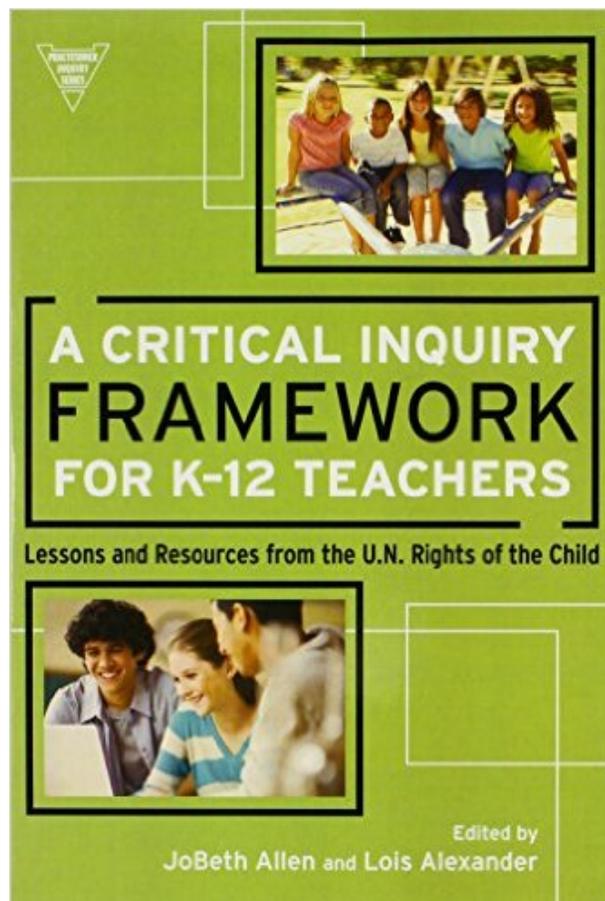


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

A Critical Inquiry Framework
for K-12 Teachers:
Lessons and Resources
from the U.N. Rights of the Child
Edited by JoBeth Allen and Lois Alexander

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**A Critical Inquiry Framework for K-12 Teachers:
Lessons and Resources from the U.N. Rights of the
Child (Teachers College Press, 2013)**

In their new edited collection, *A Critical Inquiry Framework for K-12 Teachers*, JoBeth Allen, Lois Alexander, and their contributors present powerful classroom cases that reflect the significance and educational relevance of the United Nations Rights of the Child (ROC). The collection opens with a Critical Literacy Invitation (see Van Sluys, 2005; Allen & Alexander, 2013) that derives from the U.N. Convention on the ROC and that advocates for critical, humanizing, and intentional responses to all forms of injustice. The invitation reads:

Article 2 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child "applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say; whatever type of family they come from. It doesn't matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis." (1)

This invitation is powerful for a number of reasons, particularly so because it provides the basis for a critical content framework that does not tolerate discrimination, unfairness, and inequities of any kind. Instead, the invitation recognizes the unwavering commitment of educators to honor students and their identities, realities, humanities, and lived conditions. It also acknowledges the importance of educators hearing students' voices, listening to students' concerns and, subsequently, providing students with positive learning spaces that support their engagement with "critical inquiry into social issues relevant to their lives such as race, social class, language, and other aspects of citizenship in a democracy still under construction" (2). The assertion that "no child should be treated unfairly on any basis" is a valuable message that rings through on each page as one reads the nine chapters that comprise this dynamic collection.

To move beyond imagining and into fostering classroom spaces as sites of critical inquiry where, according to Allen, "concrete subject matter [is presented] in a cohesive structure that can serve as a basis for critical inquiry across disciplinary areas" (2), each chapter begins with an invitation to readers. In the first chapter, Allen invites readers to think through the meanings and intended purposes of critical inquiry and a critical content framework. She explains that the contributors to this book are elementary, middle, and high school teachers and teacher educators who served as consultants in the Red Clay Writing Project (RCWP) in the state of Georgia. RCWP, a local affiliate of the National Writing Project (NWP), is a unique collaboration that provides teachers with professional development opportunities (summer institutes, writing retreats, open learning institutes, and Saturday workshops) focused on writing, social justice, teacher

leadership, and inquiry-based pedagogical approaches. According to Allen, RCWP participants and book contributors "wanted an explicit focus on issues of power and social justice and a framework that could guide us across content areas, grade levels, and state standards" (3). Their desire for such an explicit focus supports the belief, as presented in the ROC, that every child is entitled to fair treatment as well as equitable and socially just forms of learning. The introductory chapter leads beautifully into the remaining chapters on K-12 teaching practices.

