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Unraveling Hope in the Epicenter of Urban Educational Disaster

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Vajra Watson's *Learning to Liberate - Community-Based Solutions to the Crisis in Urban Education* is a powerful, hopeful, spiritual and soulful read. After reading this text, one is reminded of Howard Zinn's provocative point:

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places - and there are so many - where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory (Zinn, 2004, p.1).

Indeed, like Zinn, Watson mobilizes historical memory to provoke social transformation in the interest of the oppressed. Watson invokes historically liberating forms of educational

praxis to frame her path. She offers us portraits – a creative approach in qualitative research with groups or individuals (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997) of four community-based educators, who direct youth serving non-profit organizations in Oakland and San Francisco, CA. She asks us to consider their pedagogy in relation to “the crisis in urban education.” The prospect is that their endeavors may contribute to the unraveling of aptitudes and attitudes that are crucial for public school teachers to sharpen in order to be effective with youths in danger of disengagement with school. Three pivotal questions guide the study.

What are each community based educator's philosophies and strategies for working with high-risk youth?

How do personal experiences and institutional contexts shape and influence the way these educators engage youth?

In what ways, if at all, can the lessons derived from the work of these educators inform the practices and pedagogy of high school teachers in low-income urban communities? (p.178).

Watson succeeds in vividly capturing the triumph, the tensions and messiness of these dissident pedagogues and their respective projects. She delivers some solutions encoded in the title of the text and addresses all of the research questions deeply. Yet, she offers no blueprint. Rather, she allows us entry into various processes that inspire re-contextualization. In short, she creates a context that activates our imagination of possibilities, certainly a more impressive and principled feat than simplistic straightforward

generalizations to be replicated cross-institutionally.



The four community-based educators respectively exhibit decisive pedagogical inclinations. Dereca Blackmon has polished a *pedagogy of communication*, Rudy Corpuz, Jr. has refined a *pedagogy of community*, Victor Damien has developed a *pedagogy of compassion*, and Jack Jacqua has cultivated a *pedagogy of commitment*. Although each exhibits a dominant style, they weave in and out of multiple pedagogies and recognize their own incompleteness. Not only does Watson compare and contrast dominant school-based pedagogies and these inclinations; she allows the praxis of each educator to push the boundaries and inform the work of the others making the book a valuable read not only for teachers and teacher educators but also non-profit leaders desiring to deepen their praxis and non-profit leadership studies more broadly.

They share commonalities in that they are all living and unconditionally loving young people in contexts marked by real lived and symbolic forms of violence. Those symbolic forms are

most visible in unrelenting policies that structure misery in the form of poverty and institutional racism. Schools, as the author so correctly points out, are not really ineffective institutions. They are actually quite effective in accomplishing what they have always been structured to perform. Schools are part of the apparatus that function to widen social stratification, deepen racialized poverty and perpetuate a ritual aesthetic that celebrates and advances middle to upper-middle class ways of being and concurrently unleash ontological assaults on those who already bear the most social cost. These activities may be most readily traced in the instruments of coercion embodied in such schooling practices as disciplinary structures designed to disengage youth and further clear their pathway into the school-to-prison pipeline, educational tracking, false market-based “choice,” low expectations, and forms of educational and cultural colonialism dressed in the language of “standards” and “accountability.” She spends little time in denouncing the deep-seated violence and inscriptions on bodies. Instead, she is focused on the mining and announcing of solutions.

The participant educators in Watson’s research are critical in structuring spaces that facilitate the socialization of identities marked by helplessness and hopelessness out of existence. They assist in the fermenting, reconnecting, and re-inspiring youth towards subjectivities that seek engaged resistance and transformative possibilities. Their lives and work are deeply inspiring. One cannot help but pause in the reading of each respective portraiture and think about how the praxis of Dereca, Rudy, Victor and Jack might be re-contextualized to address one’s own oppressive urban climate. More

importantly, these narratives cause us to self-reflect and interrogate our own complicity and politically inadequate responses to the crisis. Yet, Watson also subtly weaves the tensions and contradictions and evades a simplistic process of (s) heroification. She is also mindful of the existence of shared forms of leadership at all the organizations, but discloses that it was not her particular research focus. She is also careful in not privileging any particular approach, and in keeping with the constructivist “art and science of portraiture” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997) and propensity to voice in dialogue, situates herself in the final production of portraits. These are just some, among numerous indications that the study is intensely rigorous and reflexive.

