

review of arie kizel's *enabling students' voices and identities: philosophical inquiry in a time of discord*

KIZEL, Arie. *Enabling Student's Voices and Identities: Philosophical Inquiry in a Time of Discord*. Lexington Books: Lanham, 2024.

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There is no doubt that we are living in a time of extraordinarily discord that seems atypical to recent contemporary life. It is for that reason that, without hesitation, I wholeheartedly recommend that Arie Kizel's book (2024), *Enabling Students' Voices and Identities: Philosophical Inquiry in a Time of Discord*, be embraced by all educators. The central argument that makes this book unique is that educators are ethically required to create a dialogical space in the classroom with the view to legitimizing multiple *personal narratives* thereby allowing children and teachers/practitioners to engage in self-construction and the *broadening of existing identity/narrative* constructions and boundaries.

Though "narrative" has become a common theoretical reference, the suggestion that educators ensure that students' *personal narratives* have a prominent place on the educational agenda, despite the mainstream educational framework that focuses on "educational advancement," "striving for excellence," and "learning achievements as the basis for a better future," is quite revolutionary. And though the author sometimes seems primarily focused on the negative impact that the typical sterile and de-differentiating academic environment has on students from marginalized communities, it is clear that a homogenizing and irrelevant educational experience that typifies the learning environment of elementary, secondary and post-secondary classrooms does a dis-service to *all* students. Kizel's radical suggestion is that we actively invite young people into the classroom *as they are*, that is, how they define themselves through their own personal narratives, and

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thereafter invite them to engage in dialogue with those who might not share the same vision and so, in this way, are offered the opportunity for personal growth. Personal growth becomes possible through authentic dialogue precisely because *narrative discourse* opens up the possibility of freeing individuals from the stories that fetter them, constrict their personality, and prevent them from realizing their potential (pp. 96–97).

In his discussion of the “politics of identity,” Kizel notes that authentic narrative discourse can be rare since “othering” groups endow themselves with a privileged status of being morally superior and hence often, even if inadvertently, silence those who have “othered.” And though Kizel is particularly concerned with typical mainstream versus marginalized groups, this “othering” tactic is true of virtually all the various tribes that see themselves as representing various contemporary agendas, as was evident, for instance, of the shockingly certain but utterly one-sided perspective of recent university student protests with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian war.

Through the discussion of othering, Kizel makes the interesting move of suggesting that we discard our mostly unhelpful focus on diversity and instead embrace the notion of “other” as valorized by Levinas who urges us to meet the other as they really are, with a sense of responsibility, rather than mere acceptance (p. 27).

In aid of establishing a rich environment of “plurals” (Manji, 2019), Kizel offers a 3-stage strategy for ensuring that none of the members on the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CPIs) feel sufficiently privileged to embody a “voice of authority” and so surreptitiously silence others, which therefore enables a sufficiently democratic interchange that allows stereotypes to be shattered and so nurtures a sense of trust that invites all the members of the community to bring themselves to the encounter. Thus, rather than formulating their queries so that their peers will like them, participants begin to ask questions that reflect their own identity, which, in turn, opens up the way to inter-narrative reflection and personal growth (p. 65). Identity-based Communities of Philosophical Inquiry thus create the agar for the birth of empowered philosophical selves who develop the power to take



charge of the trajectory of their own lives via independent evaluation and judgment and close attention to their desires, tendencies, and surroundings. As well, since relevant often contentious social issues are raised and challenged in an atmosphere that makes room for diverse perspectives, this serves as an ideal forum for preparing young people for lives as active citizens in a democracy (p. 78).

All of this, of course, requires that facilitators are thoroughly trained so that they are “pedagogically strong but philosophically self-effacing; (they aren’t) teaching *what* to think but *how* to think; (they) exchange content expertise to procedural expertise” (Gregory, 2008, p. 10). Or as Michaud notes: “The function of the facilitator in P4C is not to teach these skills as in a traditional pedagogy nor is it to transmit specific knowledge regarding the subject discussed, but rather to create a space in which the students can practice these skills and engage in inquiry on subjects that interest them” (Michaud, 2020, p. 36).

