ABU EL-HAJ, T. R. (2006). ELUSIVE JUSTICE: WRESTLING WITH DIFFERENCE AND EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN EVERYDAY PRACTICE. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE. PP. XX+233. ISBN 0-415-95366-9.

Jessica Kim

The fight for educational equity and social justice has been undertaken by educators and researchers for decades in an effort to address the continuously changing needs of schools to promote learning of all students (Adams et al, 1997; Ayers et al, 1998; Oakes & Lipton, 1999). Defining these omnipresent terms within the varying contexts of teaching and learning continues to pose challenges for educators and researchers, yet actualizing them in practice confronts practitioners oftentimes with questions that are difficult to answer. *Elusive justice: Wrestling with difference and educational equity in everyday practice*, Abu El-Haj's thought-provoking ethnographic account of two very different schools engaged in discourses on difference, brings the struggles of real practitioners to the forefront as it tries to make explicit the processes of defining educational equity and social justice for practitioners and students alike. The book is divided into five sections in which Abu El-Haj first illustrates a vivid portrait of the two schools, then describes three justice claims that emerge from working with differences in the everyday practices of teaching in those schools, and finally elaborates on what she terms as "taking a relational stance toward difference" that ultimately promotes "the full participation of all students" in learning.

The backdrops for Abu El-Haj's analysis of discourses on difference are two local schools in Philadelphia varying considerably in context and size. One is a public school which she gives the name "Parks Middle School" that serves approximately 240 students, and the other is a K-12 Quaker which she calls "City Friends" that serves roughly 900 students. The two schools are carefully chosen for research sites for their participation in invaluable inquiry into their daily practices and commitment to creating equitable educational opportunities for all students. For almost a decade, Abu El-Haj engaged in what she terms "parallel play" with practitioner inquiry teams at these schools that are actively working through questions surrounding difference.

Abu El-Haj explicates the messiness of examining what constitutes educational equity and invites her readers to think along with her and the practitioners at these two school sites in grappling with differences. What originally began as a community school driven by strict admissions policies and procedures for students identified "gifted," Parks had become a more democratic institution as a result of the district's voluntary desegregation initiative. The school was undergoing several changes, including transitioning into a full-inclusion program in which students labeled with disabilities were integrated into regular classrooms. Aside from inadequate material and human resources, practitioners were faced with complex questions of how to approach learning diversity in the classrooms without jeopardizing equity. How were they to create challenging educational opportunities for all students when there was a wide range in students' abilities, achievement, and aptitude? For example, were they to hold every student up to the same standards and treat all students equally despite the transparent differences that each student brought into the classroom? Or was it fair to encourage a range of deadlines and assignments to treat each student individually according to their respective ability levels and potentials? These were some of questions that Abu El-Haj observed that confronted the practitioners at Parks as they aimed for educational equity.

City Friends, on the other hand, committed to its Quaker philosophies and traditions, was becoming more aware of diversity issues related to race, class, and gender in its predominately white, upper-middle-class context. Practitioners at City Friends were interested in not only embracing diversity but in highlighting it for the educational advantage of all members of the school community. What did this exactly look like? Adding various hues and shades to the composition of the school with students and faculty of color did not seem sufficient. A school committed to diversity surely had to do more. How were these practitioners to promote and benefit from diversity in authentic ways to enhance student learning and enrich the school community? In analyzing the various conversations on differences from these two school sites, Abu El-Haj extrapolates three central justice claims by which she means "frameworks within which ideas about equity are organized in everyday discourse and practice" (p.5). These include integration, equal standards, and recognition of difference.

Abu El-Haj acknowledges the importance in considering these justice claims as mechanisms to use differences or diversity to create educational equity in schools. However, she argues for a different approach, one that frames difference as a relational issue that favors "substantive inclusion in the community as the reigning value" (p. 190). She recognizes that this approach requires more deliberation and effort, but, when implemented, it promotes educational equity for all students. She writes:

Taking a relational stance insists on examining educational practices in terms of the relationships they produce between groups – relationships that create or limit possibilities for building more equitable schools. This stance does not make distribution irrelevant to justice claims. However, it means looking critically at what is being distributed. Within this framework, it is never enough to focus on increasing access or opportunities without simultaneously asking how the existing arrangements of classrooms and schools preclude or promote the full participation of all students. (p.200)

Highlighted here is the importance of relationships in the foundation of educationally equitable opportunities for all students to participate in learning, regardless of their differences. In this framework, differences are not perceived as obstacles or impediments but rather valuable pieces of information that must be taken into account by practitioners when creating classroom climates and communities that encourage all students to participate.

Abu El-Haj elegantly untangles some of the most complex issues that surround the practice of educators in working with diversity and students' differences. Through illustrative vignettes and dialogue, she exposes the often muddled processes by which practitioners and students construct meaning of difference. Interwoven in these processes are valuable questions she raises that compel practitioners and researchers to think about reaching educational equity at all angles. Not only are teachers, for instance, encouraged to take into consideration the various differences that students bring into the classroom, but they are also inspired to reassess their classroom practices and norms to ensure that all students participate in learning without feeling different or estranged. For these reasons, not only teachers but educational researchers and policymakers are highly recommended to read this book.

Practitioners committed to social justice are constantly tackled by the challenge of placing equity at the center of their educational practices. With this important work, Abu El-Haj stimulates the questioning of accepted suppositions such as holding equal standards for all students to demonstrate the complexity and ambiguity embedded in the pursuit of educational equity. Abu El-Haj's insightfulness grounded in theoretical foundation makes this book a cornerstone for learning and thinking about education in a democratic society.

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JESSICA KIM

Jessica Kim is a second-year doctoral student in the Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum program at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania . She has a Master of Education degree from UCLA and has taught elementary school students in Los Angeles and secondary school students in boarding schools in New England and Shanghai, China . Her current research interests include preparation of and support for new teachers in urban public schools, teacher education, diversity in education, and Asian Americans in higher education. She can be reached at msjessicakim@gmail.com.

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