
BOOK REVIEW

Education and the social construction of 'race', Peter Figueroa, 1991, London: Routledge

Peter Figueroa draws together a collection of articles and papers with some fresh material and reworking to produce the present volume. The central themes are, first, that the notion of "race" (and hence "racism") is a social construction, operating at the level of groups in society through racist 'frames of reference'. Secondly, Figueroa argues that education is vitally concerned in the maintenance and even the further promotion of racist attitudes and actions. Thirdly, he argues that it is possible for education in general and schools and teachers in particular to make a major contribution towards replacing a racist social frame of reference with one which is based on values appropriate to a multicultural society - equality, freedom, openness and solidarity.

Some readers may find that the book does not appear to offer any substantial new theory or analysis. They may need to be reminded that Figueroa, like surprisingly few of those who write in this field, has had a lifetime experiencing many of the prejudices around which his writing and research is centred. For this reason, his examples and his analysis are worthy of careful study, even if at first sight he seems to be discussing familiar issues for those working in his field.

The book is, moreover, a timely contribution to debates on education in New Zealand, even though the focal examples all relate to (especially) Caribbean and other minorities in England of the 1980s. As a comparativist, I am not suggesting for a moment that the situation of recent migrants to New Zealand is 'the same' as that of students of Caribbean origins in Britain. Even less would the specifics of what Figueroa describes apply to Maori. Rather, the issues raised, the research described, the lessons to be learned, and the suggested remedies all provide the local reader with a wealth of challenging ideas in any examination of the role of education in a multiethnic state.

In particular, Figueroa offers much that is important to New Zealanders and Australians working in and for the education of students whose cultural origins are Pacific Island states. Like the Caribbean students, there are good grounds for believing that Samoan, Tongan and other groups have been similarly affected by labelling, stereotyping, racist attitudes and - a particularly important parallel - by being regarded as a single people, the 'Polynesians' or 'Pacific Islanders'. As well, many of these factors apply in different ways but equally strongly to oppressed indigenous groups in both Australia and New Zealand.

Figueroa does attempt to cover a great deal in his book. He opens with an introduction based largely on his early personal experiences in Britain, then chapter one offers a solid critique of Banton's rational choice theory of racial and ethnic relations. In the second chapter, Figueroa develops his own theory of racist frames of reference, following this with an interesting argument that multicultural and antiracist education can and should be seen as complementary. One of the interesting points he makes is that antiracist education alone runs the risk of being seen as wholly 'anti' and negative, and that education to change attitudes *needs* to take present and promote the positive values which will replace racism and prejudice.

Chapter four gives a useful critique of the 1985 Swann Report, the 800 page report of the (British) Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups. Figueroa shows how some of this important document's terminology, even when it is making positive points, is covertly operating in a frame of reference that is itself based along racial lines.

The four chapters which follow both present and review research relating to racism and education. Chapter five reviews research on teacher attitudes. It offers a brief counter-argument to

other reviews, arguing that teacher attitudes *can* be changed, and that much more research is needed into how this can best be done. Chapter six presents a case study of teacher trainee attitudes, noting some positive features emerging from a teacher education programme focusing on multiculturalism. Chapters seven and eight deal with racism in a case study school, and bias against Caribbean students (mainly by neglect) in examination syllabi and questions.

While these four chapters do offer much of value, they also point both to the serious gaps in research and to the complexity and extent of the problems raised. The already committed antiracist reader who reads these chapters may experience feelings of anger and frustration but others may not be helped by the somewhat piecemeal nature of what is offered. Figueroa clearly adds to the breadth of his argument by presenting such diverse material, but it could be said that there is a corresponding lack of depth in some of the discussions.

The same could be said even of the last, much more extensive chapter. This deals with the long-standing and thorny question of 'underachievement'. It contains a good number of research findings, some of which are quite appropriately critiqued by Figueroa as inadequate or even covertly biased in their methods and analysis. Yet even here, the excellent points made perhaps needed to be explored in greater depth. This applies particularly to complex issues such as: language and language learning; differences (in attitudes and aspirations?) among Caribbean cultures; and the extent to which racist frames of reference might apply to and/or affect differentially various migrant and minority groups.

Figueroa and others of us who wish to see an end to racism may draw some comfort from the fact that attitudes to women students are slowly but surely changing, and that these changes are having an effect in practice. At the same time, the enormous amount of time and effort put in by so many thousands of feminist activists, writers and critics cannot escape our notice. It is perhaps, therefore, appropriate that the book does raise so many issues, even at times in a fairly preliminary way. Given, too, that Figueroa barely mentions racism in law, social services and the labour market, the size of the challenge seems enormous. Yet he is right in asserting that changes *can* and *must* be made.

To conclude, this is a book which would be useful at a number of levels, and in a number of ways. Undergraduates would find the broad coverage valuable. Teacher trainees would find it an excellent source book for work on antiracist and multicultural education. Specialists in the field may feel that some of the studies cited are somewhat dated, and may feel the arguments are familiar, but will still find a number of insights, points of debate and questions to make a careful reading of Figueroa's book well worthwhile.

Roger A. Peddie