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Editorial: Activist research in the global quest for social justice

Eduardo Vianna, André Sales & João Otavio Garcia

After having recently published a special issue on transmethodology, we proudly present a new issue of Outlines. This closing year was, again, a challenging one. The pandemic continued to add stress to the already fractious global community, beleaguered by rampant inequality, “natural” disasters fueled by climate change, armed conflict, mass migration and the demise of neoliberal policies spearheaded by authoritarian leaders who have sought to undermine collective agency by weakening social investment and democratic institutions. While confronting the pain and losses we collectively had, we are nonetheless invigorated by the critical spirit of the authors in this issue. Not only do they offer insightful analysis of systems of sociocultural practices across different parts of the world, but their critical practice studies extend our knowledge to tackle local struggles and bridge our collective efforts in the quest for equity and social justice. The articles take issue with social practice guided by conservative ideals, often tacit, that support the status quo both in the context of strained resources in industrialized countries as well as in post- and neocolonial contexts in the Global South. This comes forth in articles whose authors, located in Nordic countries, confront dwindling socioeconomic resources in the wake of neoliberal policies that threaten their welfare state in tandem with ideologies of control, such as in narratives of child protection thinly disguised as professional knowledge in social work, developmental psychology and related fields. Political uses of child protection narratives are also unveiled in the ambivalence, if not hypocrisy, of humanitarian aid intertwined with a politics of controlling human mobility in refugee camp schools, as discussed in the article by Swiss researchers. Such colonial dynamics directly resonate with us from the Global South. As Brazilian scholars and activists we

feel in our skin the duplicitous policy of the Global North who purportedly seek to save the Amazon with the largesse of funds devoted to its protection while simultaneously supporting predatory agribusiness and allowing European and North American mining companies to operate right there, polluting rivers and threatening the livelihood of its indigenous populations. Echoes of the global crisis of capitalism are also heard in the article by Greek researchers. Connecting the epidemic of medicalization of learning difficulties to budget cuts in education in the wake of Greece's socioeconomic crisis, they alert us to a "pandemic of diagnoses", reminding us of other pandemics of social injustice we need to confront. The supremacist legacy of colonialism is also central to the article on educational transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. We are thrilled to bring non hegemonic voices that represent a geopolitical expansion of our critical practice studies.

The article by Jorunn Vindegg addresses persisting gaps between theory and practice in the field of social work. Emphasizing the complex relationship between scientific knowledge and its application, the author disavows downplaying the role of theory, such as in the evidenced-based practice movement, which makes it less accessible to critical analysis, often leaving unaddressed biases of class, gender and ethnicity. A compelling argument is put forth regarding social workers' ambivalence toward discussing their work in theoretical terms. Though social workers often use concepts such as empowerment, child development or attachment, they avoid comprehensible theoretical frameworks. Rejecting that practice works merely intuitively, as the understanding of a problem is not self-evident in the problem itself, the article demonstrates how underlying ideas and tacit dimensions of knowledge shape practice. The analysis of interviews with social workers, parents and children in the Norwegian child welfare system reveals that professional narratives, emphasizing concern and risk rather than possibilities and qualifications, often cast children as detached from their socio-political surroundings, disregarding their own experiences and competencies. In their narratives, however, children position themselves as agents of their lives, capable of reflecting on their own circumstances and negotiating their current position. Vindegg reveals how social workers' orientations position children as "wards to be worried about." Calling for more articulation of theory in practice, the author invites social workers to a theoretical discussion on the meaning of child protection that moves beyond an exclusive focus on children as victims to a more agentive perspective.

The article by Fresia, von Känel, and Perret-Clermont addresses tensions in education in refugee camps, now a key component of humanitarian aid, as narratives of child protection are intertwined with a politics of controlling human mobility. Drawing on case studies of schools in two Congolese refugee camps, the authors explore which “registers of legitimization and understandings of the child” they are built on and how they are negotiated. This is done through an intricate analysis of humanitarian schools as multi-stakeholder systems and how they are coordinated with larger national educational systems. Their findings reveal a set of structural tensions that unveil the ambivalence of humanitarian educational systems in camp contexts. While conveying projects of “normalization” aimed at including refugee children in globalized new school order, camp schools simultaneously perpetuate their exclusion by casting them as refugees, so that exceptionality and normalization are but the two sides of the same coin. Giving voice to refugee children, the authors interrogate whose interests are served by positioning them as innocent victims in need of protection. Questioning its supposed neutrality, they interrogate how humanitarianism can serve global social engineering projects aimed at creating “ideal political subjects.” What future is projected to children is thus a central issue, as the authors brilliantly disclose unavoidable political-ideological underpinnings that raise the question of what vision is enacted in refugee camp schools.

