Review of Love’s *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*

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This review of Bettina Love’s (2019) *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* places the book within the context of the school/prison nexus and the contemporary American prison abolition movement. It offers a summary of Love’s main arguments with suggestions for further reading, highlights chapters that could stand alone in course syllabi, and suggests uses for the text in teacher education, research, and the K-12 classroom. It also provides academic, historical, and theoretical connections to Love’s concept of abolitionist teaching. Ultimately, I propose the expansion and application of her work by suggesting that while Love is inspired by prison abolitionists, teachers must move further towards pragmatic connections to abolition in the classroom.

**Keywords:** abolition, school/prison nexus, school to prison pipeline, white supremacy

The connection between schools and prisons, policing and punishment, is unmistakable. Angela Davis (2011), scholar/activist and leader in the prison abolition movement describes these links within abolitionist thinking. She notes that prison abolitionist strategies connect institutions that we usually consider disconnected, writing, “the overuse of imprisonment is a consequence of eroding educational opportunities, which are further diminished by using imprisonment as a false solution for poor public education” (p. 73). These connections within education research are commonly understood as the school-to-prison pipeline, or the school/prison nexus, referring to the ways that targeted disciplinary practices such as suspension and expulsion push marginalized students out of school and into the criminal justice system (Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016). The school/prison nexus affects all students, and has particular exclusionary effects on Black girls (Morris, 2016), Latinx students (Madrigal-Garcia & Acevedo-Gil, 2016), Native students (Walsh, 2015), and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Mittleman, 2018). Nationally, African American boys, adolescents, and young men experience the highest rates of school exclusion (Losen et al., 2015; Welsh & Little, 2018). In K-12 classrooms, Black students are suspended 3.7 times more often than their white peers and are almost twice as likely to be expelled from school as white students (Green, 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). The connection between schools and prisons continues when students are arrested in schools via school resource officers or police officers called into the classroom. For example, school officials in Stockton, California called the police on five-year-old Michael Taylor, a Black student with ADHD, in an attempt to “scare” him into good behavior. He was later charged with the battery of a police officer (Wadhwa, 2016). These school practices subject Black boys, adolescents and young men in schools to the same criminalization system that Black men face on the streets. In the Summer of 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, educators were called to reckon with the violence of carcerality in both.

*We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* puts forth a vision of abolitionist teaching that addresses precisely those intersections that Davis talks about. Dr. Bettina Love’s book helps guide researchers, practitioners, and their K-12 students away from the school/prison nexus and towards educational freedom. Love is a former public-school teacher who founded the Abolitionist Teaching Network with a mission to “develop and support teachers and parents to fight injustice within their schools and communities” (Bettina Love, n.d.). Combining personal wisdom and educational theory, her book is an excellent entry into a conversation about justice in schools. Love lays out a clear, exacting, and unapologetic argument for the radical transformation of schools through abolitionist teaching.

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Abolitionist Teaching

Written as a series of essays, the book’s chapters build on each other, while remaining powerful arguments in themselves. They coalesce into a description of abolitionist teaching that is at once specific and abstract, informed by theory, research, and lived experiences. Chapter 1, “We Who Are Dark,” begins the book with an insistence that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color matter. Love makes a clear case that these are, in fact, the stakes of education in the U.S. In Chapter 2, “Educational Survival,” Love elucidates those stakes by describing the current system of education as one that teaches Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color to survive, not thrive. Importantly, she explicitly names white supremacy and “white rage” (p. 6) as the source of the “educational survival complex” (p. 30) -- calling attention to the perpetrators as much as the targets of oppression. In Chapter 3, “Mattering,” Love places herself within this system, merging aspects of her personal experiences of education and schooling with her growing definition of abolitionist teaching. Chapter 4, “Grit, Zest, and Racism (The Hunger Games),” is perhaps the strongest stand-alone chapter, in which Love again connects her autobiography to misguided education reform efforts. Through an emphasis on “character education” (p. 69), she argues, struggling students are blamed for a lack of grit and determination. Using personal narrative and connections to the murder of Trayvon Martin, Love compellingly centers the discussion on systems of oppression and the trauma they create. “On February 26, 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin displayed all these characteristics by which school officials claim to measure, rate, and rank dark children, but it could not save his life,” she writes (p. 72). Educational reforms should be directed at unsettling white supremacy.

Chapter 5, “Abolitionist teaching,” enters as an exciting opportunity for Love to home in on the solution she has been alluding to throughout the book. Abolitionist teaching, as defined by Love, is “the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools” (p. 2). The ultimate goal of abolitionist teaching is educational freedom. There is no one specific form of abolitionist teaching, but rather a range of practices in the pursuit of educational freedom. For example, Love suggests that one practice for educators is to provide a “homeplace” for their Black students. That is, a learning environment where “Black folx truly matter to each other, where souls are nurtured, comforted and fed” (p. 63). These spaces are a place of resistance that fight white supremacy by celebrating, not criminalizing Blackness. Another suggestion Love makes for abolitionist teachers is to become involved in their communities, recognizing that the oppression students face in schools is the same oppression that harms marginalized individuals in society-at-large. She describes an afterschool program she attended as a child called Fighting Ignorance Spreading Truth (FIST) as abolitionist teaching where she was taught about grassroots organizing, Black liberation, and Black joy. This educational space helped her understand systemic injustice and move past survival within it.

