



Shalaby, C. (2017). *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*. New York: The New Press.

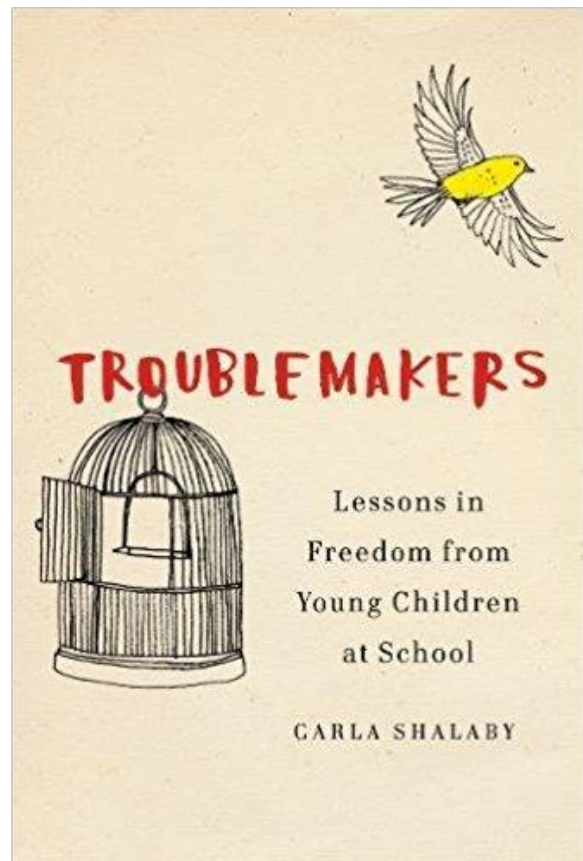
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Carla Shalaby (2017) weaves bird imageries throughout *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* to communicate the vulnerable but agentic status of four U.S. elementary school students. The front cover illustration of a bright bird flying away from a cage evokes one of the central themes of the book: a quest for liberation. It is as if Maya Angelou's (1983) "Caged Bird" somehow used its song of freedom as a means to escape its confinement. If the children depicted in the book are captured beings, then the institution of traditional schooling is the cage from which they are fleeing.

Troublemakers brings readers into the world of four remarkable humans. Zora and Lucas are students in a mixed-grade class at Forest School located in a predominately white, affluent neighborhood. Sean and Marcus attend the multicultural, socioeconomically integrated Crossroad School situated in an urban community. These students have an important commonality: their first and second-grade teachers characterized



them as “troublemakers”. Their respective principals, on the other hand, identified the teachers as competent instructors. Early in *Troublemakers*, author Shalaby positions herself as an educator and “human being,” yet reveals herself as a meticulous and ethical researcher who depicts how these four students experience school, as evidenced by observations in their classrooms and homes, as well as interviews with the children, their teachers, and parents.

Shalaby uses accessible language to convey to a broad audience an extensive inquiry process called *portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Any adult who interacts with youth on a consistent basis—a parent of school-aged children, pre-service teacher, in-service teacher, school administrator, or education researcher—will stand to benefit from the lessons presented in *Troublemakers*. One important lesson Shalaby learns from immersing herself in the lives of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus is the importance of humility. Shalaby’s analysis draws from hundreds of field hours with children who helped to strip away any pretention attached to degrees from elite institutions. Shalaby earnestly makes it clear that all children, especially those who are the most troubling or troubled, have the potential to teach adults what it means to be free.

Throughout the book, Shalaby makes a point to highlight the intersecting sociocultural identities of the students, teachers, and parents who participated in her study. Although the three teachers fit the most common demographic descriptor of teachers in the U.S. (i.e., white women), Shalaby describes their professional and personal experiences to present a more nuanced and accurate representation of who they are. For example, all three teachers traveled internationally and upheld progressive attitudes about education. Despite her attention to their diverse experiences, it becomes clear that the teachers have more in common with one another than they do with the students that they have

identified as troublemakers and the families featured in the text.

Shalaby draws attention to how the students’ multiple and interlocking markers of difference (e.g., race, class, gender, dis/ability status) influence their school experiences. Marcus was a Black boy whose mother was a city bus driver and father was in prison. The youngest of three, his mother described him as a caring and protective little brother. Every two weeks, Marcus and his mother visited his father; his mother sought to include his father when making decisions about Marcus’s education. The first of several humorous interactions between Shalaby and Marcus underscores how non-white children are attuned to the lack of teacher diversity in their schools. Marcus assumed Shalaby is drinking coffee “because I know white girls like to drink coffee” (p. 115). He then proceeded to ask, “why they like coffee so much?” To his surprise, he eventually discovered that Shalaby differed from the white women that he was accustomed to seeing at school: she was the daughter of Egyptian parents. By the end of her time with Marcus, Shalaby expressed concern about the demographic mismatch between Marcus and the women in authority at Crossroad School. She also found that his identification as a defiant and angry child reinforced negative stereotypes about Black men and that his teacher’s focus on individualism conflicted with Marcus’s commitment to community.

