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Book review: *Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education: Selected essays*, by James A. Banks

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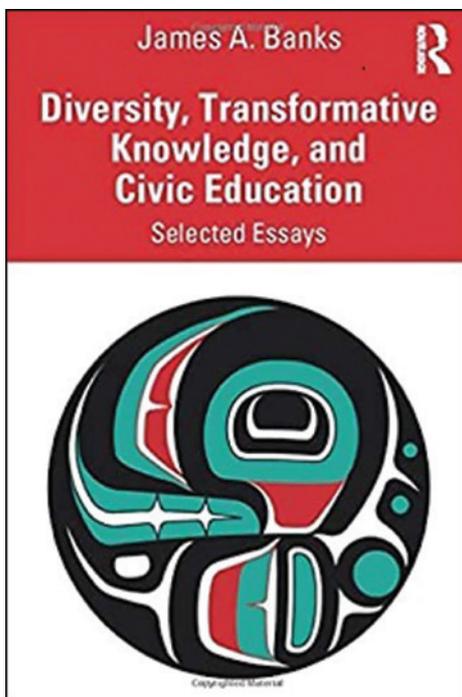
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Book review

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Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education: Selected essays, by James A. Banks

New York: Routledge, 2020; 221 pp.; ISBNs: 978-0367-86319-7 (pbk); 978-0367-86320-3 (hbk); 978-1003-01836-0 (ebk)



It is a pleasure to review this book of selected essays by James Banks, who for over half a century has worked to influence the way in which all those concerned with education can try to deal with the dilemmas and contradictions in teaching democratic citizenship values. The major dilemma in the USA and the UK is that democratic values are consistently contradicted by the social, political and economic contexts in which education takes place. These two countries are some of the most economically, socially and racially unequal in the Western world, and the 2020 coronavirus pandemic and looming recessions may well see inequalities increase. The eight essays, selected from Banks's voluminous writings, were written between 1995 and 2019, but despite the more recent widespread attention given to race, citizenship education and the Black Lives Matter movement, they are as important as ever to help explain what is happening. How is knowledge about racial and class diversity constructed historically? How can an education for a truly democratic citizenship be made a reality? How can the plurality of Black, minority, and more recent immigrant groups who make up the

diverse population of the USA and elsewhere be structurally and individually included in the political and cultural structures of the nation state? These are some of the questions that Banks has been asking, and suggesting some answers, for decades.

In the Introduction, Banks describes his own upbringing in a segregated Arkansas, and the institutionalized racism he experienced every day. It was his experiences in his segregated community, and understanding how White historians had constructed images of Black people (happy slaves!), that led him to uncover and describe the ways in which the construction of knowledge is influenced by race, class and gender. The writings in this book explain how his work on knowledge construction and on citizenship education are so interlinked. Knowledge must be transformed before civic education can be transformed. It is no good trying to teach democratic ideals and repeating a Pledge of Allegiance to a land of liberty and justice for all, if daily life in America for Black people and other minorities contradicts this. But the question still remains as to how nation states can transform their education, especially through civic education programmes. Globally, assimilationist assumptions of citizenship education have dominated racial, ethnic and immigration debates. Banks has always challenged this and demonstrated that people are more effective citizens when home and community cultures are recognized within social and national cultures and structures. One of his original contributions is to develop the notion of 'failed citizenship', which is created when people are born into or migrate to a nation state, but feel structurally and culturally excluded from it. It is not surprising that they should then feel ambivalent towards that state.