For instance, in Chapters Two and Three, the authors issue an invitation for readers, especially those who are primary and elementary grade teachers, to examine "issues of poverty, peace, power, and action" (21). To do so, elementary-aged students were asked to select books on the aforementioned topics and to think through specific questions such as: "What do people in poverty look like? What do they do? How do the other characters in the book treat them?" (24). Overtime, these questions served as impetus for deeper investigations into ways to empower "students to understand and engage the world around them [by] enabling them to exercise the kind of courage needed to change the social order" (McLaren, 2009, 74). An example of how teachers are working to empower students is found in Chapter Three, in which the focus is on ability, disability, and the rights of the child.

Reading this book convinces me even more that additional critical research is needed that explicitly examines the institutional, systemic barriers to treating students as fully human, fully capable, and as fully engaged in their learning.

In Chapters Four and Five, the authors issue an invitation for readers to consider, on the one hand, "the families in your school community [and] who feels welcome, valued, and part of the community" (Chapter Four, 54) and, on the other hand, (dis)connections among the curriculum that is taught, enduring understandings, and students' rights (Chapter Five). Here, emphasis is placed on teaching and learning that respect the lives and rights of immigrant students and their families. The authors highlight some of the ways in which to engage in this work: by encouraging the formulation of family groups within the context of schools (such as the Latinos for Involvement in Family Education) and by "naming the violation of the rights of undocumented people [to] envision and create a space for all voices and people" (89).

In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, the authors invite readers to consider other rights that are worth exploring including the following: the right to an adequate standard of living (Chapter Six), the right to culture, identity, and freedom of thought (Chapter Seven), and the right of students to work for human rights across the world. These three chapters compliment the first five chapters and they add needed perspectives on how students across the

grades can be encouraged to use their education (what they do and learn in schools and in their communities) to question, challenge, and propose viable solutions to a variety of human rights issues. As Paige Cole, author of Chapter Seven, explains: "As I expanded my teaching practice to include more space for students' cultures, histories, and thoughts, I began to see how much I had been missing" (126). Over time, Cole adopted Sweeney's (1999) stance to "create a classroom atmosphere and curriculum that prepares my students to build and participate in critical democracy" (97). Cole and the other authors of these chapters have heeded Sweeney's suggestion. In doing so, they have situated the U.N. ROC as an important framework by which to engage students in discussions and actions related to human rights.

In closing, Chapter Nine invites readers to explore children's literature for teaching the rights of the child. The chapter is filled with annotated bibliographies and explanations as to why literature should be used as a springboard for discussing human rights issues. Taken together, the chapters in this collection are provocative and powerful. They provide compelling reasons for why each and every child who enters our classrooms must be treated as full human beings, must be given the right to learn, and must be provided with opportunities to connect what they are learning in classrooms with what is happening in the larger world.

This collection serves as an exemplar for research and praxis grounded in critical literacy pedagogy. As the authors prove, we can no longer wait for permission to teach in just and justice-oriented ways. We cannot continue to give lip service to the importance of centering a human rights perspective in our teaching. Instead, we

must be (and must remain) committed to actively challenging, critiquing, and resisting dehumanizing educational practices and inequitable structures associated with histories of segregation, racism, the inequality in resource distribution, the replication of unjust social practices, and the privileging of monolingualism and monoculturalism within schools and society. This commitment requires that we move beyond a rhetoric of human rights that gets invoked only when it serves the needs of a neoliberal agenda. Instead, we must move toward critical, humanizing educational practices that are grounded in human rights, justice, equity, and difference for all human beings. While the authors of this book do not explicitly address antiracist education, they do highlight what many scholars refer to as antiracist practices and antiracist pedagogical approaches for addressing human rights issues across the grade levels.

Reading this book convinces me even more that additional critical research is needed that explicitly examines the institutional, systemic barriers to treating students as fully human, fully capable, and as fully engaged in their learning. In closing, I turn to poet-educator June Jordan who beckons us to recognize that "we are the ones we have been waiting for." We are the ones who must revolutionize teaching and learning with and because of our students. We are the ones who must stand against the *talk* of human rights and stand for locating human rights at the center of our practice, our pedagogies, and our politics. We must do this work if we are committed to standing for and honoring the Rights of the Child.



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