

Book Review

The Rose That Grew From Concrete: Teaching and Learning with Disenfranchised Youth

Diane Wishart

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In his essay *Challenges Bequeathed*, first published in 1996, long-time educator and curriculum scholar Huebner (2009) writes eloquently about the need to speak up for children and youth. He argues that “teachers have become increasingly removed from concern for the uniqueness and individuality of the student qua person” (p. 10) and that children and youth remain relatively voiceless in our society. He worries that educators are too busy trying to “understand the educational process” and because of this, they may “fail to hear and respond to the muffled sounds of those caught in the system” (p. 11).

Diane Wishart’s book *The Rose that Grew From Concrete: Teaching and Learning with Disenfranchised Youth* does precisely what Huebner has challenged educators to do: it speaks up for vulnerable young people who have been failed by mainstream education. It attempts genuinely to hear and respond to the experiences of disenfranchised, largely Aboriginal students in an inner-city high school that she refers to as Wild Rose School, in Edmonton, Alberta. Using a case study approach, Wishart talks with staff and students at the school in an effort to raise consciousness about inequitable educational practices. She calls educators to account for how they are complicit in perpetuating conditions of oppression in education that further devalue and marginalize particular groups of students who stand outside the norms of who and what we expect our students to be.

What I appreciate about Wishart’s approach to writing this book is her willingness to examine critically her own pedagogy in the light of her privileged social location. She does so genuinely that it opens spaces for readers to do the same. There were many moments reading the book that I found myself stopping to consider what I had read in relation to my own experiences as an educator. At times, I felt discomfort as I became more fully aware of my own complicity in reproducing an educational system that marginalizes many young people because of their social locations. However, as Wishart notes, discomfort is a necessary precondition for change.

Early in the book, Wishart asks the questions “How do we see students as specific individuals rather than as abstractions? How do we begin a conversation with youth about meeting their needs while we are already engaged, implicated, and consumed by an educational system that doesn’t meet their needs?” (p.3). These questions frame the discussion that follows of Wishart’s own experiences working alongside disenfranchised youth, her descriptions of these young people, her efforts to grapple with the complexities and messiness of their everyday lives,

and her attempts to describe how education and the processes of schooling might better meet these students' needs. The legacies of colonialism, institutional racism, and poverty are all identified by Wishart as contributing to the conditions of oppression that disenfranchised youth experience daily.

In Chapter One, *Framing the Story*, Wishart provides a powerful description of her teaching context and the lives of the students with whom she works. She also grapples with the challenges of meeting the needs of youth and making school relevant to them in an educational system that has largely failed to do so. Here Wishart considers the tension between her own privileged social location as a White, middle-class teacher and the locations of her students as poor and mostly Aboriginal. She speaks about the need for critical teachers to initiate and build positive relationships with students. She reflects on her experiences as a preservice teacher in a faculty of education that did not prepare her to work in such a context. The critique of teacher education is threaded throughout the text and was a critique that resonated for me given my own experiences as a teacher and teacher educator. I completed my Bachelor of Education degree in the early 1990s and began my first teaching assignment in a context not so different from Wild Rose School. I had many students who had been failed by mainstream education, who came from social locations different from my own. I had not been prepared to meet these students' needs, nor had I been challenged to consider how best to work alongside them. It matters how teachers think about and approach their curricular responsibilities, and faculties of education have a role to play. In fact they have a burden of responsibility. I think it would have been valuable for Wishart to have delved more deeply into a critique of teacher education programs, particularly those that stubbornly refuse to engage in sustained processes of program renewal or those that prefer to approach teacher education in a theory light way, as first and foremost the acquisition of skills and techniques for teaching, much as mine was 20 years ago. There is much in this first chapter for readers to reflect on. It does a superb job of encouraging readers to engage actively in a critique of education and schooling, setting the stage for the chapters that follow.

