

Introduction

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Beyond Silenced Voices: Class, Race, and Gender in U.S. Schools (revised edition) rests on the belief that educators must be at the center of informing educational policy as we are the ones who are both able to listen to youth and design classrooms. Across the chapters of this volume, we raise tough questions that simultaneously haunt and invigorate preservice educators and those already in schools. We ask our readers to engage with us through chapters that explore the structuring of exclusions, listening hard to youth, and educating for change. Written from the perspective of researchers, policy analysts, teachers, and youth workers, these chapters reveal a shared belief in education that “could be” and a shared worry about schools that currently reproduce class, race, and gender relations and privilege.

The chapters in this volume commit to the values of participation and change—a belief in the power of educators to think broadly and work intimately, and a belief in the power of youth to wrestle with questions of intellect, power, voice, dissent, and hope in schools and community. Section 1, “Structuring Exclusions” takes a close look at a series of significant late-twentieth-early twenty-first-century policies and practices that have significantly narrowed poor and working-class students’ access to rigorous and democratically based educational opportunity. Section 2, “Listening Hard” turns our attention to the microdetails of voice, desire, anger, dreams, and struggles that characterize students living at the margins of race, class, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, in Section 3 “Educating for Change,” we hear from researchers and educators who have dared to create spaces in schools and communities that wrestle with fundamental inequalities.

STRUCTURING EXCLUSIONS

“Structuring Exclusions: Educational Policies, Politics, and Practices” focuses on a set of federal, state, and local policies, as well as social and discursive practices, that systematically exclude students of color, those from poverty, and those from the working class from rigorous, engaging, challenging, and integrated educational opportunities. In this section we examine the “dismantling of desegregation” (Gary Orfield and Chungmei Lee), the proliferation of high-stakes testing (Walter Haney, Lisa Abrams, George Madaus, Anne Wheelock, Jing Miao, and Ileana M. Gruia), increasingly rigidly enforced within-school tracking systems that determine who enjoys access to rigor and who does not (Susan Yonezawa and Amy Stuart Wells), and substantially narrowed access to tertiary level education (Janice L. Bloom) for low-income students. By looking deeply and across these select federal, state, and locally based policies and practices, we witness the systematic restructuring of educational opportunities, as such opportunities are increasingly out of reach for large groups of students.

We would be remiss, however, if the only mechanisms of exclusion included in this section were policy and/or structurally based. For we know well that social relations and discursive practices in schools dramatically and fundamentally rust students’ souls or, in contrast, invite them to engage with creative intellectual imagination. Thus the final two chapters in this section address the school culture that Angela Valenzuela calls “subtractive schooling” and the discursive practices surrounding homophobia that function to isolate and dehumanize lesbian, gay, bisexual, and today transgender students (George W. Smith, chapter completed by Dorothy Smith). The chapters in Section 1, diverse in method, focus, and style, work as a force to reveal the long and devastating reach of federal and state policies, school relations, and everyday discourses as they excise the personal, local, and intimate lives of students on the margins. Section 1 is a cautionary tale: these chapters ask us to bear witness and simultaneously act, as policies, politics, and practices shrink the educational horizon for so many youth.

LISTENING HARD: SILENCE AND DISSENT

Section 2 consists of chapters that introduce voices not typically heard. Most powerfully, these chapters reveal the complex negotiations by which and through which youth on the margins negotiate with/against normalized representations of whiteness, “being American,” femininity, and even “talk.” In so doing, the chapters educate readers as to how we might “listen” to the voices of our youth. Beginning with Cameron McCarthy and colleagues’ chapter on popular media, black youth, and the production of “resentment,” we begin to

understand the importance of listening closely to messages embedded within media. The authors offer up a cultural critique of media representations of black youth and at the same time ask us, in this chapter, to listen to how such youth contend with and interpret these perverse representations. In the next chapter, Stacey J. Lee guides us into the diverse worlds of Hmong youth, as they grapple with mandates to Americanize, endure racist assault, contend with popular culture, survive under the weight of the myth of the “model minority,” and navigate the faultlines of family and schooling.

Lyn Mikel Brown continues this line of inquiry as she escorts us into the worlds of white working- and middle-class girls living in rural Maine, following the lightning rod of anger along which wisdom, pain, and desire emanate from the bodies of young women. In cross-chapter conversation with Brown, Carla O'Connor, R. L'Heureux Lewis, and Jennifer Mueller offer lessons learned from the culture of black femininity and school success. O'Connor, et al. ask their informants—successful African American women—to journey backward so as to elaborate the critical family, social, personal, and political commitments that fashioned their success. Finally Hee-jung S. Kim and Hazel Rose Markus educate readers as to the cultural significance of “silence” in Asian American communities, challenging us to understand the local politics of culture before assuming that spoken voice is the primary vehicle of communication and that speech must necessarily be privileged over respectful silence.

The chapters in Section 2 are a gift; through these chapters we hear voices not normally heard, as we gather respect for those on the margins. These chapters offer a hand as we wander into relations with youth whom perhaps we have never met before or have refused to meet on their terms.

EDUCATING FOR CHANGE

In this section we read from a series of researchers who are themselves educators, youth workers, theorists, and those engaged in educating for justice. Thea Abu El-Haj opens the section with a theoretical chapter on schooling and global politics. Moving between political theory and the everyday lives of Palestinian American students Abu El-Haj not only introduces a group of youth largely unknown to U.S. readers but also interrogates the processes by which global conflicts are embodied within schools and at the same time miscast as “discipline problems.” Here, like all the other chapters in this section, she helps readers imagine what could be, if schools were interested in “educating for change.”

Dennis Carlson and Susan L. Schramm-Pate with Richard R. Lussier move us into a southern school, where we eavesdrop on a classroom discussion revolving around the Confederate flag controversy. Using their insights

as both educators and researchers, the authors examine how differently positioned youth view the flag, the pedagogical possibilities built into the controversy, and our responsibility as educators to interrogate conflict rather than paper it over. Greg Dimitriadis assumes a similar stance in relation to critical pedagogy, moving into an afterschool program in an African American community, where he examines how African American youth connect up civil rights history as represented in the film *Panther*, with contemporary conditions of police surveillance and brutality. With an eye on popular culture, community curriculum, and the rhythms of youth culture, Dimitriadis allows educators to see the links that are often missed—or severed—within traditional classrooms.

Finally Mariá Elena Torre escorts readers into a “free space” in which diverse groups of youth have come together to craft critical research on race, ethnicity, social class, and the opportunity gap, designing a spoken word/dance performance as “public scholarship.” As the chief architect of this “space,” Torre allows us to witness the power of what can happen when very differently positioned youth come together to undertake a project larger than self.

Building off serious analyses of social inequality such as those chapters offered in Section 1, and deep understandings of student generated “voice” as reflected in the chapters in Section 2, Section 3 offers a vision. Writers in Section 3 provide guidance, wisdom, and real cases of critically based education, as they/we are determined to take back the Deweyian and Freirian vision of what must be, recognizing at one and the same time that good schooling sits at the foundation of a strong nation, a democratic society, and an educated, engaged, and active community for hope and justice.