Reforms Are Not Enough

An essential aspect of abolitionist teaching that Love repeatedly emphasizes is the refusal to settle for reforms of the broken educational survival complex. Abolitionism has its roots in criticizing reforms that simply give new shapes to a system that is meant to oppress marginalized groups. W.E.B. Du Bois critiqued the “reformation politics” of emancipation and post-Civil War reconstruction because they would not fundamentally reconstruct a democracy founded upon the dehumanization and enslavement of Black Americans (Brown, 2019). Prison abolitionists agree, citing the contemporary fictions of “racial democracy in which postwar penal reforms simply transmuted, culminating in more extensive racialized carceral practices, including chain gangs, the convict prison lease system, gendered violence, sexual terror, Jim Crow law, Lynchings, and now, the carceral state” (Brown, 2019, p. 75). This politics of refusal emboldens abolitionists to imagine new structures beyond incarceration instead of simply tweaking the broken system. Abolitionists often distinguish between “reformist reforms” that maintain inequity from reforms with a “commitment to a plane of immediacy” through the reduction of harm in the present (Brown, 2019). Abolitionist teaching thus rejects educational reforms that ultimately preserve or extend the status quo. Love (2019) writes that “education reform is big business, just like prisons” (p. 10). Indeed, this multibillion-dollar business thrives on selling educational products to racially segregated communities (Rooks, 2017). Both prisons and schools, Love argues, rely on white supremacy and the criminalization of Blackness. Both ignore the root causes of the problems
they purportedly exist to solve. Reformers like Teach for America, who enter schools with survival tactics like character education and test prep, simply ensure that the educational survival complex will remain intact.

Chapter 6, “Theory over Gimmicks” stands apart from the rest of the book in that it reads as an accessible textbook introduction to academic concepts like critical race theory, queer theory, and settler colonialism. Love’s argument is that, rather than being ivory-tower thought experiments, these theories can serve as a “North Star,” especially for pre-service teachers. “Theory does not solve issues,” she writes, but it “lets us size up our opponent, systemic injustice” (p. 132). This chapter is a strong selection for instructors of undergraduate or early education courses in order to help students connect on-the-ground experiences with a larger picture of inequity. Finally, in Chapter 7, Love returns to her commitment to strive for life beyond survival, writing, “We Gon’ Be Alright, But That Ain’t Alright.” Again she makes intimate connections about her personal experiences with mental illness and trauma to the systemic causes of this suffering. To truly be free from oppression, “there is only one choice,” she concludes. “Become an abolitionist parent, teacher, doctor… engineer, and human” (p. 162, emphasis maintained).

Expanding and Applying Abolitionist Teaching

Though Love draws inspiration from abolitionists, I believe that abolitionist teaching must make the connections between schools and prisons pragmatic and explicit in order to reject the criminalization of Black, Indigenous and Students of Color. For example, Love refers to the 18th century abolitionist communities who lived on Beacon Hill in Massachusetts, appreciating how they approached the struggle for freedom collectively, with joy. However, this comparison from abolitionists of the past to abolitionist teaching skips over the very active and ongoing work of new abolitionists working to abolish the prison industrial complex (Brown, 2019). Similarly, Love’s description of abolitionist teaching as “drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, [and] rebellious spirit” of abolitionists, while inspiring, does not make a direct connection to the work of abolishing the prison industrial complex in and out of schools. Readers looking for these pragmatic connections could look to Basille’s (2020) work on “de-criminalizing practices,” Dutil’s (2020) research on trauma-informed teaching, and Hamer and Johnson’s (2021) powerful argument on the “prison-to-school” pipeline. Love herself has taken her work a step further in a recent publication with Dunn, Chisholm and Spaulding (2021), in which the authors argue for the abolition of schools as institutions that are beyond reform.

Abolition Now!

Moving from abolitionist teaching as a metaphor, educators must critically examine their teaching practices and how they either criminalize students or insist upon their freedom. *We Want to Do More Than Survive* is an excellent foundation for this reflection. Teachers looking to rethink their efforts or place them within a systemic context may consider this book their own “North Star” towards change. Similarly, scholars and teacher-educators can read and assign this book knowing that Love’s compelling and personal writing-style will undoubtedly inform and inspire. Combining this book with the work of prison abolitionists like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Mariame Kaba could help us get closer to the “life-seeking” work of abolition in this lifetime (Brown, 2019).

References


