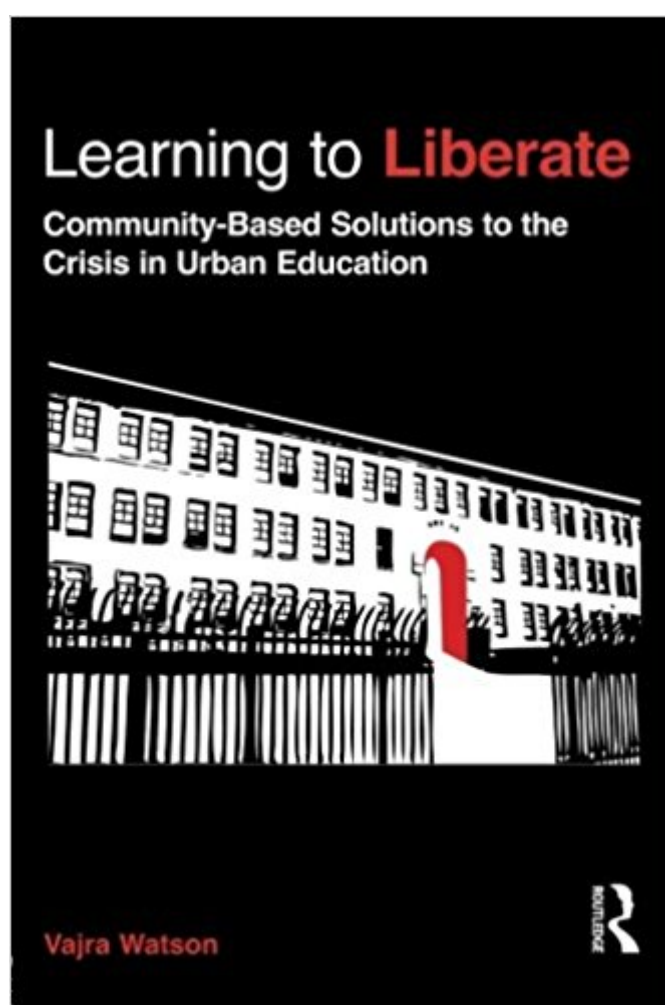


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# Learning To Liberate: Community-Based Solutions To The Crisis In Urban Education (Critical Social Thought)



## Synopsis

Few problems in education are as pressing as the severe crisis in urban schools. Though educators have tried a wide range of remedies, dismal results persist. This is especially true for low-income youth of color, who drop out of school and into incarceration at extremely high rates. The dual calamity of underachievement in schools and violence in many communities across the country is often met with blame and cynicism, and with a host of hurtful and unproductive quick fixes: blaming educators, pitting schools against each other, turning solely to the private sector, and ratcheting up the pressure on teachers and students. But real change will not be possible until we shift our focus from finding fault to developing partnerships, from documenting problems to discovering solutions. *Learning to Liberate* does just that by presenting true and compelling community-based approaches to school reform. Drawing on over three years of ethnographic research, Vajra Watson explores the complicated process of reaching and teaching today's students. She reveals how four nontraditional educators successfully empower young people who have repeatedly been left behind. Using portraiture, a methodology rooted in vivid storytelling, Watson analyzes each educator's specific teaching tactics. Uncovering four distinct pedagogies of communication, community, compassion, and commitment she then pulls together their key strategies to create a theoretically grounded framework that is both useful and effective. A poignant, insightful, and practical analysis, *Learning to Liberate* is a timely resource for all educators and youth-serving practitioners who are committed to transforming "at-risk" youth into "at-promise" individuals who put their agency and potential into action in their schools and neighborhoods.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"In a language that is at once impassioned and skeptical, challenging and hopeful, provocative and poetic, Vajra Watson paints vivid portraits of four community educator/activists whose voices and visions, philosophies and pragmatism, and intelligence and courage offer us insights into how we might transform our schools into asylums of safety and oases of learning and achievement. Learning to Liberate is a heart-wrenching, soul-stirring, and mind-expanding call to action; it is a book for all of us who want to leave no child behind." Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot is the Emily Hargroves Fisher Professor of Education at Harvard University and the author of *The Good High School*, *The Essential Conversation*, and *Respect: an Exploration* "A brilliant and illuminating analysis of what it takes to reach and teach urban youth. Watson goes to the educators who have been effective in working with disadvantaged young people for years to uncover what makes it possible for them to build relationships that open minds, change lives, and expand opportunities. Any educators seeking to find ways to become more relevant and useful to the students they serve will benefit from this book. " Pedro Noguera is Professor of Education and the Executive Director of the Metropolitan Center for Urban Education at New York University

Vajra Watson is Director of Research and Policy for Equity in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis.

