

Following the Northern Star: Caribbean Identities and Education in North American Schools.
Wigan, G. and Waldron, J. T. (2013). New York Nova Publishers. 476 pp. ISBN 978-1-62417-597-8.

Introduction

This is a new book on migration and education written from a Caribbean perspective. The contribution is welcome because there are very few publications by Caribbean authors who themselves or their family members experienced the traumatic life of slavery and colonization and ultimately the struggle for independence and self-identity. The notion of education is problematized in this volume and takes a different context. Scholars have tended to define education from a Eurocentric perspective. However, more recently there has been an acknowledgement of indigenous epistemologies. This book explores another dimension, the education contexts and experiences of an “immigrant” with a slavery background filling a gap that has existed for decades.

Readers of the book will not be disappointed because it is well written and brings new insights to the history and development of education in the Caribbean Islands and moving onto mainland North America. Just as the title suggests in metaphoric language, the book leads you to a new understanding of the education context in the Caribbean Islands which is characterised by a harsh colonial history epitomised in slavery and a much more recent phase of renaissance and reclaiming of African identities. The people of the Caribbean islands went through difficult times during the colonial period and today they still struggle for self-identity in their new countries of settlement. Global influences which are pervading all nations have not spared the minorities in North America.

Structure

The book consists of six chapters starting with an introductory and historical exposition of the education context in the Caribbean. Chapter one presents an overview of the geography and history and evidence is drawn from primary and secondary sources. The chapter highlights the motivation by the explorers seeking wealth in the form of gold and later agricultural products. It concludes with some autobiographical excerpts from the authors to illustrate the intricate relationship between the enslaved families, their roots in Africa and the migration to America. Chapter two focusses on how colonialism played a crucial role in shaping education. It was largely for subjugation of the local people. The authors discuss Black resistance and how this was suppressed and at times resistance was savagely dealt with and became quite bloody. For those who still had the chance to escape and pursue education overseas, migration to North America was one option. Many found this route and settled in Canada and the US. However this turned out not to be panacea as they faced issues of identity and discrimination in these countries.

Chapter three explores education and cultural identity of the Caribbean people. Due to the crisis and an apparent void in Caribbean education, the migrants from the islands are considered under-class when measuring education standards. By using various theoretical frames the book attempts to provide the reader with a cultural context in which to judge the Caribbean education background. The authors use anthropological and sociological arguments in supporting multiculturalism as one of the viable approaches that can enhance Caribbean students' education in North America. The authors intricately weave personal narratives with other sources to produce a rich discussion on the education of Caribbean people in North America. Chapter four presents the immigrant experiences and multiculturalism in North American schools. The metaphor of the Northern star is appropriate as it used to explain the migration to North America. The authors explore the history and the legislation that impacted the Caribbean.

The complex relationship between education, labour and migration continues to be a dominant theme. Initially, most Caribbean women were employed as domestics but struggled to educate themselves and soon found better paying jobs. The movement to Canada was more popular despite the cold weather. The US on the other hand, presented a more racialized environment and labour in the plantations of the South served as a reminder to the slavery in the Caribbean.

Chapter five focusses on the experiences in education of first generation Caribbean parents in Canada. The period examined is between 1960s and 1980s. It highlights the difficulties of an education system based on the assumption the parents act as "teachers" at home. The reality is that most immigrant parents work a number of jobs to make ends meet and therefore may not have the time and the knowledge to assist their children with homework. Nevertheless the Caribbean parents place a strong emphasis on education and the narratives in the book underscore the goal and aspirations to have their children attain higher education and better jobs. Back in the Caribbean education reform has focussed on decolonizing the system and the values and purpose of education in a post- independence era, by introducing a curriculum that redresses the past. Central to transformation is "self -identity and emancipation" both in the mind and the larger society.

Chapter six provides a discussion on Caribbean heritage in North America and engagement with the school system. The narratives highlight the barriers encountered including racism. The authors advocate for a multicultural education as a one way of mediating the change for immigrant minorities in North America. The current curricula are from a dominant culture and therefore do not serve the needs of the Caribbean and other minority groups.

Conclusion

The book is undoubtedly a valuable addition. However it can still be improved by including a concluding chapter that ties the various chapters and themes and provide a prognosis into the

future. For example, there is a poem at the beginning and at the end which is powerful presentation, but this does not capture the very critical issues interrogated in the book. The findings in the book on immigrant barriers to education are consistent with current research. The issues of cultural relevance or irrelevance and differences between education systems in North America and those in the country of origin continue to be challenges for both parents and students. The book is a valuable resource for scholars of international education, multicultural studies and global education among other disciplines.

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