



## 'Diversity, transformative knowledge, and civic education: selected essays'

by James Albert Banks, New York & London, Routledge, 2020, 221 pp., US \$39.96 (paperback), ISBN 9780367863197

Michael Vavrus

To cite this article: Michael Vavrus (2021): 'Diversity, transformative knowledge, and civic education: selected essays', Intercultural Education, DOI: [10.1080/14675986.2021.1864131](https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1864131)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1864131>



Published online: 16 Feb 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**'Diversity, transformative knowledge, and civic education: selected essays',**

by James Albert Banks, New York & London, Routledge, 2020, 221 pp.,

US \$39.96 (paperback), ISBN 9780367863197

In the 21st century, the ideals and practices of liberal democracies face challenges and discreditation in tandem with the rise of authoritarianism and questioning of what constitutes a national identity. Illiberal politicians utter familiar echoes of fascist politics from nearly a century ago by promoting mythic histories within a nationalistic discourse that denigrates cosmopolitanism and diversity. In their rise to power, right-wing politicians scapegoat ethnically diverse groups for economic inequalities while fuelling racial identity anxiety among historically privileged groups. Contested in this global context are questions such as who should be considered valid citizens within a nation and whose knowledge claims of injustice should count as legitimate or be dismissed as 'fake' (Garrett 2019). These political tensions are transpiring when unprecedented numbers of people across the planet are attempting to migrate to escape wars, poverty, internal displacement, famine, and natural disasters. A United Nations (2019) report states that among the nearly 275 million migrants, 'Forced displacements across international borders continues to rise' (para. 10). In 2019 alone, based on data from the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (2020), over 50 million people were forced from their homes or displaced. By the mid-2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic brought migration to a near standstill, simultaneously aggravating uncertain conditions for refugees and causing millions of urban workers to migrate to their rural homeplaces. Intensifying the devastation brought on by climate change and spurring an economic downspin comparable to the Great Depression of the 1930s, the global spread of the virus, according to the United Nations (2020a), 'presents the greatest test of this generation's commitment to multilateralism, global citizenship and solidarity' ('Greatest test', para.1). Illiberal responses to the pandemic necessitated a plea from the UN Secretary-General 'to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate' and to make an 'all-out effort to end hate speech globally' (United Nations 2020b, 'Scapegoats', para. 3).

Into this extraordinary time arrives James Banks' latest publication *Diversity, Transformative Knowledge, and Civic Education: Selected Essays*, a text that this reviewer recommends for policymakers, researchers, educators, and graduate students. Spanning 37 years, this collection of essays on multiculturalism, diversity, and citizenship offers timely insights into how the international educational community can address discriminatory schooling practices to improve the human condition. Throughout this publication Banks highlights myriad international examples of where young people experience discrimination within their schools and society. Notwithstanding educational inequities, Banks consistently presents models that conceptually and pragmatically provide critical alternatives to a somewhat indifferent status quo.

In addition to an introductory chapter, the collection is divided into three sections: (1) 'Race, Knowledge Construction, and Transformative Curriculum Reform'; (2) 'Cultural Democracy and Civic Education in Diverse Nations'; and (3) 'Diversity, Global Migration, and Civic Education'. The seven essays include a 2019 chapter and six journal articles published between 1983 and 2017. In order to ascertain the continuity in the development

of Banks' career of scholarship, including international conceptualisations of civic education and citizenship, readers can check his references as well as a section at the end of the book (pp. 194–208) that lists his extensive publications over his career, beginning in 1967.