Echoing themes raised in Vindegg’s article at the intersection of theory, practice, and training, the article by Jydebjerg, Madsen, & Christensen, focuses on gaps and contradictions in the education of social workers and, consequently, their conception of their profession. Based on an empirical study with Danish social work students, the authors explore conceptions of professionalism by placing it in a broad context that begins with a brief but illuminating review of how the field of social work developed in Denmark. This background sheds light on how a potential conflict between care and control is built into the social work system. The paper exemplarily makes the case for canvassing a broad ethico-political context in order to examine the ideological underpinnings of societal practices. The authors’ theoretical inspiration is Martha Fineman’s vulnerability theory, which offers a conceptualization and critique of how liberalism shapes a static definition of the subject, namely, the myth of autonomy. One prominent finding is the dichotomous understanding that only clients are vulnerable whereas the social worker maintains an objective, detached, thus invulnerable, position.

This bureaucratic understanding leads to a “powerless relationalism, which accords power to the state, not the social worker. Thus, the article demonstrates how social workers’ agency is hijacked by their education as professionals non-reflexively committed to a notion of help as social control, via expectations that clients will become normalized—including through direct force, if needed.

The article by Bottcher et al. discusses pressures on the welfare state in Denmark based on a national restructuring of social support for individuals with disabilities. Drawing on Vygotsky’s dialectical concept of disability, the authors connect individual and social aspects of disability in children with cerebral palsy, highlighting access to activities that support children’s learning and development. Therefore, the often difficult development of children with disabilities can be seen to result from a mismatch between the biological development and the cultural tools available. Analyzing the work of multidisciplinary group assembled by the Danish National Board of Social Services to develop a new national practice for children with complex cerebral palsy, the authors reveal how the conflict between the welfare ideology and economic feasibility remains unresolved and can be expected to limit the extent of remedial efforts. Their analysis considers “how the practice of drawing up a guideline for a social service pathway for children with complex cerebral palsy evolved through conflicts and contradictions,” such as the contradiction between medical versus social and educational criteria for diagnostics. Exposing how societal ideas and professional practices related to differences transform them into disabilities, the article demonstrates how political economy constitutes disability by shaping social conditions of development.

The article by Venianaki, Timplalexi, and Dafermos focuses on the medicalization of learning difficulties in Greece where overdiagnosing students has reached an epidemic proportion. In consonance with critical studies in education, they argue that “learning problems do not reside in the heads of pupils,” but rather in the complex social interactions in schools, which are themselves situated in a broader social, cultural and political context. Furthermore, they argue that “educational policies produce school failure and create huge numbers of learning disabled pupils.” Based on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological approach, the authors seek to provide a better understanding of environmental dimensions. This is reflected in their case study methodology based on triangulating data from local education office archives, interviews of key informants, and

national data and news articles about the school crisis and accompanying protests. They further analyze the impacts and dynamics of geomorphological, cultural and economic formations, thus connecting educational issues with the recent socioeconomic crisis in Greece. The article offers a penetrating analysis into how this clinical approach attributes learning difficulties to individual problems while neglecting environmental dimensions.

The inspiring article by Azwihangwisi Edward Muthivhi offers a penetrating analysis of schooling under the Apartheid and points toward the possibilities for indigenous and decolonized transformative approaches. He analyzes the sociopolitical context that developed in that country after the end of Apartheid and its complicated legacy while raising many significant points about contemporary pedagogy in South Africa. He offers a poignant discussion of the despicable ideology of racial hierarchy of the apartheid regime and how it shaped oppressive educational practices to perpetuate white supremacy. Combining the African philosophy of Ubuntu with Stetsenko's transformative activist stance, Muthivhi addresses the importance of a teacher's enactment of a transformative pedagogy in the context of South Africa's post-apartheid. He focuses on identity development at the intersection of learning and knowledge construction within collaborative practices for social transformation to reveal their underpinning in a transformative agency.