Book review

Bozalek, V., Leibowitz, B., Carolissen, R. & Boler, M. (eds). 2014. *Discerning critical hope in educational practices*. Abingdon, England: Routledge.

Discerning Critical Hope in Educational Studies is a thought-provoking and percipient book that draws its relevance from the context of crisis in which it is currently embedded. It offers a robust and critical engagement with the notion of *hope* in a society in dire need of positivity, critical thinking and practical strategies. The multifarious struggles, both symbolic and real, facing academics, practitioners and students in higher education today, could be interpreted as a dynamic interplay between *hope* and its counter-part, despair. The fulcrum however, around which ideological battles are being fought, is defined by a criticality, needed to rescue *hope* from its shadow self, hopelessness.

True to its insightful title, the book draws our attention not just to the idea of 'critical hope' in and of itself but to the act of *discerning* it, by eruditely making selective and enlightened links with what it means to 'discern' hope in a climate of despair. This collection of essays is astute not only in unpacking the many layers of contextualised iterations of 'critical hope', but in foregrounding our relational realities by inserting the importance of our judgement, selection and choice in our considered actions. It does this by engaging readers' proclivities through their individual and collective agency (Archer, 2000), which is critical for transforming and not merely reproducing society's structures and discourses. By engaging in the act of 'discerning', critical hope is presented not as a passive construct (Freire, 1970) handed down to new generations, but as something that has a reality of its own, with independent powers and properties (Bhaskar, 1975). These properties, when triggered and engaged with, allow agents to fully realise their potential in the framework of more enduring struggles such as 'desocialisation' (Apple, 2014), destabilising myths and decolonisation (Darlaston et.al., 2014).

As an action verb, 'discerning' points to the kinds of agential exercise that practitioners working in this domain could consider. Through its own performative ability, the book shows how its collaborators themselves (from editors to individual authors), using their full range of authorial sensitivity and expertise, discern the nuances of hope implicit in the substantive content of both the theoretical and empirical inputs. They do this by pulling out the distinguishing features of *critical hope* for us as readers to scrutinise further.

Of special significance is the distinction drawn by most authors between naïve and critical hope, asserting that the dialogue between hopelessness and despair is poignant in any group working with social struggle. What makes hope 'critical' is not that it is the flipside of despair but that it is true to its own emergent properties. This can only be engaged with

critically if hope is linked to action in relation to broader struggles, such as a more just education system.

The volume is divided into four sections: Critical Hope in Education; Critical Hope and a Critique of Neo- Liberalism; Critical Race Theory/ Postcolonial Perspectives on Critical Hope; and Philosophical Overviews of Critical Hope. In each section, readers are introduced to conceptual blocks that build a convincing argument for why *hope*, as a reflexive and socially responsive component, hinges on the affective and ethical relationships between human beings. This primordial chord of Hope, our 'ontological need', (Freire, 1994: 8) is etched in our identities, and works through a generosity of spirit and spontaneous need for human connection. Through the wide landscape of local and international examples that the book explicates, *critical hope* is upheld as transcending geo-political and geo-spatial boundaries, and represents 'diverse sites of practice and struggle for social justice within education' (p.4).

This resonates with recent struggles in South African higher education where student protests have highlighted the gross neglect and slow pace of transformation of the sector (Haffajee, 2015; Kessi, 2015). In their call for a decolonisation of the curriculum, students have signaled strongly that invisibility, representation, marginalisation, alienation, voice and integrity need to be engaged with robustly, in classroom and university spaces (#RhodesMustFall). Students' protest actions, rigorous and well-theorised as a challenge to an unjust education system, present us with a critical narrative to counteract the stock stories of 'diversity' and 'transformation' (Kalwant and Jackson, 2013) in higher education. It is through such acts of disruption of the status quo that the humanity in society is rekindled, re-awakening a deep yearning and hope for political, economic, and social equality. This sense of *critical* hope establishes the bedrock for a more socially responsible dispensation through 'a critically reflexive practice in which affect, imagination, relationality and resistance are inserted into the concept of hope' (p.7). The student protests of 2015/16 are an immediate and tangible case of *critical hope* in action.

The narratives of critical hope thread together seamlessly across the book, telling a rich and sensitive story to keep readers reflectively engaged and critically activated as they move through the many vignettes; each designed to exemplify conceptual, contextual or practical application of the theoretical notions of hope. Between reader and writer, critical hope is exercised in the act of engaging with the material in this book itself. This emergence of hope as a necessary outcome of the interaction of its component parts attests to how this book was judiciously conceptualised and enacted through various substantive accounts of classroom practice, both formal and informal. This gives rise to something unique in its very construction, transcending even its own limitations of page and word.

This book will definitely appeal to an audience researching and teaching in the area of social justice but will also find strong resonance with all practitioners in education today who are concerned with transformation of a system riddled with historical, political, social and cultural imbalance.

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