The text is clear that there are a number of conditions that community-based educators are released from in comparison to public school teachers. In drawing the attention to these conditions, the text invites readers to think of alternative educational structures more widely. They, unlike many teachers, do not have to adhere to inflexible curricular standards, rules that structure behaviorism and scientific management as organizational anchors, strict limitations on time, and organizational rules, whether explicit or implicit, that rules out the lived experience and voice(s) of poor and working-class youths of color. Although these are not matters totally resolved in community-based organizations, they seem to be the case in the organizational reality and praxis of the four participants in the research. Despite these differences, the research arrives at significant findings that directly bear on school based teaching and teacher preparation.

All of the community-based educators demonstrate the power of genuine care and relationship building. Although they are not always successful at reaching all youth, it is apparent that they are committed. It is evident that this form of engagement is not tangential to learning, but the necessary pre-condition for it. This finding is one that is already well established in theoretical and empirical work in urban education (Noddings, 1992; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Valenzuela, 1999; Dance, 2002). Watson, like L. Janelle Dance (2002), accents the contribution to this literature through a cross organizational lens.

To be genuine, for the educators in the study, requires the development and perpetual sharpening of one’s own political clarity. Watson, further elaborates Jack Jacqua’s claim, “To Jack, many teachers deny their students’ pain because they deny their own pain.” (p. 128). Without deep self-reflection on pressing historical, cultural (particularly youth culture as manifested locally), social, political, and economic inequalities, it is unlikely that one can develop a posture of concentrated attentiveness to the voices of youths. This is an indispensable process for, as Rudy puts it, “ear hustlin.” The emphasis placed on effective listening throughout the portraits is quite significant in a culture that insists on not seeing or hearing youth who are low income and of color; unless, of course, to be seen and heard is fixed to capital consumption, systems of surveillance, corporeal control and exploitation. Without this disposition towards self-examination it is also unlikely that one can develop a register capable of honest dialogue and praxis that acts in service to youth who are routinely rendered invisible

and subjected to lethal forms of social control. Yet, self-reflection alone is insufficient.

All of the cases illuminate the transformative power of involvement in movements larger than the self. It is from this fountain that all of the educators theorize youth as active and capable of producing change, of becoming “rebels with a cause” (p.155). All are passionate about both consciousness-raising and skill building through a culturally relevant, student centered and social justice oriented curriculum and pedagogy. It is only at this intersection that they have avoided praxis conditioned on guilt and low expectations, although, Watson sharply calls into question exercises that she perceives expect little from youths. All of the educators in the study are custodians of organizational cultures that do not demean families. It was not surprising to find that parent participation in their organizations was rare and that engaging parents was not a key strategy in their praxis. It was surprising and insightful that Watson problem poses this finding in contrast to the tired claims so often heard in schools that code disengagement as a result of family or cultural pathology.

Watson finds that for “the four educators there is *no outside the classroom* because the environment is the learning context; students’ lives are the content” (p. 160). Here, perhaps the most important section of the text, Watson challenges us to imagine innovative alliances capable of blurring the boundaries and providing for long-term structures that sustain youth. She challenges us to imagine teacher education programs that are anchored to community-based organizations and sees these formations as not only critical for the formation

of teachers but also a fountain from which a “new generation of *community based teachers*,” may be recruited. (p.162). Watson might have sought to strategically de-center linguistic markers such “community-based,” which may function in the reproduction of the very dichotomy of “school-community” one senses the author wanting to rupture.

Key tensions in education are navigated in politically skillful ways. Unlike those who would claim that the crisis is totally manufactured, she is adamant that much work must be undertaken for schools to become spaces that take seriously the lived experience(s) of urban youth, particularly youth of color while also addressing students’ needs to succeed in standards-based academic culture. The point as bell hooks (1994), so eloquently puts it, is to enter dominant culture and simultaneously re-make it so that it becomes a site of struggle for democratic forms of social organization. She concludes, without distancing herself from the dynamic by the use of the plural nominative “we,” that “we have to be bold and brave enough to meet students where they are, even if they are in a place that makes us uncomfortable.” (p. 160). Yet, she simultaneously critiques those who proselytize the “crisis” for purposes of advancing market-based educational reforms from charter schools to firing teachers and closing schools, outcomes that furthers the assault on youth. Although she is clear that greater political clarity on the part of teachers and teaching for social justice can make a qualitative difference, she is equally clear that teachers should not be blamed for inequality and that teachers alone cannot meet the needs of all students. These are only some of the findings, interpretations and

recommendations. Encoding all of the conclusions in this review is impossible and pointless. Like a good gift, it should remain wrapped. The book is well written and well worth the read. Much more is open to discovery.