### Subjectivity of a lived experience and objective scholarship

The introduction gives readers a glimpse into Banks' life as a marginalised youth without full citizenship rights who experienced the racism of segregated facilities as a Black child, remembrances that for him remain 'enduring', 'bitter', and 'painful' (p. 4). Here Banks speaks to his 'epistemological journey' to make explicit what has influenced his teaching and scholarship throughout his career:

My experience growing up in the segregated South and learning about the ways in which White historians outside the African American community had constructed images of Blacks that were institutionalized within the schools and the society writ large initiated an epistemological journey that resulted in my focusing much of my life's work on uncovering and describing the ways in which the autobiographical journeys of historians and social scientists influence the knowledge they create and how the construction of knowledge is influenced by factors such as race, class, and gender. (p. 4)

He then explains, 'Feminists call this phenomenon *positionality*' (emphasis in original, p. 4). Throughout the introductory chapter Banks incorporates his positionality to provide an overview of his intent for the organisation of the chapters that follow. To further contextualise his personal orientation is the inclusion of his 1998 essay 'The Lives and Values of Researchers'. Pointedly, Banks acknowledges 'the relationship between the subjective and objective components of knowledge' (p. 69) with the aim to make transparent the subjective connections that flow from 'my work on knowledge construction and civic education' (p. 5).

### A liminal space of transformative possibilities

For Banks, the subjectivity of his lived experiences as a child with the alienating characteristics of what he labels as 'failed citizenship' serves to inform and frame his analyses of how access to the rights of citizenship are far from fairly distributed. Banks operates in that critical liminal space where what exists now provides the conditions of possibility for a transition towards a more hopeful and engaged form of civic education and citizenship. Banks offers a citizenship typology that moves from 'failed citizenship' to that which is 'recognized' and 'participatory' in the political process. 'Transformative citizenship', the final stage within his typology, is of critical importance. It is this liminality of *transformation* that grounds all of Banks work here and throughout his career. Banks explains in his text-anchoring and seminal 1993 article 'The Canon Debate, Knowledge Construction, and Multicultural Education' that when transformative academic knowledge is introduced, it co-exists uneasily in theory and practice with mainstream knowledge. Banks' call for transformative multicultural *knowledge* leads eventually to the possibility of transformative multicultural *citizenship* which culminates in using personal agency 'to implement and promote policies, actions, and changes that are consistent with human rights, social justice, and equality', even when civil disobedience may be necessary (p. 155).

In Banks' 1983 presidential address to the National Council of Social Studies, we find roots of his life-long focus on the ideals of liberal democracies: 'liberty, equality, justice, and human dignity' (p. 93). For individuals to identify with such ideals, nation-states

must be inclusive in recognising and embracing cultural practices of diverse ethnic and racial groups which have been excluded from full participation within the polity. In this process, Banks differentiates between 'political democracy' and 'cultural democracy' (p. 94). The kind of civic education he envisioned more than three decades ago contributed to foundational concepts for what is now commonly referred to as culturally responsive teaching (Vavrus 2008). The essay expresses concerns that ring true in the 2020s: Barriers to a consensus on public policies that reflect democratic ideals have been 'stymied by factional self-interest groups' through an over-emphasis on 'individuality and diversity' to the point that 'there is little national consensus about what should be the goals of governmental, industrial, health, and educational institutions' (p. 102).

By 1983 Banks had already critiqued 'the liberal assimilationist conception' of citizenship as 'incomplete, flawed, and oversimplified' (p. 104). A quarter of a century later in articles published in 2008 and 2009, he amplified his analysis of the failures of forced assimilation by noting, 'Unity without diversity results in cultural repression and hegemony' through a thematic trope that perceives 'the rights of groups as detrimental to the rights of the individual' (pp. 114, 129). Alternatively, to shift towards a more robust and transformative concept of the process of becoming a citizen, he offers 'multicultural citizenship', a concept he adapts from Will Kymlicka (p. 113), a Canadian political theorist who has significantly influenced Banks since the 1990s. Multicultural citizenship for Banks incorporates constructs of both cultural and political democracy while recognising that nations internationally have generally been 'reluctant to view themselves as multicultural societies' (p. 137).

