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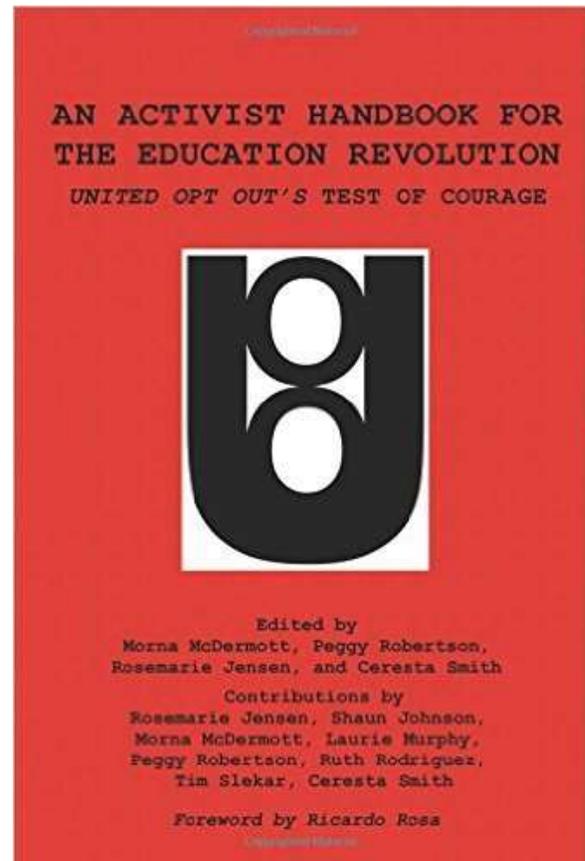
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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has,” attributed to Margaret Mead (Institute for Intercultural Studies, 2009).

An Activist's Handbook for the Education Revolution is a challenging, at times frustrating, and ultimately meaningful contribution toward making activism a part of educators' practice —a conclusion that I arrived at only through multiple engagements with the text. It is a flawed, honest, human, and therefore realistic reflection of the challenges, aggravation, and real accomplishments that can result from parents, educators, and other allies organizing to speak up and out about the educational “malpractice” that testing has become (Strauss, 2014). Upon reflection I realized that my first impressions (somewhat disappointed) were colored more by my experiences as an early career scholar new to teaching social foundations classes than the book's limitations themselves.



One of the key messages that I have heard from students is some variation of, “I now understand how deeply structured inequality is in schooling and society, but what can I do? I feel hopeless.” Initially my reaction to their hopelessness was to try to persuade them about resisting the “methods fetish” and of finding hope in a “humanizing pedagogy” (Bartolome, 1994). However, many of my colleagues-in-learning were unconvinced, countering that including readings in our class, like Julie Underwood’s (2013) “Do you have the right to be an advocate?” and Michael Fullan’s (1993) “Why Teachers Must Become Change Agents” was a set-up because the authors spoke in generalities and did not provide clear guidance on what they should do and how to go about doing it.

Instead it was I who was persuaded, over the past several years becoming subtly interpolated into the methods fetish discourse. I have been searching for activist recipes and admit, with some embarrassment, that I did not see this text as *handbook enough*. I could hear certain students’ voices and arguments as I read Morna McDermott’s “Predators, Colonizers, and Corporate-Model Reform” (Chapter 1), and found myself thinking, *This is going to piss “them” off - some because they [I] already know this stuff and others because of the strident tone*. I was startled by my visceral reactions to this chapter and came to realize that I was projecting my preoccupations on students. It dawned on me that “*We*” *should be more pissed off*. *That’s the point of this book*. I was pre-empting students’ experiences with these complex issues, feelings, perspectives, conflicts with each other, and in doing so was failing to model Bartolome’s humanizing pedagogy. This was a turning point in my capacity to see this collection’s place within my teaching.

The collection itself is very personal and its 10 chapters, written by the editors and four other contributors, are organized developmentally, tracing United Opt Out’s (UOO) origins (via listserv, email, and Skype) following the 2011 Save Our Schools march in Washington, D.C. (Chapter 2, Who We Are);

to the complexities of movement building within the US’s pervasive racism (Chapter 6, Every Narrative Has Its Lens); to considering next steps in shifting the narratives surrounding the Opt Out Movement as only about testing and not offering positive alternatives to “failing” American schools (Chapter 9, Where Do We Go From Here?). Because this is a collection of personal accounts that provide a movement’s narrative, the chapters have different voices, perspectives, styles, and sometimes feel *insiderish* – one including email conversations and another containing a nearly four-page paragraph consisting of decontextualized responses to the question, What does it mean to “opt out?” (pp. 49-53). I mention these examples because they could become distractions for some readers, to the detriment of the practice wisdom the contributors do provide.

My first impression that this collection was not going to be practical enough was quite incorrect. In addition to important stories of struggle and possibility, each of the authors uses their experiences with UOO to show what their activism looks like and most of the chapters end with a section “the Activist Workbook” which provides advice about steps to take. For example, Chapter 8: Strategizing 101: What It Involves and Why It Is Important ends by summing up important points for any collective action: shared understanding of purpose, clarifying organizational structure, defining objectives, identifying allies and audiences, establishing and protecting credibility, etc. These points are enriched by the stories in which they are embedded, especially those that are most human.

In her chapter with Morna McDermott, Ceresta Smith demonstrates the courage identified in the book’s subtitle, not only through her activism but by bravely discussing, “. . . a rather scathing and somewhat embarrassing speech” made during a 2013 protest at the US Department of Education where she criticized President Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Corey Booker, Marco

Rubio and other prominent people of color for promoting corporate-model education reforms (pp. 116-123). Her speech addressed cheating scandals, comparing the indictment of the former Atlanta Public Schools superintendent, who is African American, and 34 of her colleagues with a similar scandal in the District of Columbia Public Schools when Michelle Rhee was chancellor (she escaped criminal charges). In trying to make a point about endemic racism and unequal treatment of African Americans in the US legal system she called Rhee an “Asian bitch”, which resulted in condemnations and accusations of racism that overshadowed her important points.

For several reasons I found this to be the most powerful discussion in the book. First, it is an act of rare honesty. It would be understandable if she had apologized and put this event behind her. Instead, Smith uses this painful experience to illustrate that this work is messy and requires both reflection and collegial support. To do this, she locates this offense within examples of the critiques that were pointed at her in press accounts, by Diane

Ravitch in her blog, and in the blog’s comments section. Second, as the only woman of color among the original six UOO administrators – Ruth Rodriguez (Chapter 7, A Case Study in Reform Failure: An Inconvenient Truth) joined later – her discussion introduces an important anti-racist feminist thread into a collection that has a colorblind quality to it.

In the end, this collection is true to the broad purpose laid out in its introduction. Peggy Robertson writes, “We share our story for a reason. Stories create action. The UOO story may be a catalyst for other small pockets of resistance out there who are right now asking, *Is it possible? Can our small group do this? Can we make a difference?* Yes. You can.” (p. xviii). If a critical text’s success is indicated in terms of the reflections and actions that it provokes, then I would call *An Activist Handbook for the Education Revolution* a success. As a result of wrestling with this text, and myself, I will be using it in my next Foundations of American Schooling class.

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About the Reviewer

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