Like Marcus, one of the teachers vocalized an acute awareness of the racial differences between herself and a student. Zora, the only girl featured in *Troublemakers*, shared the colorful flair and outgoing disposition of her Puerto Rican mother and African American father. While her family encouraged Zora to stand out and speak Spanish at home, Shalaby noted she was “different, caught in the intersections of identity” in a school community with the “persistent demand for sameness” (p. 39). Ms. Beverly, her teacher, reflected on Zora’s difference: “...this is my one African

American child who has heard her name fifteen times—and what judgments are the kids around her making?” (p. 26). Ms. Beverly may have integrated souvenirs from a trip to India into her lessons or facilitated a class discussion about the role corn played in an indigenous community, but the teacher’s erasure of Zora’s Puerto Rican heritage is disconcerting, especially considering Zora was Ms. Beverly’s student for two consecutive years. Ms. Beverly fixed her gaze on Zora’s Black identity and openly struggled with the potential correlation between her constant admonishment and Zora’s racialized existence.

Interconnected with race, class, and other markers of identity, Shalaby captured how family structure influences home-school collaborations. Sean was the only child of the four featured students whose father was completely absent during Shalaby’s investigation. He was a redheaded boy of Irish descent who was close to his aunt, *tío* (i.e., uncle in Spanish), and cousins. His mother, a working woman, lamented that because of her white, middle-class background, school officials underestimated the support she required as a single mother. Furthermore, although the racial identity of Lucas was never explicitly stated in the book, Shalaby makes it clear that his mother espoused values that aligned with the school culture—this was a unique feature of Lucas’s narrative. During home visits, Shalaby learned about his extensive medical history. Although his father’s job took up a substantial amount of time away from the family, Lucas’s mother frequently visited the school and developed amicable relationships with the staff. She demonstrated great confidence in Forest School and often sought out additional interventions on his behalf. Unlike Lucas’s mother, all other parents expressed ideals and expectations that directly conflicted with the teachers’ perception of school culture.

Although the primary focus of *Troublemakers* is on the relationships between the four children and their respective parents and teachers, Shalaby also touches on peer-to-

peer interactions. The four children often took risks to entertain their classmates but were also taught that it was appropriate to police other children’s behaviors. Her account notes Ms. Beverly knew the children were making assessments of their own about Zora. Shalaby, however, skillfully demonstrated how the classmates made judgments informed by both the trouble-making children’s activities and by the cues that the teachers provided about how to respond to difference. “Exclusion does not build community—it destroys it” (p. 162). Ultimately, the teachers’ practice of calling out and marginalizing disobedient students was as equally disruptive as the students’ misbehavior.

Shalaby’s portraits clearly center the four children, yet she manages to do so without maligning the adults in their lives. She is as empathetic as she is accurate in her representations of the dynamics between the children and adults she observed. She does not blame teachers nor romanticizes the children’s troubling behaviors, but instead, reveals how the parents and teachers who express love and fondness for these four children often turned to controlling interventions that reinforced conformity. Shalaby interrogates the proverbial chicken-egg dynamic between a teacher-centered school culture and the misbehavior and academic challenges the students exhibited; she subverts, however, the notion that it is necessary to decide which of the two came first and instead prioritizes the pursuit of freedom.

With this focus on freedom, Shalaby’s reference to Angelou’s caged bird is an especially powerful allusion in *Troublemakers*. In the poem, as if it was not enough to imprison the creature in the cage, someone also clipped the bird’s wings and tied down its feet. Similarly, beyond the stifling demands of traditional schooling, school officials encouraged parents to seek clinical interventions to further control the students’ behaviors. When presented with the option of medicating their children, the families tearfully grappled with the decision of whether or not to subdue their distractibility with prescribed

drugs. It is both alarming and telling that all four children were eventually medicated to address their behaviors. Irrespective of their parenting philosophy, the families eventually conceded to the idea that their children must adapt to the teacher-centered school culture.

The bird imagery within the book extends beyond the restricted experience of schooling. Shalaby credits learning about the function of the miner's canary as a critical moment in her own praxis. The expression originates from the former practice of taking caged canaries into coal mines. The small birds are sensitive to methane gas and if a bird died during an excursion, the miners were alerted to the presence of dangerous fumes. Shalaby contends that non-conforming children play a unique role in exposing the enacted purpose of schooling within a democratic society. Like canaries in a coal mine who signal when the air is toxic, some children are more sensitive to threats to freedom than others. If youths, as she argues, are exceptionally capable of teaching humans about freedom, trouble-making children in particular can reveal what societal factors impede it. The four children featured in her book are just as much trouble-detectors as they are troublemakers.