Part 1 of the book selects three essays from the time when acrimonious debates were taking place on whether and what sort of knowledge should be taught in schools, colleges and universities. Should a changed curriculum recognize ethnic and cultural diversity and histories? In the USA, the Western traditionalists defended the beliefs that Western history, literature and culture were under attack from multiculturalists and feminists, while those described as multiculturalists believed that the curriculum marginalized minorities and women, and pressed for curriculum reform. Afrocentrists held that African culture and heritage should be taught in order to reflect and motivate African American students. Banks takes mainstream historians to task for not understanding how their own cultural biases had influenced their writing, especially on the Reconstruction period in America. Knowledge is not value-free, and it usually reflects the views of the powerful, who can impose their beliefs on what is taught. Gunnar Myrdal's famous 1944 study of 'An American Dilemma' and the need for value clarity is quoted a number of times, and here Banks has produced a valuable typology of knowledge which can help educationalists understand how their beliefs are constrained by personal assumptions and experiences. A second essay examines the negative construction of knowledge about race from the eighteenth century onwards, the influence of eugenic and Nazi ideologies, and the challenges posed to these 'theories', especially from Black scholars. The third essay – Banks's Presidential Address to the American Educational Research Association meeting in 1998 – continues the theme of knowledge construction and citizenship, and notes the work of scholars both 'inside' and 'outside' Black communities, with scholarly activist W.E.B. DuBois, who authored hundreds of publications, rightly given pride of place.

The first essay in Part 2 of the book goes back to 1982, when Banks gave a Presidential Address to the National Council for Social Studies. In this, he linked democracy and citizenship education to the American Dream, that powerful image of success that has drawn millions of migrants to the USA. But it was always the case that the price for citizenship in that country was assimilation into an Anglo-Saxon dominated culture. Banks argued that a cultural democracy should be produced in which people

and groups should have both political and cultural freedom to join the civic culture, while retaining home and community cultures and languages. He also contended that young Americans should develop a strong national identity and commitment to American ideals, but that they should also be able, if they wished, to function within their own cultural communities. He quoted the powerful poem 'Harlem', written by Langston Hughes in 1951, a warning against race and class stratification that leads to a 'Dream Deferred', which causes the Dream to 'dry up, like a raisin in the sun'. The second essay selected in this section takes up the debates 25 years later, when, in 2009, Banks gave a keynote address to the Korean Association for Multicultural Education in Seoul. Migration around the world had increased considerably by this time, and more nation states incorporated racial, ethnic, cultural, religious and language diversity, all of which challenged notions of citizenship. Again, Banks has some positive ideas for educators, presenting a typology of stages of cultural identity that could eventually reach a global identity competence where people have the knowledge and skills to function in their own cultural communities, their nation state and the wider world.

Part 3 of the book continues the discussion around the realization that global migration and the search for political, social and other rights by minorities have led to much questioning of the simplistic liberal assumptions of assimilation that dominated citizenship education for so long. In a paper published in 2008, Banks again examines assimilationist, liberal and universal notions of citizenship education and shows how citizenship education could be transformed to give students the knowledge, skills and values to function within their own communities, their region, nation state and globally. Again, Banks seeks to assist educators in their attempts to transform the curriculum, producing a typology of citizens defined by four levels of participation. This uses the examples of Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her bus seat, and the Greensboro students who sat-in at a lunch counter, as cases of citizens whose actions can transform citizenship. In the second essay, presented initially to three audiences in 2015 and 2016, the notion of 'failed citizenship' is explored in detail. This examines the challenges to Western nations that struggle to accept racial, ethnic, religious and other minorities into their civic populations. By 2016, the Black Lives Matter movement was developing, and there was an increase in racism and xenophobia aimed at immigrants and refugees, with populist leaders being elected and debates becoming more polarized. People do not have to be 'failed citizens'. If people are recognized, and can participate, as members of the polity, then they can be transformed citizens able to promote policies aimed at human rights, equality and social justice. The final essay describes the conceptual framework for civic education courses, and returns to the theme of transforming the mainstream curriculum, with its current limited academic knowledge, to transformative academic knowledge. This change is urgently needed to combat the rise of xenophobic and authoritarian populist leaders and their supporters, who threaten a democracy that was always fragile.

The essays in this book reflect both the personal and political work of a half century undertaken by James Banks, who continues to be a groundbreaking and powerful scholar in this area of multicultural education, knowledge construction and the creation of a truly transformative education which could transform future global citizens.

Notes on the contributor

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