When a homogeneous application of citizenship is applied by nation-states divided hierarchically by status categories of differences but operates under a liberal ideology of equal opportunity, Banks observes that individuals from diverse groups are limited in exercising their full citizenship rights. With his more recent articles, we further see how he has broadened his work on citizenship and civic education since the turn of the century. Incorporating an international orientation, he explained in his 2008 essay that the purpose of global education is for students 'to develop a deep understanding of the need to *take action* and *make decisions* to solve the world's difficult problems' (emphasis added, p. 141). Reading that particular essay in the midst of the current COVID-19 pandemic highlights the social justice importance to enable young people to act 'in the global interests that will benefit humankind' (p. 141).

Banks situates the collection's final two essays from 2017 to 2019 in our current moment that is witnessing what he describes as a heightened 'xenophobia that has targeted immigrants and mobilized angry populist groups in a number of Western nations' with 'authoritarian politicians who seriously threaten democracy, which is fragile and requires continuous renewal' (pp. 153, 189). Most problematic for Banks is how such nations as the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and China 'have alienated marginalized students from their histories and cultures when trying to make them citizens' (p. 165). Nevertheless, he evokes specifically for non-citizen youth the liminal space of '*transformative civic action*' as an alternative to suppressing and then relinquishing their cultural identities through the rigid expectations of assimilation (emphasis in original, p. 157). What is required for the non-citizen is a 'human rights cosmopolitan education' – again applying a concept from Kymlicka – which 'is grounded in democratic ethics, the human rights tenets that have been codified in documents endorsed and published by supranational organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union' (p. 180). Furthermore, such a human rights education must pedagogically incorporate 'the theoretical ideas that have been formulated by political and social scientists', a number of which Banks cites (p. 180). This approach,

Banks notes, contrasts ‘with parochial ethnocentrism and inward-looking patriotism’ (p. 182) because engaged civic education, whether for citizens or non-citizens, requires transformative knowledge.

### Moving forward ...

The challenges to improve the life opportunities for marginalised young people can appear insurmountable in our current contested political economy environment. Interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Banks urges us to not give into despair:

As educators we must be hopeful, and we must have faith that our work will make a difference. Faith and hope enable us to wake up every morning and to keep going — believing that we can make a difference. Without faith and hope we are immobilized. (Banks, as cited in Kelly, 2020, ‘Do you remain hopeful,’ para. 2)

Along with the analyses and conceptual frameworks, that Banks offers throughout his new collection, critical intercultural and multicultural educators will need to remain dispositionally mindful of Banks’ counsel in collectively continuing to work towards a more just world.

### References

- Garrett, H. G. 2019. “Why Does Fake News Work? On the Psychosocial Dynamics of Learning, Belief, and Citizenship.” In *Unpacking Fake News: An Educator’s Guide to Navigating Media with Students*, edited by W. Journell, 15–29. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. 2020 April. *Global Report on Internal Displacement*. <https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2020/>.
- Kelly, P. 2020, April 7. “Education Books: Athletics and Higher Ed, Supervising School Principals, Activist-oriented Teaching — And a Conversation with James Banks on His New Book of Essays.” *UW News*. <https://www.washington.edu/news/2020/04/07/education-books-athletics-and-higher-ed-supervising-school-principals-activist-oriented-teaching-and-a-conversation-with-james-banks-on-his-new-book-of-essays/>
- United Nations. 2019 September 17. *The Number of International Migrants Reaches 272 Million, Continuing an Upward Trend in All World Regions, Says UN*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/international-migrant-stock-2019.html>.
- United Nations. 2020a April 24. ‘Leave No One Behind’ Mantra Matters More than Ever, as Coronavirus Threatens All Humanity. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062492>.
- United Nations. 2020b May 8. *UN Chief Appeals for Global Action against Coronavirus-fueled Hate Speech*. Peace and Security. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/106354>.
- Vavrus, M. 2008. “Culturally Responsive Teaching.” In *21<sup>st</sup> century Education: A Reference Handbook*, edited by T. L. Good, 49–57. Vol. 2. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Michael Vavrus  
Evergreen State College, USA  
 [vavrusm@evergreen.edu](mailto:vavrusm@evergreen.edu)

© 2021 Michael Vavrus  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2021.1864131>

