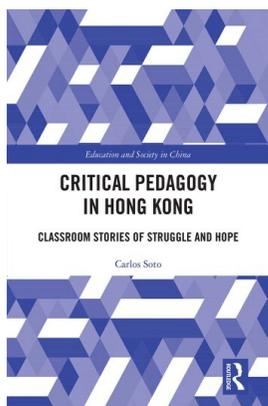


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Critical Pedagogy in Hong Kong: Classroom Stories of Struggle and Hope

Carlos Soto, Routledge, 2019. 176pp. ISBN-13: 978-1-138-61180-1.

Reviewed by Huili Han & Luo Zhang, *Central South University, China*



Critical Pedagogy in Hong Kong: Classroom Stories of Struggle and Hope is a book about pedagogy. However, the book is not only a collection of educational views, it is also more narrative and dramatic, fascinating and with extremely strong readability. This is a work of enlightenment and rebirth. Many ideas in this book are exactly what readers think, feel, and wonder. Many real thoughts buried by teachers and students come out on paper, providing abundant educational resources for researchers, educators, and both pre-service and in-service teachers.

The book is both theoretical and practical. One focus of the book is on the nuances of the historical development of critical pedagogy, including its goals and deficiencies. Soto also discusses the existence and development of two dimensions of critical education—teaching and learning—in an exam-oriented environment at two research sites, New Territories Schools (NTS) and Industrial Secondary Schools (ISS). Soto applies critical pedagogy theory to the inequitable educational environment in Hong Kong through a hopeful “field” story. Throughout the book he explores the limitations and possibilities of empowering minority students through the practice of critical pedagogy in Hong Kong.

The author divides the book into seven parts. The first part examines how the struggles and needs of students in emerging markets are framed from a demographic perspective. The second part provides a literature review and theoretical framework. In this section, the author narrows the theoretical

framework to the main ideas of the late Brazilian educator Freire, and introduces and defines important concepts, such as banking education, critical consciousness, generative theme, dialogue, empowerment, etc. The third part summarizes and demonstrates the critical ethnographic approach used in this study from an ethical perspective. The fourth part is an overview of the author's year-long ethnographic work at NTS, the first study site. It explains how Soto implemented curriculum guidelines at NTS, and how he generated the topics and developed the participation tools. The fifth part is an overview of the author's work at the second research site, ISS. This part mainly discusses how the curriculum should be developed under the guidance of critical pedagogy from the perspective of tool development. The sixth part focuses on the dialogue and behavior of ISS students related to the practice of critical pedagogy in daily life. The seventh part responds to the research question, advocating the deconstruction of oppressive social conditions and school practices, and constructing a new critical pedagogy theory and practice. The first and second parts clarify the key terms and lay a solid theoretical foundation; the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth parts discuss the generative theme, participation tools, course materials, student dialogue, and action in turn. Each part is supported by "on-the-ground" examples; thus, the book makes the content, teaching process, and results of the critical education method tangible.

One of the most substantial features of this book is the authenticity of it, drawing directly from the experiences of pre-service teachers and students. The authenticity also comes from the critical pedagogy ideas that the author expresses and has tried to implement. For example, one idea is that many students suffer from self-abuse or self-harm during adolescence and cut their bodies; there are also many adolescent students suffering from love. Soto uses a series of participatory tools such as film, literature and philosophy to help students look at themselves with a new perspective, inspire themselves, understand their own problems, and connect with the greater cultural conflict and historical struggle. In addition, Soto clearly explains that teachers at the surveyed sites felt helpless in the area of banking education, an area with a strictly prescribed teaching method that must be used in the classroom given various external pressures. These include the pressure of the high stakes and high academic level exams in Hong Kong, schools trying to improve reputation and promote freshmen enrollment, and parents feeling that their hard-earned money has been wasted. These various pressures are causing teachers to have less choice in course materials. This kind of pressure is also a disaster for students, because under banking education, "filling in the blanks" is the main form of learning, which lacks the channels and opportunities for students to fully express their opinions.

This book examines critical educational theory and practice in Hong Kong. Soto does not blindly praise critical education theory. Instead, he holds a dialectical point of view to describe the shortcomings of critical pedagogy. The first weakness he identifies is the lack of precision and transparency; the second weakness is the lack of tangible and clear tools and materials as a support; and the third weakness is that it is easy to fall into the critical dilemma of blindly deconstructing oppressive conditions and neglecting construction of social

conditions suitable for critical pedagogy. Furthermore, critical education overemphasizes the heroic role of teachers in repressive schools. Influential researchers argue that the hegemony of dominant structures creates a false sense among people that they cannot collectively challenge the status quo. What we have not taken into account, however, is that many of those researchers substitute one form of hegemony for another. That is, they do not really question their understanding of the social world but advocate that the oppressed replace their own "original consciousness" with the researcher's own "constructed consciousness."

Critical Pedagogy in Hong Kong: Classroom Stories of Struggle and Hope speaks what many people want to say but dare not say and does what many people want to do but dare not try. The author explores the significance of being an analytical teacher and researcher and is constantly reborn in this process. Education should represent the hope to deconstruct current inequality and oppression, and then to construct new social conditions. It should be the main force to promote social change. For teachers and students under the oppression of an unequal education environment, this book can instigate their rebirth. Because school education has a natural sense of alienation from students that is not influenced by nationality or race, it is important to understand that any real teaching practice requires a commitment to social change in the unity of subordinate and marginalized groups. The book advocates for students, teachers, and school leaders to break with traditional education ideas, and supports students and educators in having a firmer goal of a future, fair education system. Isn't that what the education revolution is all about? Hopefully, readers will find insight from the story to help them embark on their own journey of challenging existing systems and rebuilding new systems based on equality.

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HUILI HAN, PhD., is an associate professor at Central South University in P. R. China and a visiting scholar at The George Washington University in the U.S. She is on the review board for the Human Science and Technology Award in China and is a peer reviewer of the Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education in the U.S. She presided over a project for the Ministry of Education and participated in a number of provincial and national level research projects. Her book was published by a national, first-level publishing house in China, and she has also translated three books. Her major research interests lie in the area of national governance, online education research, higher education research, and multiculturalism. Email: huilian2018@hotmail.com

LUO ZHANG is a graduate student at Central South University in P. R. China. She is pursuing a Master of Law degree. Her major research interests lie in national governance, college students' career planning, and multiculturalism. Email: 1816034963@qq.com.
