

BOOK REVIEW

Evelyn Aquino, Heather Bligh Manchester and Anita Wadhwa, *The little book of youth engagement in restorative justice: intergenerational partnerships for just and equitable schools*. New York: Good Books, 2021, 121 pp., ISBN 978-1-68099-748-4 (print), ISBN: 978-1-68099-770-5 (eBook).

In their book *The little book of youth engagement in restorative justice: Intergenerational partnerships for just and equitable schools* (part of the Little Books series on Justice and Peacebuilding, published by Good Books), Aquino, Manchester and Wadhwa argue for a more meaningful and more collaborative engagement with the young people for whom the school restorative justice system is ostensibly created. The authors assert that both in schools and in communities, young people's passion and skills to promote change are typically minimised or even extinguished by the limited power given to them by adults. In their book, the authors critique the unequal distribution of power between young people and adults at the leadership level, analyse the importance of meaningful youth engagement and collaboration from a multidimensional perspective, and show what it would look like for well-intentioned adult practitioners to not only value the opinions of young people but to also meaningfully collaborate with them. In congruence with this framework, this book review is itself an intergenerational collaboration between an undergraduate student (the first author) and her restorative justice professor.

To give readers a deeper understanding of youth engagement, the authors begin the book by visualising restorative justice youth engagement using Adam Fletcher's Ladder of Student Involvement in Schools. The ladder, which is referred to throughout the text, shows the transition from passive to active participation by young people in eight steps, which include (from bottom to top) manipulation, decoration, tokenism, youth-informed, youth-consulted, youth/adult equality, completely student-driven and youth/adult equity. This framework is useful because it both describes what typically exists (adults setting the agenda and threatening/incentivising students to participate) and demonstrates the range of what is possible, which includes young people participating in agenda-setting, not only in the classroom but also in community and leadership spaces normally reserved for adults.

The authors' call for young people to participate more meaningfully is not intended to suggest that young people should lead the decision-making process or even that they should share power equally with adults. Though both of these approaches can be found near the top of the ladder, the highest rung is not necessarily the ideal level of engagement. Rather, the authors argue, the adults who work with youth need to understand the range of possibilities and maximise the respective capabilities of young people and adults while taking into account the differences in their experience. This is consistent with Aquino, Manchester and Wadhwa's main point, which is to have adults and young people cooperate with each other to create a just social environment in the interest of the collective rather than their own specific cohort.

Following the ladder, Chapter 2 discusses the core values of youth participation in restorative justice: intergenerational partnerships and liberatory education. Intergenerational partnerships refer to youth and adult community members working together inside and outside of school to create equitable and healthy learning environments. Awareness of the importance of intergenerational partnerships with youth promotes more meaningful participation by young people. The second core value is liberatory education in order to transform structural injustice. Becoming aware of the existence of an unjust system, the authors argue, makes it possible for individuals to work against it and be liberated from it.

In Chapter 3, the authors continue to explore the value of liberatory education by introducing a four-stage framework for moving towards liberatory consciousness: a cycle of awareness, analysis, action, and accountability proposed by Barbara Love, which provides practitioners with opportunities for self-examination that can help them deepen their commitment to justice. In this chapter, they also discuss the social construction of both dominant and nondominant identities, the former consisting of group membership that carries benefits from unearned privilege, while the latter consists of group membership afflicted by unearned disadvantages due to lack of access to various kinds of resources such as education and health care. The authors cover this content quickly, perhaps because it has received substantial attention elsewhere and is, therefore, likely to be familiar to readers. However, we would have preferred a bit more elaboration in the section on intersectionality. The authors do point out that many of us check off both dominant and nondominant categories, but a specific example might have made the implications of intersectionality more salient. For example, many of those who are college-educated (a dominant category) are part of marginalised racial communities and had to overcome considerable economic and social barriers to obtain their degree. Such an example might have underscored the complexity of intersectional identities and the challenges of navigating them and, in so doing, strengthened the rationale for the authors' assertion that in working towards liberation, one should not take the membership in these dominant and nondominant groups personally, but rather remain focused on the broader effects of oppressive ideologies.

In Chapter 4, the authors apply Barbara Love's cycle to the concept of adultism, which the authors define as 'the inherent and structural bias of adults against youth' (30). The purpose of this chapter is to help readers (presumably primarily adult educators and restorative justice practitioners) understand how age-related power imbalances manifest at various social levels and to provide strategies for anti-adultism. The premise is simple enough: adults should respect and support the decisions young people make about their education and lives and be sufficiently cognitively flexible so as to be able to provide appropriate guidance and negotiate rights and power as the need to do so develops dynamically. In practice, however, such negotiations can get complicated. How might adults respond, for example, when two boys are disrupting a circle focusing on gendered dynamics in school? What would an anti-adultist response look like in a situation in which the primary decision-making power of young people is in the hands of the dominant group? Is there a way for adults to ensure that the decisions made by young people are not potentially harmful to their more vulnerable classmates without perpetrating

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adulthood? We expect that the authors have some experience navigating such complexity and wish that they made space for some of those personal stories, so that readers with less experience are not surprised when encountering such challenges themselves.

Though we both appreciate the theoretical framework, the heart of the book is, to a large degree, found in Chapters 6, 7 and 8, which are individual case studies of restorative justice collaboration with youth in three different contexts: Houston (written by Wadhwa), Holyoke (written by Aquino) and Oakland (written by Itzamar Carmona Felipe and Manchester). In these case studies, we see how each of the authors approaches student engagement, and we meet their student collaborators. In the process, we see a bit of their humanity and the formidable barriers that get in the way of their guiding philosophy. There is a reason that this kind of intergenerational collaboration is not commonplace: even self-identifying ‘progressive’ schools are typically organised hierarchically, with adults in charge of both rules and consequences, and the students expected to comply with those rules with, at best, token representation in the decision-making process with little preparation for how to navigate the adult space. Challenging this cultural paradigm is mostly uncharted territory, so there is much to be learned from each of the authors as they set off with their students into the unknown. Dear reader, the road they travel is far from easy. They fall. They hit dead ends. At times, they feel discouraged and frustrated, at other times, angry and resentful. Sometimes they are upset with each other. More often, their ire is with the system and those who are too short-sighted to see its harmful impact. When there are victories, we breathe a sigh of relief because we know they were hard-fought and recognise they remain precarious.

In our respective roles as student and professor, we have both had our experiences with intergenerational collaboration. As such, these three chapters are both familiar and novel. These are not ‘how-to’ chapters that purport to show the way. Such manuals will eventually be written by others, perhaps even with student co-authors, in part because well-intentioned restorative justice advocates will ask for them and someone will want to fill the perceived need. Our own stance is that these kinds of efforts cannot be manualised: each context has its own unique characteristics; each group of young people, their own personalities and lived experiences. We can create models and frameworks and give others a window into what it looks like to engage with young people in this way, but ultimately this work is relational, and relationships do not easily lend themselves to ‘how-to’ manuals. One of the many strengths of this book is that all three authors are clear about this. They do not want others to follow in their footsteps; they want them to chart their own path.

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