



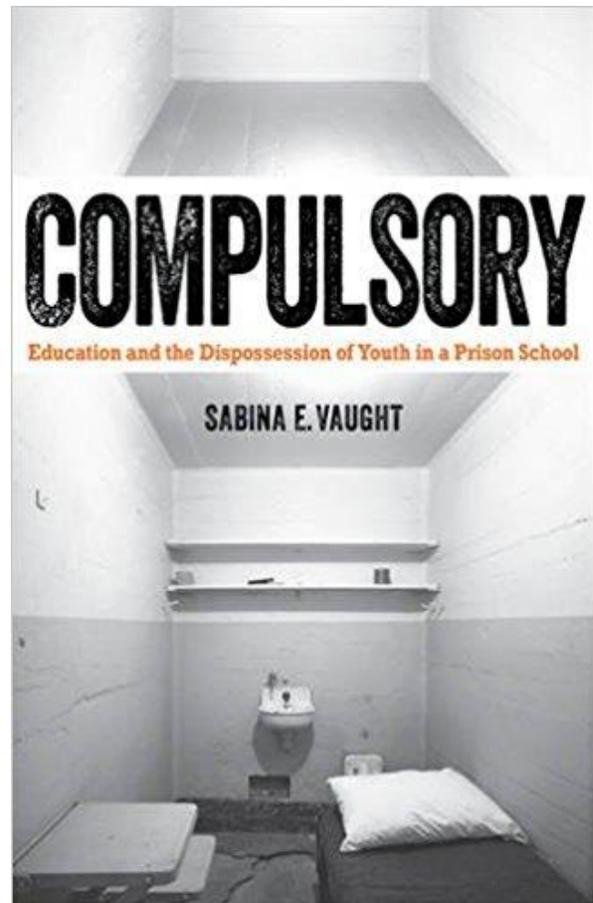
Vaught, S. E. (2017) *Compulsory: Education and the dispossession of youth in a prison school*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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Educators and scholars who believe in the liberatory aim of education may find it difficult to read Sabina Vaught's book, *Compulsory: Education and the Dispossession of Youth in a Prison School*; however, it is possible that they will emerge with a new sense of hope and purpose within their own work as a result of this critical ethnography. Embarking on interviews with young inmates, families, security personnel, and prison administration, Vaught unearths the raw impact that prison systems have on our youth and their families and the ways in which these systems continually work together to keep young men and women on the Inside¹. In one interview, it is unveiled that penal systems justify their incarceration measures of allowing police to conduct neighborhood sweeps to arrest youth from families with criminal backgrounds as a "preventative" measure during summer and school breaks. These children are held in



¹ Here, capitalization of specific words are in line with the Vaught's intention to delineate literal and

symbolic spaces within the prison and school systems.

juvenile detention centers during their school vacations, not knowing that it was their school that gave the police their home address to conduct the neighborhood sweep in the first place. *Compulsory* is fraught with mind-bending facts and narratives such as this, which work to call its readers into action to change the systems of oppression that, as educators and scholars, they may have unknowingly perpetuated.

Compulsory focuses on Lincoln Treatment Center, the highest security youth prison for males in its state, and Lincoln School, its educational system Inside. Here, readers become privy to the lives and struggles of young men of color such as Amando, an 8-year-old Black Dominican boy who was playing with a small fire on the sidewalk outside of his home. This fire and his family's negative reputation with the police led to his incarceration for an indeterminable amount of time. On the opposite end of the spectrum is Chief, a 21-year-old African American inmate, who upon hearing that "juvie" has an 8-year-old locked up, somberly reminds readers why the prison system needs to change: "You can't take kids from they people, from they home... That does things to a kid can't be undone" (p. 114).

Throughout these interviews, themes emerge that will both resonate with and haunt the reader. These themes unapologetically evoke the pain and loss of thousands of children incarcerated across this country. Vaught combines complex frameworks such as allochronism, or the suggestion that prison exists "in a time apart from societal time" (p. 8), with the physical and symbolic mapping of the Lincoln Treatment Center. The Lincoln

school is situated in the very center of the prison, which means that all prisoners, workers, and visitors must enter and exit the treatment center through its school. Symbolically, this purposeful structure of having all individuals enter prison through the school is a stark reminder of the role schools play in filling the prison system with the bodies of young Black and Brown men. She combines these frameworks with critical race theory² and whiteness³ to illustrate how a compulsory educational system in America has been working in tandem with the policing and prison systems to keep children of color incarcerated and under surveillance now for over a century.