In Chapter Two, *Comfort that Eludes*, Wishart describes how Wild Rose High School attempts to offer an "alternative understanding of the ways in which disenfranchised youth may wish to be, and arguably can be, successfully included in integrated school programs" (p. 44). She explores the tensions between segregation and integration, the limitations of teachers' experiences with Aboriginal students, and the need to be conscious of our "shared history and the traditions of schooling in Canada" (p. 47). It is in this chapter that Wishart advances an approach to consciousness-raising education that is similar to Donald's (2009) ethical relationality, "an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other" (p. 77).

Race and class disadvantage are more deeply explored in Chapter Three, *Constructing the "Self": Opposition and Acceptance in Public Schools*. Through the voices of her students, Wishart provides compelling evidence of how race, class, and gender shape young people's experiences in and beyond schools. This is a powerful chapter that would have been made more so by drawing on Critical Race Theory and Whiteness Studies standpoints to expand the discussion of privilege to include considerations of White supremacy. Having said that, Wishart's call to understand students as real people beyond labels and create conditions for dialogue that will encourage students "to be conscious of the social and societal conditions of their lives" is the focal point, and arguably the most important aspect of this chapter and should be seen as such regardless of the extent to which she draws (or does not draw) on CRT.

As I read this chapter, I reflected on a conversation I recently had with a classroom teacher working with disenfranchised youth. This teacher described an encounter with a colleague in which the colleague complained about a student whom they both taught. The complaint centered on the students “uncleanliness,” particularly his failure to launder his clothes. My teacher friend indicated that this student, poor and Aboriginal, whom she had taken the time to get to know, did not have access to a washer and dryer given his life circumstances, and perhaps it was incumbent on the school to allow him access to their available facilities. I share this example because it speaks to the lack of awareness of many teachers of students who live with difficult material and social realities. It is suggestive of the imposition of middle-class standards on disenfranchised youth. Because his clothes were dirty, this student, this storied being, became “less than” in the eyes of the teacher. Yet he is more than what he wears and how he smells. How has this situation come to be in the first place? What role might this teacher play in the life of this student? How can she adjust her own perspectives about teaching and learning to accommodate for this student’s harrowing life circumstances? There is much insight to gain from Chapter Three and throughout the book, a reason why it should be required reading for all teachers and teacher educators across the country.

Chapter Four, *Other Tensions: Schools, Teachers and Students*, resonated with me, particularly Wishart’s discussion of the dangers of labeling students. She draws attention to the non-neutrality of language and how labeling students effectively ignores who they really are and the stories that shape their lives. She calls educators to be critical of the labels they are “required” to use and to consider the connection between the use of labels such as *special needs* and the neo-liberal agenda (although not explicitly named as such) driving some educational practices. Furthermore, Wishart alerts the reader to how labels such as *special needs* are always understood in relation to some sort of norm, usually grounded in middle-class sensibilities. These are important observations that I think would benefit from being grounded in a more in-depth examination of the neo-liberal agenda in education.

Given the challenges that Wishart highlights in the first four chapters of the book, she does an excellent job in Chapter Five, *Understanding School Practices and Critical Literacy*, of grappling with how these challenges might be met by teachers and administrators working alongside disenfranchised youth. What conditions need be created in order to break the status quo? Wishart suggests that students must be in partnership with teachers, they must be given a voice, and that behaviors can only be shaped by being in relationship with one another. She describes the use of popular theatre at Wild Rose High School to facilitate a sense of belonging and comfort for the students. She also offers examples of how critical literacy can be fostered in students through examining social realities, including their own experiences with police brutality.

In the final chapter, *The Story Speaks*, Wishart reflects on her process of discovery working alongside disenfranchised students as teacher, researcher, and writer of this book. It is apparent that she has taken her responsibility to account for her own privileged location seriously. She challenges us to do the same by dwelling amid tension and living with discomfort as we interrogate our own assumptions about teaching and learning. The model that Wild Rose School offers has the potential to reshape educational practices, including the practices of teacher education.

The Rose that Grew From Concrete is a profoundly moving, provocative, and important text for anyone tasked with educating young people. It has the potential to change how educational processes are understood, and more importantly, how schools meet the needs of

disenfranchised youth. Wishart has answered Huebner's (2009) call to speak up for children and youth, and has bequeathed to her readers the challenge of engaging differently in education.

References

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