

## BOOK REVIEW / CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

DIANE WISHART. *The rose that grew from concrete: Teaching and learning with disenfranchised youth*. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press. (2009). 208 pp. Paper: \$24.95. (ISBN 978-0-88864-516-6).

This book, designed to be of interest to academics, practitioners, and the broader public, constitutes a loosely structured case study of a private urban senior high school in Edmonton devoted to serving “disenfranchised urban youth.” *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*, a titular reference to Tupac Shakur (1999), is so named because the school “grew out of the cracks” of the “institutional field of public schooling in Alberta” (p. xvii) and because its students “are like roses growing in a nutrient-poor environment” (p. ix). Most students at pseudonymous Wild Rose School (WRS) are Aboriginal, nearly all are poor, and many have lived on the street. Wishart, a former teacher at the school, conducted a three-month-long study to explore the experiences of these youth — and the violence, substance abuse, and conflicts with legal authorities that pervade their lives.

The manuscript is organized into six chapters. After setting the stage for her narrative (chapter 1), Wishart explores in turn: programs for disenfranchised urban Aboriginal youth (chapter 2); social location and identity formation (chapter 3); tensions among students, staff, and schools (chapter 4); and critical literacy as manifested in school practices (chapter 5). She concludes with critical reflections on her process and offers evaluative comments on WRS’s model and the potential “Contributions to the Sociology of Education” (chapter 6). Wishart’s study draws upon hermeneutics and autobiography as she foregrounds her own experiences with, and responses to, the students, staff, and the wider process of teaching and learning in the spirit of a critical inquiry of self-discovery.

Wishart’s work deserves recognition as a contribution to longstanding calls for research into less standardized school settings in Canada and their impact on student experiences of success / failure (Gaskell, 1995). She provides an in-depth, context-specific case study that explores tensions and contradictions

that characterize practices within specialized programs that serve disenfranchised youth. For instance, she discusses how privileged teachers misapprehend their students, as well as the enduring tension between provincial standards and meeting individual student needs. Many of the critical issues Wishart highlights deserve the attention of policymakers and educators at provincial, school board, and individual school levels.

The author emphasizes and appreciates WRS's efforts to treat each student as an individual and to look beyond "dangerous" labels that objectify youth (p. 94). However, her embrace of a "unique individual" discourse in her efforts to avoid "enforcing categorical differences based on cultural generalizations" (p. 47) is problematic. For instance, she foregoes labels that might convey aspects of the specific national identities of the First Nations students who attend the school. Readers never learn if the students at WRS are Cree or Ojibway or Métis, or what insights might be gleaned from understanding their specific national or traditional communities—not to mention the contributions of Elders' presence in the school (who are mentioned once without elaboration).

Wishart's autobiographical approach will likely appeal to some readers and not others. She shares her "slow process" of becoming aware of her white privilege upon moving to an urban context where "I noticed people who weren't white, but they didn't directly affect my life so didn't challenge my assumptions in any significant way. But my image of normal was now imperfect" (p. 81). She further describes how her racist assumptions changed as she discovered "other 'normals'" through her new relationships with people of colour (p. 81). These autobiographical narratives might seem self-indulgent to audiences familiar with or engaged in critical theory. For others, this level of detail and transparency may be compelling, as it sheds light into the author's thought process as she negotiates privilege and evolving assumptions to a degree rarely found in academic or popular works about working with vulnerable youth. Although teachers working in alternative settings may find some of her conclusions too general or relatively commonplace, a work that renders the author's motives, judgments, and analysis so transparent permits readers to see where their own concerns and perspectives converge or diverge with the author's. At the same time, other dimensions of Wishart's work remain more opaque. For instance, basic features of Wishart's study, including how long and under what circumstances she taught at WRS, as well as how many people she interviewed and how extensively she did so, remain vague.

Regardless, Wishart shows considerable sympathy for disenfranchised urban youth who are failed by public schools and society. She emphasizes that "youth do have a voice" and that "it isn't my voice," thus presenting the book as "an opportunity to listen to what they have to say" (p. xvii). Yet while Wishart's conclusion expresses the "hope that this book will make voices heard that have not been heard before" (p.141), the presence of student voice remains

marginal rather than central in the work. The chapters contain relatively few, usually short quotations from students. Thus, the vast majority of evidence provided to support Wishart's claims and analyses stems from her own narrative reflections and interviews with senior school staff, as opposed to the first-hand descriptions of the students' own lives that readers are primed to expect. This remains a significant disjuncture in a work that describes itself as "an exploration of student's perspectives, desires, and feelings within the context of schools" (p. xx).

What Wishart does offer is an earnest portrayal of her own development as a critical educator/researcher in an important school context. In the process, she adds to a growing literature that explores the complexity of what success might mean for staff and disenfranchised youth in specialized programs. She also successfully highlights critical questions and concerns that pertain in practice: where the histories of oppression, schools, standards, staff, and students meet.

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#### REFERENCES

- Gaskell, J. (1995). *Secondary schools in Canada: The national report of the exemplary schools project*. Toronto, ON: Canadian Education Association.
- Shakur, T. (1999). *The rose that grew from concrete*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

