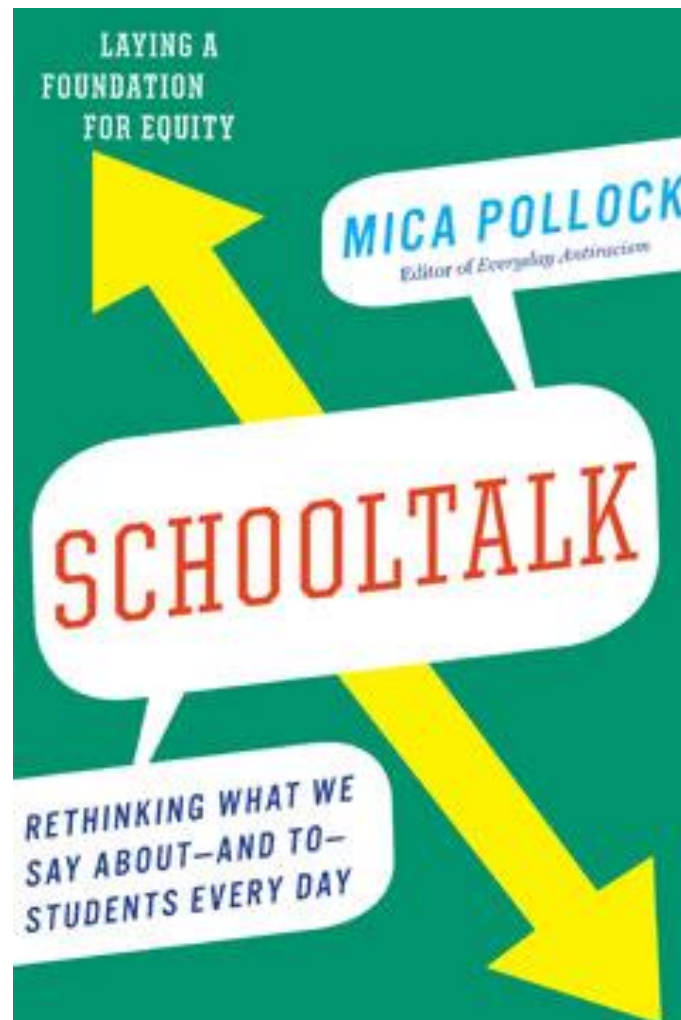# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review
Schooltalk: Rethinking What We Say About
—and to—Students Every Day
By Mica Pollock

Reviewed by Emily Schnee

Schooltalk: Rethinking What We Say About—and to—Students Every Day By Mica Pollock (The New Press, 2017)

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Mica Pollock's central premise, that how we talk to and about our students can either help build or disrupt a foundation for equity, is compelling. As an English professor at a community college, I firmly believe that language matters. Language can reinforce or challenge dominant values and reproduce or contest the educational status quo. So, I took Pollock's invitation to scrutinize my own "schooltalk" seriously. I was chastened to reflect on the ways in which, in moments of frustration, bewilderment, or discouragement, I have spoken about students or been complicit in other faculty's venting about students, despite my professed commitment to educational equity. Thus, Pollock's goal of "*design[ing] new ways to talk about and with young people* in schools" is laudable (7 italics in original). Amidst other pressing systemic problems that impede equity in schools, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that our words do indeed matter. Her assertion that "each communication is an action with serious equity considerations" is a call to reconsider the ways in which schools could be (re)designed to foster more and better communication with and about our students (4).

This "pie in the sky" approach to re-designing schooltalk infrastructure is not the book's only flaw.