As Shalaby notes, "a 'problem child' in one place, may go unnoticed in another" (p. xxxvii). Shalaby contextualizes the experiences of these 6- and 7-year-old children by providing statistics about the disproportionate disciplinary practices in P-12 settings (e.g., suspension and expulsion rates) and makes connections to the overrepresentation of Black and Brown bodies in U.S. prisons. Other education researchers have similarly used the miner's canary comparison to reveal the role special education plays in isolating and marginalizing minoritized children:

Following this metaphor, the canary warns us about potential unequal distributions of access to opportunities and participation in society that might result from inadequate use of educational practices. This problem does not involve only the canary (i.e.,

over-representation of certain groups) but everyone in the coal mine (i.e., the educational system). Thus, the problem cannot be examined by focusing solely on the canary but on a situated relationship between the canary and the coal mine, [that is], the educational system and its attendant policies and practices that afford and constrain opportunities. (Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010, p. 29)

Special education researchers and policymakers have long wrestled with overrepresentation of boys and Black children in "high-incidence" disabilities. In addition to the connections she makes between harsh disciplinary school practices and the school-to-prison pipeline, it is just as necessary to understand Shalaby's book in tandem with the discourse about special education. Shalaby's book may not be *about* special education, but it is noteworthy that the parents of all children were familiar with the special education referral process.

This study is unique in both its research methodology and its stylistic presentation. Beyond the hardships that metaphors about caged birds and miner's canaries convey, *Troublemakers* is about celebrating the joy that humans engender despite efforts to control and manage their behaviors. Shalaby included the comical drawings of Mo Willems (2013), an award-winning children's book author whose series about a persistent and defiant pigeon delighted Lucas. The choice to use quirky illustrations in her book demonstrates why Shalaby was especially equipped for this inquiry. She respected the four children enough to care about their interests and gave as much credence to their insights as she did the ideas of adult experts. Shalaby was not only attuned to the activities often punished in the traditional classroom setting (e.g., playing, independent exploration, drawing) but also validated the children's delight in following

their own interests, despite the potential consequences.

Throughout the book, Shalaby highlights the creative ways children expose and disrupt the taken-for-granted arbitrariness of some classroom expectations. What others describe as impulsivity, Shalaby redefines as fearlessness. There are several moments where she shared her amusement as she depicted the unpredictability of these children. They refused to be pigeonholed, which often confounded the adults in their lives. For example, Shalaby captured the different strategies Sean employed to convince his mother to extend playtime. Another researcher may interpret Sean's behaviors as problematic and manipulative. Shalaby—while acknowledging how exhausting it is to work with children who are consistently unpredictable—was impressed by the inventive techniques he used to assert his desires and maintain his dignity. She challenges educators to move away from thinking about student success as a standardized way of being and suggests “a loving way” (p. 175) that reimagines the classroom as a dynamic space where students and teachers decide together how to assert the freedom and humanity of all.

At the end of the book is a list of resources and suggested readings. On a personal note, I credit one of the included books, Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, for influencing my decision to pursue education as a profession. As a former special education teacher at an elementary school, I once struggled to align my philosophical affinity toward Freire with the challenges I faced teaching young children with disabilities. In reflecting about my practice, I often rationalized the discrepancy I saw between my espoused ideology and my day-to-day classroom interactions. Freire's conceptualizations about education for liberation were inspired by adult literacy campaigns in rural Brazil; he did not have to deal with the high-stakes accountability

pressures that I did. Shalaby, however, clarifies what Freire, U.S. educators, and all students have in common: we are all human beings, and as such, we all have the capacity to teach, learn, and co-construct knowledge and ways of knowing.

Although very young children and students with cognitive and language disabilities may find it difficult to engage in the types of dialogues described in Freire's books, Shalaby reminds educators that behaviors are also a form of communication; children communicate through their behavior, whether voluntary, involuntary, intentional, or unintentional. Just as Freire insisted that pedagogy must be *of* the oppressed, Shalaby argues that lessons in freedom are best learned *from* children. In *Troublemakers*, she presents the various ways four students troubled traditional schooling and asserted their quest for freedom. She sees all children as capable teachers and encourages adults to take heed of the signals that indicate threats to freedom.

Troublemakers reveals a tragic irony of the U.S. education system. “These young people demand their freedom even as they are simultaneously the most stringently controlled, surveilled, confined and policed in our schools” (Shalaby, 2017, p. xx). The future leaders of innovation and divergent thinking will not come from the most compliant students, but from those who are encouraged to take risks. Shalaby intentionally chose to observe classrooms within *progressive* schools, teachers who were *lauded* by fellow educators, and children whose parents were actively *engaged* in their children's schooling. Even under these ideal conditions, she finds that schools are structured to suppress the very children who are most apt to teach humanity about the value of non-conformity. Hopefully, readers will find the lessons in freedom taught by Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus instructive—and Shalaby's reframing of troublemaking informative—when responding to student differences.

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