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Book review: Critical leadership Praxis for Educational and Social Change

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Book Review: *Critical leadership praxis for educational and social change*. K. Pak & S. M. Ravitch (Editors). NY: Teachers College Press, 2021. 257 pages.

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“Rupture, reckoning, reimagining” (pg. xi) is the sub-title in the preface of Katie Pak & Sharon M. Ravitch’s book, *Critical leadership praxis and social change*. While not only signifying what education and society at large have undergone due to COVID and the ripping of the social fabric caused by systemic racism, their work is a bold move to a social-political responsive leadership theory. The editors make a strong case for the inclusion of critical leadership by noting the deficiencies of transformational theory and contemporary teacher education training programs, to train responsive educational leaders. “The issues we have raised thus far speak to our main concerns about the uncritical promotion of educational leadership texts and theories that are mostly grounded in the privileged experiences of White men, and the subsequently uncritical development of the field and future educational leaders” (pg. 6). Just as certain theories have been driven to improve student achievement, poverty, or social emotional learning, Pak & Ravitch have crafted a powerful challenge to contemporary educational leadership. It is with this challenge as presented, that a

model of leadership is formed through four pillars.

Each pillar is connected to leaders through the strands of criticality and racial literacy. These constructs are tools that assist leaders in identifying processes, allow for recognition of problematic relationships, and strive for greater personal recognition and inner examination, for a critical response to oppression. Interspersed around each pillar, are specific strategies, for educational leaders to utilize, provided by contributing authors. For the pillar of transformation of self, Coleman and Portlock provide an important focus on leadership in crisis and how critical thought, reflection, and storytelling can strengthen leaders, and as well as how collaboration can sustain leaders of color. When it comes to the pillar of transforming educators, a stellar contribution comes from Colket, Garrett, and Shaw, who describe the use of transformative storytelling, to assist leaders in recognizing the importance of lived experience, as opposed to focusing on the curriculum or standards at the expense of the leaders and students. “Decolonial imaginarium” (pg. 206) is a strategy described by Shakeir, Odendaal, and

Rosado-Viurques under the pillar of transforming systems, that incorporates role playing to generate discussion, understandings, and recognition of the colonial influence on students in a section devoted to decolonial work. Dialogue and reflection are centerpieces of this structured role play, where the setting becomes a “third space” of sorts, whereby interrogation of important concepts and understandings occurs. This strategy not only comes from a rich theoretical construct, but also provides a meaningful discussion as to how it would look upon being used in schools.

In their conclusion, Pak & Ravitch describe how practice without theory, cannot adequately address major challenges such as racism and other forms of oppression. At the same time, theory must be informed by practice, for leaders to bring about change that is informed by leadership research. A specific leadership approach is advocated for, with each pillar serving as a theme for improvement. The first pillar represents the critical understanding of the leader and the understanding that is necessary to bring about necessary change. The second stage of leadership focus, addresses the critical understanding of educators in their respective contexts. The third stage of critical praxis leadership specifically addresses the need for intersectional inclusiveness in the organization, through which leaders are situated. Lastly, the communication with and collaboration with stakeholders, is the final stage of leadership training and development. The need for leadership to engage in praxis, and not to just leave it to teachers is advocated for in a

way that fully addresses the almost inert response of leadership theory and leadership development that is present today. “Teachers themselves cannot carry the burden of striving for equity through their teaching and learning practices if their leaders, organizations, and systems are not also modeling and sustaining these commitments” (p. 216).

A strong summation of this work is provided in the afterword penned by Rho & Booker. These contributors share their insight in working personally with two programs to engage in the practice of critical leadership development. The first program is of a leadership coaching variety, as part of the New York City Department of Education, with the second occurring in the University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Educational Leadership Simulations Program. The highlighting of these programs show the complexity and the importance, of leadership development as it relates to critical leadership. The understandings of the individual leader and addressing their relevant intersections cannot be emphasized, as failing to address it can lead to a leader who engages in practice, but with less impact. “Identity plays a large part in the degree to which stressful events may be experienced as troubling to individual leaders. There is a reluctance to give priority to these issues, both for the privileged and especially for those from whom such events are most challenging.” (p. 224). Is from this greater understanding of the leader’s sense of self and the structural realities in which they inhabit, that lead to greater understandings and greater potential for change.

If this work has any shortcomings, it is in the area of being a creation in academia, as opposed to being a community created response. The “in the field” contributions are brought in by the contributors themselves, through reflections. It would be unfair to take this criticism entirely on its own without two important caveats. First, this work could not have been an “in the moment” creation during the pandemic, much as Freire’s work was with the people that he worked with. Secondly, it should also be pointed out that Pak & Ravitch admit this work is a starting point, not a comprehensive model by any means. The intended audience for this work is educational leaders, who Pak & Ravitch interpret as those who touch educational practice. Just as Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* approached praxis from a teaching perspective, the editors and contributing authors strike boldly into the arena of educational leadership, creating a work that stands out not only due to a lack of alternative praxis leadership models, but also in the area of providing a structure and content that is relevant to our times.

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