Schooltalk is divided into two parts, the first dedicated to "Flipping Scripts," an effort to counter misinformation and challenge the ways in which educators habitually talk about young people in schools. Pollock does an excellent job of condensing recent research on educational inequality and presenting it in an easily digestible format, particularly in Chapter 2, "Inequality Talk." She does not shy away from confronting common myths and provides abundant evidence, for example, that racial disparities in academic achievement result from opportunity gaps. Further, she helpfully re-frames controversial questions in order to stimulate more productive talk among educators about the roots of unequal educational opportunities and outcomes. The second part of Pollock's book, "Designing Schooltalk Infrastructure," attempts to consider the structural constraints that impede communication for equity in schools. She offers many suggestions for re-designing school communication to engage a host of family, community, and school partners in effective talk with and about students. Pollock thoughtfully considers the crucial role of "data" and is rightfully wary of its potential misuse, cautioning against data systems that define students by their test scores. Further, she advocates for opening up the borders of what, when, and how we communicate with students in order to bring their "life experiences" into conversations about academic success. While Pollock's

proposals are extensive and interesting, her failure to adequately consider the substantial investments of time and money implementing her suggestions would involve limits their utility.

This "pie in the sky" approach to re-designing schooltalk infrastructure is not the book's only flaw. As I read, I kept wondering who Pollock thought her audience would be. Though she says that she is writing for "school district people," she includes among her potential readership all of "the key people who shape any young person's fate each day through their everyday actions," including politicians, journalists, community and industry people, and "everyone observing schools" (9). Casting such a wide net seems like a misstep. Much of the information she presents feels too basic, and the way in which she presents it too didactic, to effectively reach those in this "outer ring of people . . . whose acts shape young people's lives" (9). The tone and content of the book actually seem more appropriate for undergraduate teacher education students or brand new teachers. I would even consider using the chapter on "Inequality Talk" in an education-themed first year composition course, for example. Though Pollock seems to have designed this book with in-school professional development in mind, with lots of "Think/Discuss" prompts and "Action Assignments" peppered throughout, I'd bet that the schools and educators who'd embrace professional development around "schooltalk for equity" are a lot savvier than she assumes.

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I also wondered whether Pollock got some unhelpful editorial advice in her choices around book structure. Her format of interjecting highlighted "Think/Discuss" questions and "Action Assignments" throughout the book, as well as many arrows, charts, and bolded snappy phrases in varying fonts, disrupted my flow as a reader. I found myself wanting to skip over what might be the most important parts of the book, her provocative questions, so that I could follow the narrative flow. Furthermore, while some of the "Think/Discuss" scenarios are complex and multi-faceted and get at what Pollock calls the "core tensions" underlying educational inequity, others feel facile and simplistic. She easily resorts to using clichés ("it takes a network to raise a child!" [339]) and cutesy phrases (such as calling small initial actions "Try Tomorrows" [363]) that do a disservice to the seriousness of her topic. Overall, *Schooltalk* reads more like a professional development training manual than a book. I kept imagining that a much shorter, more concise version that could be made available online for free as a PDF would do a better job of reaching its intended wide audience of the not-already-converted.

It would be easier to overlook these quibbles around the book's tone and structure if I did not also have qualms about her overarching argument. While of course words *do* matter, as most radical educators already know, the ways

in which educators talk in schools is neither the "foundation for equity" nor the primary obstacle to equitable educational outcomes. Pollock assigns talk too much power, conflating communication with action, without adequately addressing the material and structural constraints that produce inequitable outcomes in so many schools. Further, Pollock's definition of schooltalk is, at times, frustratingly elastic. She lumps important equity concerns, such as school disciplinary policies or the restructuring of schools into smaller organizational units, into the category of talk, ignoring both the ideological and material obstacles to such substantial educational reforms. In the end, Pollock imbues talk with too much power to shape students' educational aspirations and outcomes. In the process she downplays the role of structural inequalities, such as vast differences in school funding, which do substantially more to determine students' academic opportunities and outcomes than speech. And by focusing on talk, absent a more thorough consideration of material conditions, Pollock ends up embracing a neoliberal stance, advocating for individual solutions to systemic problems, when she argues that "educators who analyze their own everyday acts' contributions to student success and well being . . . actually do better by students" (106). While Pollock's book provides educators many tools to enhance the ways in which we communicate with and about students, improving our schooltalk alone will not be enough to lay a foundation for equity, her stated goal.

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