In Diversity & Education: A Critical Multicultural Approach, Michael Vavrus carefully unravels contentious debates about diversity and multicultural education that continue to plague educational discourse. The book is the latest in the Multicultural Education Series edited by James A. Banks. Through a sweeping social, political, and economic analysis within contemporary macro contexts, Vavrus scrupulously examines the complex groundwork of histories and ideologies that undergird unjust educational practices and outcomes. Chapter by chapter, he builds a rationale for social action by asking us to re-imagine what might be possible in the lived realities of “people of color, the poor, women, and sexual and religious minorities” as we consider “how the norms of the larger society hold consequences for school-age youth” (p. 1). Ultimately, the book calls for a critical approach to multicultural education that is firmly rooted in solidarity and hope.

An important theme is that we must understand how ideologies and histories bolster worldviews. Vavrus posits that differing worldviews are both constructed by and construct diversity discourse within the social, political, and economic realities in which they are mired. He begins with a rationale for standpoint theory as a methodological approach for excavating contested concepts of diversity. He then introduces critical theory as a compatible orientation that allows for understandings of transformation; considers critical pedagogy as a process; and grounds itself in social justice.

The first two chapters set the stage for analysis of the contentious diversity topics that are examined in the remainder of the book. Chapter One, entitled “Tensions,” delves into concepts of history, ideology, and political economy in relation to critical multiculturalism with its roots in contested diversity. In Chapter Two, “A Spectrum of Worldviews,” Vavrus outlines three ideological types: social conservatism, liberal multiculturalism, and critical multiculturalism. While he stresses that they are idealized and fluid, he also maintains the validity of patterns and trends.

The remainder of the book provides analyses and examples of diversity issues in education along with overviews of the issues from viewpoints of each of the three ideological types. Chapters Three and Four work together to mine issues of contested diversity around race and ethnicity. First, Vavrus examines color consciousness and color blindness, citizenship rights, school re-segregation, and the decline of judicial support for diversity in schools. A highlight here, as in the entire book, is Vavrus’ up-to-the-minute use of data and statistics that ground his examples in lived realities. Chapter Three ends with a meditation on the value of racial diversity in schools and neighborhoods. Chapter Four continues the racial diversity debate by probing the vexing issue of the school-to-prison pipeline through a historical narrative of Black criminality and White victimization. This chapter raises important questions about human rights violations of children caught in the web of the juvenile justice system and offers practical recommendations to reverse this trend and move toward restorative justice.

In Chapter Five, Vavrus critiques the melding of the conservative and liberal “culture of poverty” approach that is currently popular for explaining the effects of socioeconomic status on children. In a wide-ranging analysis, Vavrus explores: conceptual origins of culture and historical justifications for inequality; the political war on poverty of the 1960’s; and the critical color consciousness that speaks back to conservative and liberal attitudes equating culture and class. Ending with a call to reintroduce the freedom budget, Vavrus maintains that critically informed social action hopes to “reverse the decline in the quality of life for increasing numbers of our children” (p. 96).

Vavrus continues his sweeping analysis of diversity topics in education through Chapters Six and Seven. In Chapter Six, he focuses on the curriculum of ethnic and multicultural studies and minority language learning within the contexts of dramatic global shifts in populations alongside the rising tides of xenophobia and nativism that historically accompany such shifts. An interesting inclusion here is the spotlight on indigenous youth and the horrific effects of conservative and liberal models of
education on youths’ psyche and well-being.

In Chapter Seven, Vavrus blends debates over gender, sexuality, and religion by highlighting key public diversity issues and their effects on the education of children. By presenting the history of patriarchy as a social and political driving force, Vavrus outlines clashes over curriculum, textbooks, sex education, and gender diversity in schools. He points to bullying and gender harassment within increasingly hostile school environments as outcomes of well-funded conservative and liberal ideological worldviews that continue to push against a safe school curriculum reflective of critical multiculturalism. Vavrus argues that these same strategies in turn contribute to anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment and the demonization of Islam. In a final plea, Vavrus calls on critical educators to name “the system of patriarchy as a major source of discrimination and oppression” (p. 131) in the process of a democratic education.

Chapter Eight will particularly resonate with teacher educators concerned with diversity curriculum/practices and higher education national accreditation standards. Vavrus presents a biting critique of existing and new standards from the former National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the current Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Although recognizing the challenges of implementing critical multiculturalism in teacher education, Vavrus offers the example of a successful collaborative, relationship-based model in New Zealand. At the same time, he raises the important question of “who will actually provide a critically informed teacher education” in light of the “unevenness in the knowledge base and ideological orientations” of teacher educators (p. 141). As in other chapters, Vavrus concludes with practical suggestions that offer hope for teachers at all levels to understand the power of agency and to embrace commitments that will transform classroom practices and the lives of their students.

Through an artful weaving of historical and contemporary critical analyses, Vavrus leads us, chapter by chapter, down the rabbit holes of contentious diversity debates. Although one potential drawback may be the text’s accessibility (it is theoretically, conceptually, and linguistically dense), this book is an important contribution to the critical multiculturalist’s library. Vavrus carefully defines terms that are overused but rarely examined.

Another potential limitation may be that while Vavrus ends each chapter with a few practical recommendations, these may not be as strong a call to action as we might wish, thus limiting the book’s appeal to practitioner audiences. However, Vavrus resists simple approaches or fixes to complex problems; critically unpacks diversity issues; and offers an alternative vision. It is difficult to imagine an educational landscape without the dissident voice of the critical multicultural educator. Along with others in the Multicultural Education Series, Vavrus beckons his audience (K-12 educators, school administrators, teacher educators, parents, and communities) to work in solidarity and hope towards improving the lives of children.

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