Vaught's writing is both poetic and intentional, with symbolic meaning and emphasis sweeping across each page through metaphors and punctuation that delineate the differences between being on the Inside or the Outside and the implications that each carry. She consistently finds ways to draw connections between her metaphors of paperclips, kinship, keys, and painting to remind her readers of how carceral systems use simple objects and relationships to force their oppressions on children of color growing up in poor and neglected communities. Early into her first chapter, Vaught calls the reader's attention to the adult prisoners (all men of color) who have been called upon to paint the cells of the boys while they were in their classrooms. All other sites at the treatment center were painted professionally; however, in the boys' living quarters, adult inmates were forced to paint their walls—smearing gobs of paint with plastic brushes because they could not be trusted with proper tools. Vaught draws a connection of kinship between these

² According to Vaught (2017), critical race theory "suggests that challenges to racial domination are ongoing and unsettled, as the contestations require conversing in one of the ultimate languages of power: the law" (p. 46).

³ Vaught states, "White supremacy is the systemic and institutional superordination of White

material, ideological, legal, and political power that pervades and organizes the private, public, and state spheres of the nation, producing a fluid core of severe, systematic racial hierarchies that include gender, sexuality, and class, among others" (p. 33).

adult prisoners and youth, because on the Outside, parent(s) generally paint a child's room, but in the prison system, unrelated professionals are passed over for free labor. The state becomes the possessor or guardian, while the adult inmates become symbolic kin, reflecting the prison administration's expectations for their young inmates.

Another poignant piece within the book recounts a mother's prohibition from caring for her son, evoking the theme of contraband as a symbol for freedom at Lincoln. On numerous occasions, Vaught was told that visitors cannot bring anything into the center, particularly paperclips because they can be used to pick handcuffs; however, families can bring in personal items for their children on visiting days. During one visit, Vaught stands behind a mother who brought in new clothes for her son, because she was denied the opportunity to give him his clothes on the previous Saturday, visiting day. She was initially told to bring the clothes back during the week, so she took the day off from work, got a ride, and came to Lincoln to hand over the new, fully-sealed clothes to the guards. Instead, she was refused entry to visit her son and was told that those items would not be delivered to him. She was instructed to bring them back again on visiting day. Torn between trying to do right by her son and not giving into tears in front of the guard, the mother asks them, "Tell Ace I love him" (p. 144), before fleeing out the door, Ace's brand new clothes left behind on the counter. Lincoln's reasoning, contraband was exchanged during family visits, does not explain why the mother was denied the opportunity to give her son clothes on one Saturday and later instructed to bring the clothes on a different Saturday. Adding another dimension through metaphor, Vaught reflects on the notion that paperclips symbolize a potential freedom from chains and a simultaneous danger to the system that holds the key. Yet on a visit to the administrator's office, she finds a paperclip carelessly left on the floor near the visitor's

chair, a reminder that those in power can do as they will, and a mother is forbidden to bring her son new socks because the system holds the power to be flippant with its rules and regulations.

Vaught writes this book to urge educators and scholars invested in the fields of education, social justice, criminal justice, and the school-to-prison pipeline to act. Reading this book is the first step, but change will not happen without an army of resisters to fight. Using arguments of whiteness (Smith, 2006) and critical race theories (Milner IV, 2008; Tate IV, 1997), she argues a strong case that the compulsory system of education supports the carceral system and capitalism to produce more prisoners and free laborers for the state. Her argument recognizes and emphasizes the fact that most of these prisoners are Black and Brown young men from impoverished urban cities. Readers who are already activists in education and social justice will value Vaught's unapologetic perspective of a flawed educational system that brings to light important features of how education and the penal system have historically worked together to segregate people of color, and how it continues to perpetuate this cycle of oppression today. Readers outside of education and law will appreciate the way that Vaught lifts the veil on a darkened corner of society that impacts American culture, consumerism, and education—encouraging them to reflect on their own schooling and personal narratives of their youth.

But it is young Eugene's closing words that remind all readers of the importance of their future actions to pursue social justice and change in their communities, "When you write this, I want them kids to know if they could avoid all this, avoid it. It will ruin your life" (p. 309). In a country that justifies youth imprisonment as a preventative measure for children of color in neglected neighborhoods, how do we keep our promise to Eugene knowing that the state can incarcerate youth

that have never committed a crime? In centering the voices of these young men, Vaught leaves her readers with one question:

now that you know, what will you do to change the system?

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About the Reviewer

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