



Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations: Re-Imagining Schools. Michelle Fine and Lois Weis. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003. 208 pp.

CAROLYN L. PIAZZA

Florida State University

cpiazza@garnet.acns.fsu.edu

Schools are "profoundly contradictory spaces" (p. 2), sites for reproducing social inequalities and places to "imagine more opportunities for all"(p. 110). If you doubt this paradox, I suggest you read *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations*, collected essays representing two decades of work by Michelle Fine and Lois Weis. The essays, which offer an "intellectual tour guide" (p. 3) for veteran and future teachers, are seamlessly compiled into two main parts to represent the dual faces of schooling. Part one, Scenes of Silencing, details the painful reality of silencing voices and reproducing inequities of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Inequities, say the authors, often cloak themselves in a system of fairness and opportunity, making things not what they seem. Part two, Scenes of Extraordinary Conversations, re-imagines schools with extraordinary conversations that bring hope and "wedge open opportunities for new selves to emerge" (p. 109).

The practice of silencing, and the ways it subverts, appropriates, exports, and expels critical talk about students' lived experiences, lies at the heart of chapters 1 through 4. In the opening chapter, Fine explores silencing practices (such as fear of naming the problem, reifying single truths, avoiding counterevidence, acting paternalistic, segregating academic and personal voice) to analyze whom silencing protects; the means by which asymmetric power relations are institutionalized; and the effects of subconsciously silencing students. The concept of silence frames the other essays in this section, whether it is silencing a discourse of desire in female sexuality (Fine, chapter 2); allowing white working-class males to sustain a dominant identity dependent on constructing others (white women, black women and men) as inferior (Weis, chapter 3); or unintentionally reinforcing behaviors that separate students and faculty along gender and racial lines (Weis, chapter 4). After reading part one, it is hard to forget the chilling effects of silence or its haunting definition: "a terror of words, a fear of talk" (p. 14). Conversations not held, or "undesirable talk" (p. 14) left uninterrupted, deny students' lived experience and render them passive or resistant. In short, "silencing removes any documentation that all is not well" (p.15).

The essays in Part two suggest what is possible when schools challenge social injustice and social stratification. Chapters 5-7 showcase three public schools where "teachers and



kids work against the grain to create more critical and egalitarian structures" (p. 110). In a de-tracked ninth grade social studies class, Fine, with teachers Anand, Jordan, and Sherman, observes spaces "of intentional interruption" (p. 117) where students are held accountable for going beyond the dominant perspective of the privileged elite to the social relations of those "from the bottom" (p. 121). No sooner done, the marginalized voices of the class emerge while the privileged voices struggle to reclaim or subvert the conversations. The case of a voluntary girls' group, presented by Weis with teacher-attorney Carbonell-Medina, shows how a safe place to openly discuss abstinence-based sex education allows girls to "crack the silence" (p. 143) and share their secrets and problems. Such discursive work leads to revision of personal and collective identities, and challenges outdated gender and race scripts. In the last chapter, the consequences of integration are revisited in a civil rights oral history project (Fine, with principal Anand). Students read newspaper articles on the local history of segregation and integration between 1947 and 1972, and voice tough questions about wealth, privilege, race, and journalistic biases.

In the epilogue, Memo to Educators, the authors comment on the impressive body of literature, amassed over the past 20 years, which addresses structural changes in regard to social class, racism, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. They acknowledge, however, that change has been a painfully slow process. In the 21st century, schools continue to be "held hostage to a series of political struggles around vouchers, high-stakes testing, abstinence, evolution, segregation/integration, whole language, bilingualism, governance, and finance (in) equities" (p. 1). If nothing is done, social inequities persist on their own, "masquerading as neutral" (p. 177). Doing nothing has profound consequences.

Silenced Voices awakens readers to the challenges that teachers face in the schools, and to the optimism with which teachers can approach their actions and future work. Indeed, the question of responsibility looms large in this volume. Current teachers are invited into the controversies and asked to respond to the voice "that first called them to education" (p. 3). By becoming social activists, and making the personal political, teachers create and make possible free and expansive settings of critical imagination and student engagement. They recognize that "educational work is always political work" (p. 35) and find compelling reasons to continue the dialogue. A post-script: The authors dedicate the book to "youth who persist in spite of the odds, to those who have (hopefully temporarily) given up, and the educators who have stood by all of them" (p. 178).

(c)2003 American Anthropological Association. This review is cited in the September 2003 issue (34:3) of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*. It is indexed in the December 2003 issue (34:4).