

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas

September 17, 2006

ISSN 1094-5296

hooks, bell. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. Routledge.

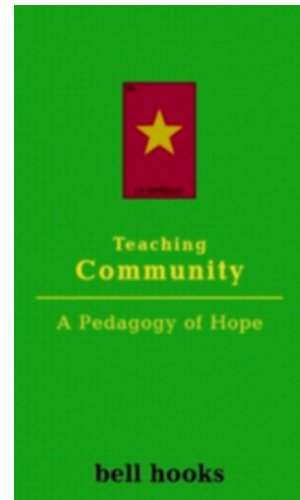
217 pp.

ISBN 0-415-96817-8

**Reviewed by Brooke Johnson
University of Colorado at Denver
USA**

bell hooks, in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, includes a series of essays to argue convincingly for education that reflects what she calls the “practice of freedom” and a “pedagogy of hope.” hooks believes that such practice of education is key for social justice as it recognizes, encourages, and values alternative ways of knowing. This practice of education is imperative, she insists, because schools in this country typically represent institutions of domination that “colonize minds” in relation to the dominant power structure. hooks refers to this power structure as the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Though it is a dense and perhaps intimidating phrase, hooks uses it to illustrate various aspects of a complex hegemonic power structure in our society. Education, she says, often benefits those who are from privileged groups while it often harms those who are not. I agree with hooks that acknowledging that different hegemonic power structures affect the educational experiences of students is important for two reasons: first, to better understand why some students succeed and others fail, and second, to identify leverage points for change. Creating opportunities for all students to learn and succeed is what hooks refers to as the practice of freedom. In her writing, hooks explores ways to help empower all learners to achieve, by insurrecting subjugated knowledge, interrogating domination, and unlearning racism.

In discussing the principal problems of how educational opportunities are influenced, hooks focuses on issues around race and class. Though she does not commit to any one theoretical framework, hooks argues- largely from the perspectives of critical theory, feminism and Marxism- that race and class are socially and politically constructed systems of value and power that are important markers of privilege in our



schools. As such, they significantly affect students' educational experiences. hooks is adamant that race and class not only matter but that we must all be willing to talk about them in order to enhance education for all. Those outside of this system of privilege (e.g., those not benefiting from white-supremacy), specifically in educational and school settings, find their experience, voice, and knowledge to be devalued and subjugated to that of the privileged group. Resulting negative outcomes include feelings of shame, disengagement, and self-destructive behavior.

hooks is interested, however, not just in identifying what is wrong in schools, but also in helping to create action steps to improve schools and learning outcomes. She offers hope that people and institutions can change, and argues for efforts aimed at insurrecting structures, policies, or practices that dominate and harm many students. Her work is aimed at increasing social justice for all.

hooks outlines many action steps that can be taken to proactively challenge the white-supremacist, hegemonic power structure. These steps are part of a larger picture of building trust, love, and what hooks calls beloved community. Steps towards building community include: (a) Aligning behaviors with beliefs and values, including making friends with people of color; (b) seeing and acknowledging everyone in a community and not just one's class peers; (c) using inclusive language; and, (d) speaking aloud daily affirmations and commitments related to engaging in this work. hooks suggests actions such as practicing and encouraging critical thinking by sharing personal stories and reflections with others, taking steps to recognize and value commonalities as well as differences among people, building trust by cultivating courage and civility, and in finding unity in diversity. The key, she believes, to building community that can support this type of social justice education is love- a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust. Love, in her assessment, creates the necessary conditions for optimal learning and democratic education for all.

There are some for whom hooks's ideas and methods may not resonate, however. hooks does not use traditional research methodology or include citations to support her claims. Rather, her authority lies principally in her narratives about personal experience—her own and those that others have shared with her. hooks is candid about what she has done well and what she hopes to improve upon, and constructs her own work in the way she advocates others should. While hooks communicates integrity in this way, demonstrating alignment between her espoused values, beliefs, and actions, some readers may desire increased documentation to support her description. One challenge of hooks's approach is that readers must take her word as truth without having the benefit of traceable references or sources.

Instead of using traditional citations, hooks connects with her readers with narrative. This tactic, though nontraditional, is supported by

theories of cognition which posit that individuals can make sense of information by connecting it to previous schemas, or conceptual structures, that they have developed (Piaget, 1985). Therefore, by using narrative, hooks attempts to connect with her readers in a personal way. A critic of this approach could say that this technique may not reach everyone, or establish credibility with all her readers. For example, if an individual from a dominant group has not experienced the domination or subjugation of knowledge that hooks writes about, then hooks's ideas may be discounted or not understood. Despite this possibility, hooks argues that narrative is an effective way to build bridges with people from both similar and distinct perspectives.

In fact, hooks has achieved many measures of success and credibility in her career. She has studied and worked at many prestigious institutions of higher education across the country and is widely published and cited. The significance of hooks's work is great. She argues that this pedagogy of hope and social justice will help everyone to "decolonize their minds," to challenge what they know, why they know it, and what the value of that knowledge is. This in turn can lead to unlearning racism, realizing validation of personal knowledge, developing tools of inquiry, critical thinking, and self-empowerment. This is work for everyone, and is particularly important for privileged white individuals who, she says, are more likely to "continue the dance of denial" that racism is alive and well (p. 30).