Leaning to Liberate was a great book. It was easy to read and I stayed engaged throughout each story. She allowed the reader to feel the passion, pain and triumph of each of the community leader and their students. Although they all practiced a different pedagogy, they all knew how to reach their students. They met them right where they were and figured how how to impact them when no one else could. As a new teacher, I am learning that what and how I learned, was totally wrong. I learned that if I teach that way, I will be doing my students a disservice and I won't help them to get on the "freedom train." Watson showed how poverty can easily start children down a path to destruction and there has to be someone willing to pull them out. She also pointed out how the schools are contributing to this crisis, but how teachers can help improve it. While reading this book I went through an array of emotions. There were times I was sad, frustrated, angry, but when I finished, I

was motivated. All of the leaders realized they could not reach all the children out there that needed their help, but they knew that there were kids out there they could help. That is the message that will ring loud throughout my teaching career. I will not be able to reach all my students, but I will stay motivated to reach as many as I can.

I really enjoyed *Learning to Liberate*. Watson brings us into the lives of four community educators that are truly making a difference. Each educator is different and diverse yet each one finds a way to connect and empower underprivileged youth. The stories of these educators through me off at first because this book is the result of an academic study but what I came to find was that the use of story was the perfect medium to share the results of a study in critical pedagogy. Watson does a good job of summarizing and tying together what each community educator has in common and how today's educators can critique and be critical of their own pedagogy in the final chapters. One of the key lessons is to listen and I encourage educators working with underprivileged youth to listen to the stories that Watson shares and use them to reflect on their practice, unlearn their poor practices, and relearn the good practices.

Vajra Watson, PhD, educator, (whom I've known since high school), through ethnographic portraiture, observation and storytelling has written a book that strives to build bridges between the pedagogy (framed as pedagogies of communication, commitment, community and compassion) of 4 Bay Area community educators and transferable strategies for teachers in the classroom. Written with a very real, relatable feel within an academic context, Vajra showcases all 4 of these educators as successful at facilitating educational, transformational culturally relevant and socially practical environments where their "at-risk" hard to reach students not only learn content, but are empowered to exhibit youth leadership in their own lives, amongst their peers, and give back to their communities through a social justice framework. I implore anyone who does any type of formal or informal work with young people inside and outside of the classroom to **READ THIS BOOK**. Coming from a background as a community educator, I was inspired, and felt I was reading my own story at times. This book should be required text for any current and future teacher, especially those who will be working within urban settings and communities of poverty and trauma. I LOVE THIS BOOK and can't stop telling people about it!

This book is one of the required texts for a course on Critical Pedagogy that I am taking this summer. Vajra Watson's use of humor and personal insight makes this book accessible and

enjoyable. The four youth workers highlighted in this book demonstrate the commitment and compassion that are the foundations of critical pedagogy. Each portraiture provides an explicit discussion of the obstacles that young people must overcome to be successful adults. Poverty, racism, incarceration, homelessness, and community violence are issues that are rarely discussed with objectivity. Ms. Watson boldly reveals these problems and challenges each of us to critically examine our own homes, schools, and communities and become active in creating opportunities for change.

This book was incredibly insightful, gut wrenching at times, but I could not put it down! The author's ability to write an ethnographic study in a way that felt like one was reading a novel was impressive. This study merges the work of community organizers and social justice freedom fighters to the much needed field of education. This book brought up my own conflicts as a former public school educator when I knew I needed to act with my heart but sometimes wrongfully sided with what was "required" of me from the neoliberalist accountability paradigm such as NCLB. Reading this book reminds us all of the importance for educators to not only build inroads with community activists but to continuously redefine what it means to educate from a social justice perspective as students' lives and well being may very well depend on it. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in issues of social justice in education, community activism, and youth empowerment.

This is an amazing book for anyone who cares about reaching youth who have been dismissed from "productive" community. Reading it at minimum provides whole new openings for being able to broach a conversation with a teen who has been raised on the margins of our culture. If you care about education it is a must read. Dr. Watson has dedicated her life to Justice and Service. p.s. It is a super enjoyable read...not dry... she tells the story by sharing experiences working with and interviewing community based organizers that have succeeded over time making huge differences for youth that otherwise would have only been used by the system they were born into.

Very interesting angle on the education of troubled youth, giving alternative, positive ways to reach and connect with them.

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