

Book Review

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Caruthers, L., & Friend, J. (2016). *Great expectations: What kids want from our urban public schools*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. 294 pp., \$160 (hbk), \$45.99 (pbk). ISBN 978-1681234403.

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So, what is it that kids really want from their urban schools? According to authors Loyce Caruthers and Jennifer Friend, the kids want what every other student wants: Teachers who care for them and have high expectations, a safe environment, exposure to high-level and engaging learning experiences, and information about their culture along with the culture of others. This simple, yet compelling information, was obtained by simply asking the students and valuing their voice. Student voice is often described as the varying levels and opportunities for students to actively participate in school decisions that directly affect their lives and the lives of other students around them (Fielding, 2001; Levin, 2000). Examinations of the effects on student voice are well documented and suggest that student voice as a construct has empirical and practical merit to inform teaching and learning in urban schools. (Butler, Kane, & Morshead, 2017; Seiler, 2013; Venzant Chambers & McCready, 2011). However, *Great Expectations* represents a unique approach to the utilization of student voice to inform practices in urban learning environments.

This concept of voice inspired the authors to write *Great Expectations*, which is designed to help educators understand the importance and value of student voice in addition to describing how to implement that understanding through the lens of critical race theory to help educators understand and become aware of the “enduring historical and sociocultural ideologies as well as deficit orientations [that] are likely to exist” (Caruthers & Friend, 2016, p. 204). To meet this purpose, the authors have created a framework that carefully examines specific techniques such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, digital storytelling, blogs, photographs, and participation

on decision-making committees to solicit student voice and drive urban school renewal initiatives.

Biographical Sketch of Authors

Dr. Loyce Caruthers is an associate professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, who is known for her research in urban education, race, class, gender, narrative (storytelling) studies, and school desegregation. She has received the Portrait of a Black Woman Award as well as the Grady Ray Brown Spirit Award. Her professional experience in large urban school districts includes program coordinator for gender equality, staff development coordinator, and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Dr. Jennifer Friend is an associate professor and assistant dean at the University of Missouri–Kansas City, who is known for her research in urban education, educational leadership and technology, and documentary film making. She has received awards for her narrative and documentary films entitled *The Rest of Her and School Desegregation Cases* and *The Life and Legacy of Dr. Eugene E. Eubanks*.

Summary of Argument

“The purpose of this book is to advance a framework for listening to students’ voices in the context of urban school renewal” (Caruthers & Friend, 2016, p. xxi). The authors suggest that school reform efforts are, in most cases, the result of adult ideas and policies based on shallow examinations of student demographic and achievement data which does not tell the complete story. They argue that the missing link to effective school renewal can be corrected by valuing and listening to the unique perspectives of students who have diverse backgrounds. Telling stories can be a powerful medium that reveals a person’s perspectives and values as they make sense of their lived experiences. This has the advantage of helping people discuss difficult issues, which can help bridge the gap between theory and practice from an affective perspective. Understanding these unique perspectives of students of color can create opportunities for educators to evaluate the presence of institutionalized forms of inequality based on White privilege, teacher quality gaps, deficit-based mental models, and the social construction of race. When these uncomfortable issues are honestly addressed, true healing and renewal can overcome prior unsuccessful reform movements. To this end, the authors sought input from students from urban learning environments, given that many policies and initiatives seek to address challenges facing urban schools, but fail to consider the

voice of the learners who are most acutely impacted. The next section provides a summary of the contents of the book.

Summary of Contents

The book is comprised of a forward written by Gloria Ladson-Billings, an introduction, 15 chapters, and an appendix, which offers information on further readings, and interview permission forms. The book is broken down into three distinct sections with the first section describing the context and inequalities associated with urban public schools. Chapter 1 establishes the foundation of the main argument by providing explanations of why student narratives are so valuable. This is followed by a discussion, in chapters 2 and 3, which articulates how the construction of “others” is based on society’s creation of subordinate and dominant roles based on White privilege. Chapter 4 examines the influence exerted on schools by federal policies, including high-stakes testing, that decreases rich learning opportunities for disadvantaged schools and students. The first section ends with chapter 5 that stresses statistical data are superficial to understanding *why* urban students struggle, so there is a need to use qualitative data collection methods to better understand the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Section 2 introduces how the framework is used and the importance of addressing what students want from their schools. Chapter 6 briefly describes the process of collecting, coding, and interpreting student information as well as articulating the difference between reform and renewal. Chapters 7, 8, 9, and 10 describe the influence of culture and how educators can care for students, facilitate safe environments, develop engaging lessons, and promote culturally competent teaching.