Despite the action-steps that hooks suggests to fight the hegemonic power structure and build community, there are inherent difficulties in applying these ideas to real situations. This is a critique more about the difficulties of creating praxis around her ideas rather than a critique of her ideas themselves. hooks does acknowledge that discussions about race are difficult to have, and that many people (especially whites) are weary of having such conversations in groups. I would add to this that it is difficult to find a person who can mediate such discussions with the necessary empathy, balance, and perceived authority to make them valuable learning experiences. Moreover, there is little time or public space—at a school or on a larger scale—to be able to realize meaningful conversations about who has privilege and advantage, what the norms, values, and assumptions are that are embedded in our design and implementation of schooling, and whose knowledge and experience is truly valued.

One place where discussions of race may be attempted is in school or faculty professional development meetings; this often happens around "reducing the achievement gap"—a discussion in which race is key. However, the ways in which these discussions are often constructed prove to be of little consequence or use—especially if the intent is to work on ways to help marginalized, disadvantaged students achieve greater success. Furthermore, outside of schools, particularly in the political realm, those in public positions have little incentive to engage in such

difficult discussions- because of a perceived need to build political capital (and not wanting to alienate those benefiting from white supremacy) and because of a fear of being ridiculed or attacked for how they engage in the conversations.

Despite the difficulties of engaging in this work, I believe, as hooks does, that we must soldier on. hooks dreams of large-scale improvement but works within her immediate sphere of influence to effect change. I agree with this approach; individual students are within a teacher's immediate sphere of influence and are the ones who can most effectively reflect on how they experience schooling and education. A direct and timely application of hooks's ideas would be to create more space and time in order to have these conversations- particularly with students. We could create structures and opportunities to encourage student voice within schools and classrooms. Though students are those for whom education policy and practice ostensibly exist, they are the ones who are least often consulted about decisions concerning schooling and education (Cook-Sather, 2002; Lee, 1999).

I believe that we often discount or disregard student voice, and thus the students themselves become subjugated in the name of liberation. We must address this by creating educational opportunities that empowers students to construct learning in a way that is relevant to them. Cognitive psychology and sociocultural constructivist learning theory support this idea. Work out of both fields argues that knowledge construction is deeply personal, and that it builds on previous experience as well as the learner's particular interests and needs. This approach to learning supports the empowerment of student voice, and the resulting learning happens on two levels: meaningful student learning, and enhanced understanding by adults about how young people experience schooling and education (Cook-Sather, 2002; Fine, 1991; Lee, 1999).

Education as the practice of freedom, writes hooks, must include and encourage "counter narratives", and "multiple ways of knowing" in order to fight the dominating white-supremacist hegemonic power culture associated with race and class; student voice must be included in the chorus. I find the idea of narrative particularly powerful, and agree with hooks that when people personalize stories or sentiments those with whom they are speaking are less likely to feel defensive and closed to discussing difficult, or possibly polarizing, issues. Everyone comes at life with their own experiences. Whether or not we think others are "right", we must create spaces for people to share their own personal narrative without feeling attacked or threatened. It takes great skill in navigating difficult discussion such as issues around race and class. We must be committed to creating safe environments to have honest, open discussions, and to be willing to accept that a feeling of vulnerability may be born from such dialogue.

If we accept the premise that race is integral to one's experience, particularly in a white-supremacist system, then we must consider its effect on all aspects of education. I relate to the author's idea that no one is born a racist, and that unlearning racism affirms the basic goodness and humanity in people. hooks argues convincingly that forms of dominance—largely determined by class and race—negatively affect many students in our schools. She not only makes the case for why we in schools and communities are not realizing positive, democratic education for all, but she also argues that we can all change ourselves and educational outcomes. hooks's writing is impressive and applicable to my own work, as well as to local and national work around education reform.

References

- Cook-Sather, A. (2002). Authorizing students' perspectives: Toward trust, dialogue, and change in education. *Educational Researcher*, 4(31), 3-14.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fine, M. (2003). Silencing and nurturing voice in an improbable context: Urban adolescents in public school. In Fine, M. & Weis, L. (Eds.), *Silenced voices and extraordinary conversations: Re-imagining schools*. (pp. 13-37). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lee, C. (2006). *Denver Public Schools, Resegregation, Latino style*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.
- Lee, P. W. (1999). In their own voices: An ethnographic study of low-achieving students within the context of school reform. *Urban Education*, 2(34), 214-244.
- Piaget, J. (1985). *Equilibration of cognitive structures*. University of Chicago Press.

About the Book Author

bell hooks (*nom de plume* for Gloria Jean Watkins) earned degrees in English literature from Stanford University (B.A. 1973) and University of Wisconsin-Madison (M.A. 1976), before earning her Ph.D. at UC Santa Cruz. Her professional teaching career has included UC Santa Cruz, Yale University, Oberlin College, The City College of New York, and Distinguished Professor in Residence at Berea College. While at Yale in the 1980s, she led a support group of Black women called "Sisters of the Yam." bell's work with students and her approach to education has played a



significant role in her incredible legacy. Her written works include some 40 books, scholarly and popular articles, essays, poetry, and five children's books. Her work has been published in more than a dozen languages.

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas



Education Review / Reseñas Educativas / Resenhas Educativas is edited by Gene V Glass (English), and Gustavo E. Fischman (Spanish/Portuguese), and supported by the Mary Lou Fulton College of

Education, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, if the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>. *Education Review* is **free-to-read and free-to-publish**.

