discuss the lessons drawn from history and the voices and experiences of teachers, senior leaders and refugee children.

The book is moving, informative and academically robust. It is also a powerful call for action in support of inclusive education for refugee and asylum seeker children. The authors have developed a theoretically rich interdisciplinary account of refugee education drawn from lessons from history as well as the lived experiences of young people and the professionals who work with them. It is an inspirational book that highlights optimism over despair and offers ways forward for schools. This book deserves to be read by all those interested and involved in refugee education.

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