On the other hand, Kizel warns us that privileging developing thinking skills over identities creates an educational space that is liable to allow the mainstream discourse to dominate and hidden violence to grow, acting like an elephant in the classroom. Facilitators must thus meet the almost impossible challenge of finding a balance between the two. The best model in this regard, Kizel suggests, is a two-stage scheme, in which they first free themselves and then enable the community (p. 86)

Kizel also adds that facilitators must seek to participate openly and critically within the community, though humility is a prerequisite for respecting identity within the group. Facilitation thus demands a strong faith in others – in their ability to create and re-create. Dialogical pedagogues must believe in the O/other before they even meet him or her face to face and must avoid condescension or rank-pulling so that all the participants perceive themselves on an equal footing. Rather than artificial, such egalitarianism constitutes a balance of power that encourages mutual trust, enabling the community members to form close ties as they act together to change the world (pp. 92–93).

Kizel warns us, though, that educators must always beware of the very natural attitude of protecting children as this impedes dialogue and identity

expression. He argues that educators should turn their backs on “saving” and “rescuing” even young participants on the grounds that they know what is best for them in favor of engaging in a mutual learning process. They ought to, in other words, foster a secure rather than custodial atmosphere (p. 93).

Kizel admits that inter-identity discussion can often arouse fierce reactions, bringing feelings and emotions to the surface and he notes that some would claim that this heightens tensions within the Community of Philosophical Inquiry. Nonetheless, Kizel argues that while this may be true at first glance, when undertaken in the service of making room for, rather than excluding, identity, it actually reduces tension, allowing members to be truly, fully, and authentically present. Facilitators who take this route foster a feeling of being at home in an “open village” rather than a segregated house (p. 95).

In the last chapter, Kizel presents the results of studies of Communities of Philosophical Inquiry run by facilitators who have adopted his 3-part strategy of enabling identity in groups in which marginalised students are obviously part of the mix, e.g., groups of German and Turkish students and groups of Israeli and Palestinian students. This affords the reader a fascinating look at how, when difference is not “invisibilized,” identities rise to the surface in a way that allows students to communicate from a place of authenticity, for example, “As a Palestinian, it seems to me that. . .” This chapter also includes a fascinating description of how participants in a CPI handled discussions on how poverty might impact identity and how, through authentic dialogue, those in poverty can be transformed into being perceived as living humans who might not be totally responsible for the position that they have found themselves in.

Aside from potentially altering the othering tendencies of those who are privileged, Kizel reminds us that philosophical discussion can also be extremely beneficial to those who feel victimized. His notes that pupils who embrace the view that their fate is predestined and “such is life” are unlikely to hold out any hope of change. They thus become paralyzed and develop a sense of self-blame (p. 95). However, philosophical dialogue can, on the one hand, give birth to the knowledge that, rather than aiding pupils to escape their underprivileged position, self-



oppression fosters a sense of victimization and lack of belief in the possibility of change, and on the other hand, foster the capacity to become “agents of resilience.” Authentic philosophical dialogue enables individuals to understand that they can change the world in which they live; that even if hope currently lies beyond the horizon, they will not relinquish it. Hopeful thinking is the order of the day (p. 95).

All of this, of course, takes time and can be tricky when identities are wedded to positions. It is for that reason that Kizel warns us, again, to beware of what he refers to as the “pedagogy of fear” (see also Kizel, 2016; Kizel, 2022). Kizel rightly describes the presence of fear as *the* major challenge in education today, but reminds us that since learning, by definition, requires a journey into the unknown, it inevitably engenders fear, while learning from others who think differently will seem particularly perilous. It is for that reason that Kizel argues that it is the educator’s job to acknowledge the fear that arises when learning something new but, nonetheless, model the taming of that fear through intellectual discipline.

Kizel emphasizes that this “self-liberating education” rests on *recognition* rather than the transfer of *knowledge*, and reminds us that Freire (1970) calls this form of education “radical pedagogy” by which he means “freedom from certainty.” This requires, however, that teachers free themselves from the logic of capitalist globalization and instrumental rationality (pp. 88-9) and transform themselves from objects that merely pass information into autonomous thinking subjects, thus partnering with students to create a space for questions that interrogates the status quo.

Educators, of course, will be suspicious of many of these suggestions. As long as students arrive in the classroom with unchallenged narratives, certainty, safety, and stability reign. By contrast, engaging young people in “inter-narrative dialogue” can trigger emotional responses and hence create an uncertain context which will deprive students and educator/facilitators alike of their armour of safety. This may seem particularly treacherous in this “age of discord” when “cancelling” those who seek a deep and complex understanding of the wicked challenges we face has become a sport for many. All of which is precisely why educators need the voice of this courageous identity-enabling educator at their side.

We need to remind ourselves that if any of us can do it, all of us can do it. Individual student growth and democratic survival requires that we all learn to dialogue across differences from the place we find ourselves in, that is, from our identity, and in doing so open up the possibility of personal and societal growth.

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