Learning Power. By Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers & Martin Lipton. New York:Teachers College Press, 2006. 205 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-8077-4702-5

In May 2004 at a celebration commemorating the 50th anniversary of the *Brown v. Board* ruling, comedian and entertainer Dr. Bill Cosby used his award speech to launch a hurtful tirade against poor African Americans. Cosby scorned poor blacks "for not holding up their end in the deal" and for "not parenting" (Dyson, 2005, xi). Similarly, in December of 2006, former New York congressman and mayoral candidate Herman Badillo suggested that too many Latinos were "mired in poverty because they don't value education" (Campanile, 2006). Badillo, a Puerto-Rican American wrote:

> Education is not a high priority in the Hispanic community . . . Hispanics have simply failed to recognize the overriding importance of education… failed to assume responsibility for their children's welfare . . . rarely get involved with their children's schools… seldom attend parent-teacher conferences, ensure that children do their homework or inspire their children to dream of attending college (Campanile, 2006).

Cosby and Badillo both utilize "common sense explanations" for the educational underachievement of African American and Latino students. These forms of deficit thinking locate failure internally within the race, culture, and family of Black and Latino students (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997).

In ***Learning Power***, Jeannie Oakes, John Rogers, and Martin Lipton take issue with these simplistic explanations for school and community failure by presenting cases in which highly engaged students, parents, and teachers who deeply value education, work alongside educational "experts" in a common struggle for social justice and for education on "equal terms." In this clear and well-written book, the authors advance a compelling framework for urban school reform, which emphasizes participatory social inquiry as a key building block for democratic sustainability; a concept grounded in the later work of philosopher and educator John Dewey. This is a must read book for policy makers, educators, parents, teachers, and community activists who are working towards a vision of school reform that seeks to subvert deficit ways of thinking and systems of privilege that eliminate the possibility for socially just schools.

Oakes, Rogers, and Lipton begin their discussion by examining how *Brown v. Board of Education* failed to end the "separate and very unequal educational opportunities" (7) that differed along racial lines. Although some progress was made towards desegregation and " eliminating dual school systems" during the 1970's and early 1980's, recent reversals in federal and state policies and court decisions have resulted in Latino and Black students attending public

schools that are as segregated as they were before the 1954 Brown case. The authors underscore the active role that students and families took in the recent *Williams v. State of California* case, in which the plaintiffs sued the state to correct long-standing imbalances in state resource distribution between predominantly white-serving schools and schools located in low-income Black and Latino neighborhoods. Even when administrators and teachers "buy-in" to "equity" reforms in racially mixed schools, as Oakes, et. al. point out, politically powerful parents (mainly White middle class) often create significant roadblocks towards actual implementation even though these "reforms rarely reduce the material and nonmaterial opportunities of more advantaged students" (p.162).

The most powerful part of the book is found in the voices of those fighting for social change: students enrolled in a Futures Project (chapter 4); a "teacher inquiry" group; the formation of a "Teaching to Change LA" online journal (chapter 5); parent activists from the Parent U-Turn group (chapter 7); and activist groups comprising the Educational Justice Collaborative (chapter 8). The poignancy of these chapters is found in their narratives as they described how they *learned to build and exercise power*.

Oakes, et. al provide case studies of the three groups to shed light on how UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) serves as a mediating agent for students, teachers, and parents, helping them "to learn about and promote a different approach to educational change" (p. 5). Through "social design experiments" researchers at IDEA have tried to understand whether their approach to research and reform can more effectively "redistribute power on behalf" of Black and Latino students and families enrolled in Los Angeles Unified School District; communities that are often marginalized and silenced due to existing systems of privilege. These experiments employed by IDEA are grounded in a participatory social inquiry built on four Deweyan principles: engaging those most affected by inequality, ensuring access to knowledge and its construction, and adopting a critical stance that supports the development of a transformative goal.

IDEA's social design experiments with local Los Angeles students, for example, included participation in a series of "Futures" summer seminars and student-based research groups at UCLA. Through these unique experiences students were able to examine a variety of topics affecting their communities and schools, while also utilizing social theory as learned through their college level texts. From this participation, students developed research and analytical skills necessary to engage in concrete projects for change in their high schools. In the end, all but one of the 30 Futures participants graduated from high school, demonstrating a higher level of achievement than a similar group of students who were chosen for comparison purposes. Parent and teacher groups that were involved in projects through IDEA were able to develop important analytical

skills through their dialogue with each other and with IDEA researchers. Most importantly, the group projects highlighted the power of coalition building in effecting change within their local communities. Based upon these experiences, the authors conclude that "movement organizing informed by public inquiry provides our best hope for disrupting the logic of schooling that creates and sustains inequality" (p.158).

While the results of these social design experiments appear promising, the process of engaging in participatory social action on a large scale can be challenging. First, "placing the onus on low-income people of color to initiate 'participatory social inquiry' and social activism calls on them to surmount the material and political asymmetries that underlie their current disadvantages" (p.177). The difficulty in gathering financial resources and social capital are serious obstacles towards the establishment of any serious political campaign. Second, school professionals and researchers must be convinced to "abandon their traditional role with community members" (177). They must see beyond simplistic deficit explanations and begin to recognize the communities that they work in as sites of potential forms of "cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) and trust community members sufficiently to work alongside them. A third, and perhaps most difficult challenge, is in "bringing people together across race and social classes" (178) that has as an end goal of creating a multiracial coalition with common interests. During a time in which federal labor and tax policies are being rewritten in order to benefit the rich at the expense of the poor, those in the middle class have had to face the prospect of "declining fortunes" and may be less willing to cooperate with the poor over the fear that their children may be excluded from opportunity (Lareau, 2003).

In the current reform climate of high stakes testing and accountability, *No Child Left Behind* has placed additional constraints on social justice educators by creating greater curricular rigidity and forcing teachers and schools to teach to the test. This legislation "purports to promote equity by holding schools and students accountable for their performance on standardized tests even if it does nothing to address the conditions under which children are educated" (Noguera, 2006, p.130). Ironically, the law is creating additional barriers for many urban students by placing greater emphasis on high-stakes testing performance over quality content learning. Oakes et. al. rightfully point to the social contradictions inherent within NCLB in hopes that the anger and disappointment of low-income students of color, parents, community members, and teachers, will serve as impetus for action.

The strength of this book lies in the call for educational researchers to partner with communities to revitalize the public's democratic imagination. Institutions such as public universities need to become resources and forms of capital for community members and organizations that are engaged in school

reform. Without these collaborations, social justice oriented educational research will continue to have a limited impact on reversing the ill-effects of *de jure* segregation found in most low-income communities. By themselves, students, parents, and community activists may lack the resources and knowledge base to build power and refute the false logics that "elite groups" often employ to discredit them. As influential civil rights scholar, Derrick Bell (2004) once stated, it is imperative that advocates of racial and social justice "rely less on judicial decisions and more on tactics, actions, and even attitudes that challenge the continuing assumptions of white dominance" (9). Echoing Bell's call to action, Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton offer a valuable blueprint for creating community-based coalitions intended to disrupt white, middle-class privilege, while also fostering spaces in which to build more democratic and socially just schools.

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Reviewer

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