The last section examines the specific techniques used for enlisting the voices of students and how to use those voices to create systemic change. Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14 describe how to create and use student interviews and focus groups, surveys, arts-based inquiry and technology, and finally how to incorporate student voice in the governance of schools. Chapter 15 concludes the book by describing how the framework can be dovetailed with culturally responsive pedagogical models and calls for educators to solicit and value student input.

Strength

The authors add credibility and strength to their argument by including student voices throughout the book that they personally collected when

interviewing students from a variety of urban schools. This is important because it increases the authenticity of the content and helps to model the practices described throughout the book. These narratives, presented as transcript quotes, are used to support their points with conviction and adds an emotional connection for the readers.

In addition to student quotes, the authors consistently build their argument by citing research from previous studies and theories from well-respected researchers. For example, the authors refer to the work of Nel Noddings who is a well-respected ethics researcher. Noddings suggests that many researchers are missing the mark when they only measure the perceptions of teachers. For example, when determining the caring nature of teachers, should their perception be the only one that is measured and judged? Noddings recommends collecting information from the actual students. How do they perceive the caring nature of their teachers? Noddings is advocating that the students' voice be heard and recognized when seeking information. This directly supports the underlying premise of the authors' argument.

Their underlying claim is adroitly articulated when they suggest "culture is a story that we tell ourselves over and over again; to change the culture is to change the stories we tell" (Caruthers & Friend, 2016, p. 16). This supports the idea that a person's story reveals their culture, perceptions, and values. This idea is further reified by the work of Bell who researched stories related to race and was able to inductively produce four types of story that revealed how a person perceived race. He concluded that *stock* and *concealed* stories supported the status quo of White privilege, *resistance* stories recalled a person's struggle to promote racial equality, and *counterstories* challenged the dominance of White privilege. The authors reinforce the importance of listening to student stories especially if they are able to produce *counterstories*, which reveals institutional examples of racism that are unnoticed by the adult policymakers.

Weakness

Overall the text reads more like a journal article as opposed to a traditional book, which might introduce fewer concepts that are fully articulated with a complete discussion of their meanings and implications. Throughout the book, there are times the authors make powerful claims that are not explained other than a parenthetical citation. This leaves the reader either wanting more information or googling for the article/book that was referenced. The amount of information provided in this book is extensive and requires some background knowledge about culture and diversity due to succinct descriptions. Readers new to this topic might struggle to fully

understand the myriad of concepts and thoughts discussed by the authors. Although this text might challenge the neophyte reader, it certainly offers an expansive account of issues surrounding race construction, issues of White dominance, and the systemic manifestation of institutional racism in today's educational system.

Conclusion

Throughout the book, Caruthers and Friend cite multiple examples from well-known authors who strongly encourage the use of cultural considerations in the classroom. Because most educators agree that connecting new learning to existing knowledge is an effective instructional strategy, understanding and building upon a student's cultural background is an important component to student achievement. "If educators understand that learning increases from making use of prior knowledge, then they must also recognize the sociocultural nature of learning or the understanding that cultural context and content impact teaching and learning" (Caruthers & Friend, 2016, p. 206). As a result, the authors stress the importance of including the use of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies along with their framework to solicit and use student voice.

Overall, this book is appropriate to readers familiar with issues related to culture and diversity who want to create renewal in today's schools. Urban education researchers, using the voices of students in urban schools, wrote this book. Throughout the book, it is evident that when the authors consider culture and the unique cultural funds of knowledge learners bring to the classroom, urban learners are the target populations the authors wish to support and empower. This book is unique because it provides a framework for incorporating student voice in the learning process within the urban learning environment. Therefore, scholars and classroom teachers should consider this book as a reasonable guide for incorporating or investigating student voice in urban schools. Although this book targets urban-school educators, the concepts and framework can certainly translate to other schools who want to understand and listen to the narratives of the students they serve. This book can also thoughtfully inform policy makers, parents, and all stakeholders who are committed to social justice, equality, and issues related to race, class, and gender.

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