The research is methodologically coherent. The transition between the authors' epistemological and ontological standpoint (particularly when considering the authors own scholarly-activist history), theoretical perspectives, choice of portraiture as method (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997) and research question(s) is entirely harmonious. Multiple points of triangulation are sought. One also senses Watson's passion for community-based youth education throughout and awareness of her own racial identity marker and the privileges it affords. In true keeping with her chosen method, reflexive vignettes are effectively interwoven throughout. The research narrative is as absorbing as the final findings. Perhaps, the text might have been strengthened by entry into greater dialogue between methodological grounding and the post-structural turn and penchant for multiple truths (English, 2000). Watson does, in part, indirectly address these criticisms of the qualitative technique of "portraiture" however.

Another area that might have been further developed includes deeper theorizing regarding organizational collaborations. Although Watson states that the dynamic requires more research, the influence she places on collaboration, as a solution, deserves more conceptual grounding. In my own context and work between community-based organizations and public schools, I have noted (and risk anecdotal reasoning here) that a number of those

community-organizations and the key educators within them, have become so disillusioned with public schools, for both good and elusive reasons, that they are often at the forefront of structuring alternatives that directly or indirectly act in the dismantling or undermining of quality public schooling. The reality certainly does not negate the brilliance of their assistance to youths, although it does compromise the service in the long run. Watson warns against these alternatives. But, one wonders about the role she might ascribe to community-based organizations in them. This is, at least for me, a site of conflict and struggle.

One also wonders how the text might have been deepened through an analysis (even if through a synthesis of the already existing literature) of culturally responsive and social justice oriented public school educators and the value they might contribute to the work of community-based educators. More interestingly, one wonders about the praxis of those whose identities are sutured to both normative schooling and education outside the boundaries of the four walls or those who blur the distinctions. Perhaps, this would be a rewarding path of future exploration by Watson; conceivably even an auto-ethnographic exploration of the author's own work.

The text deserves wide dissemination. It reads quite nicely alongside L. Janelle Dance's (2002) *Tough Fronts. The Impact of Street Culture on Schooling*. The research trajectories of the two texts are different and yet both validate key findings and attempt to respond to each other's calls.

Learning to Liberate is an important contribution to the literature on urban education,

the sociology of education, qualitative methodology in education, transformative educational leadership, educational policy studies, and organizational behavior in educational settings. Of course, the book is also of value in a number of subfields in sociology. The questions raised invite readings across disciplines.

Pre-service and in-service teachers will encounter valuable lessons that intervene in the common assumption that nothing can be done within the restrictive environment of standardization. Pre-service and in-service guidance counselors and administrators, who are less noticeable in the text, would also benefit from reading the text. Although one is hard pressed to release teachers from responsibility, since their work bears the most impact on the lives of youth, it is often school counselors who have more time and flexibility to enact innovative projects and programs centering on community collaboration in the current educational environment. Unfortunately, most are too conditioned to the pursuit of goals that are housed within the four walls of school and engaged in dominant readings of families as dysfunctional and the coding of certain youth (particularly youth of color and living in poverty) as beyond hope. Community-based educators will be inspired and moved to perhaps forge connections beyond the local in the hope of creating a local, national, and global network of powerful political projects centered on addressing the needs of youths of color. The text inspires the formation of creative networks between school based educators and community based educators, and further blurs the boundaries of what should qualify as education. In doing so, Watson provides us with a very

valuable invitation to establish dialogues across spheres.

Most importantly, the text should also be read by youth in secondary education, since one of the most powerful ways to reconnect youth with education is to open up spaces for reflection and dialogue on the very institution they inhabit for seven to eight hours daily. No positive political project can unfold without the voice(s) of youth (particularly those who bear the most social cost) at the center and all of our bodies on the line.

Vajra Watson is defiant and victorious not only due to the splendid achievement in this particular text, but through her very success at creating innovative organizational forms that seeks to put youths and teachers at the center of reform and student-centered pedagogies at the heart of the project. Watson's work in education and communities for well over two decades is testament that her research in *Learning to Liberate. Community-Based Solutions to the Crisis in Urban Education* is not only an academic exercise. She is operating out of a scholarly-activist culture that is sobering.

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