

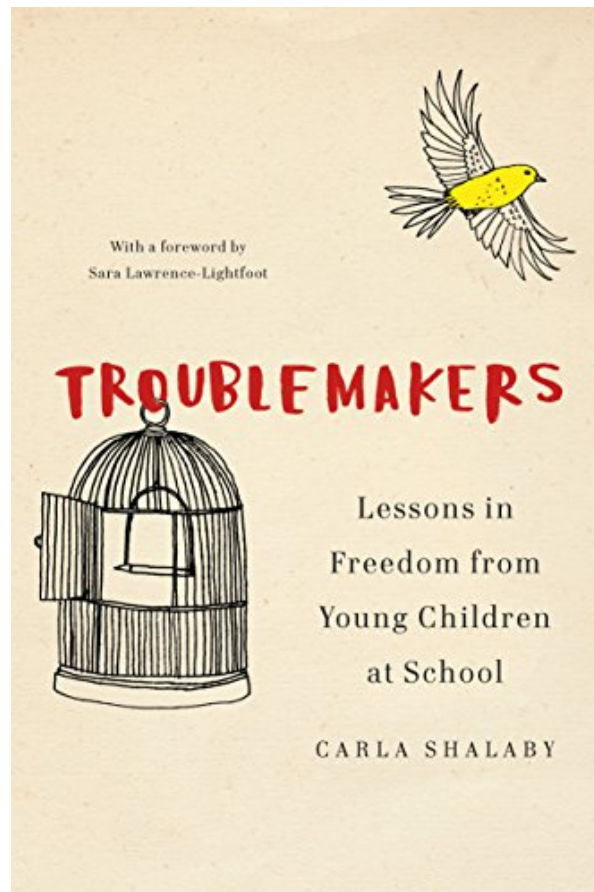
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Review

Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom From Young Children In School

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TROUBLEMAKERS: LESSONS IN FREEDOM FROM YOUNG CHILDREN IN SCHOOL BY CARLA SHALABY (THE NEW PRESS, 2017)

***Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children in School* by Carla Shalaby (The New Press, 2017)**

Carla Shalaby's *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* provides needed perspective to the school discipline reform conversation. Shalaby, a former classroom teacher and university elementary education program director studies first and second-grade "troublemakers." They call out, question, and disrupt their classrooms. At an age when children are first learning about their roles and relationships, these children are frequently punished and ostracized. Shalaby's thesis is that "these troublemakers--rejected and criminalized--are the children from whom we can learn the most about freedom" (p.xx). In Shalaby's analysis, classroom practices of public reprimand, contingent acceptance, and reinforced conformity impede free expression and socialization and diminish loving acceptance and community. Ultimately, she offers deep portraits of "troublemakers" to advocate for a collective response from teachers against the oppressive discipline practices widely institutionalized in schools.

In *Troublemakers*, Shalaby (now a research fellow at the University of Michigan School of Education) spends a year or more following each of four 6-7 year-olds identified by their teachers for their challenging behavior. Shalaby selects well-regarded teachers in two respected schools: Zora and Lucas's suburban school is "relatively wealthy, predominantly white," and Sean and Marcus's urban school is "uniquely racially and socioeconomically diverse" (p. xxxii). Shalaby wants to understand "how children struggle even in these schools because it demonstrates the systematic, cultural, and often invisible workings of *school*, as an institution" (p. 153). The children themselves encompass a diversity of demographic descriptors: gender, race, economic conditions, ethnicity, parental circumstance, and influence of multilingual family. This reveals the unique interplay of personal factors for each child, while at the same time suggesting common threads.

By including children in varying circumstances and schools across socioeconomic contexts, Shalaby provides needed complexity to the intersectional race/class/gender paradigm. She is explicit in identifying racialized inequality in schools broadly and in the individual experiences of the children and families. Of Marcus, a young, black male from a working-class family, and his teacher who is white and female, Shalaby writes that "subordination takes on a particular meaning when it intersects with race, gender, and class... It cannot be ignored, even if the black male is barely seven years old" (p. 148). Individual stories of racial inequality are underscored by the author's inclusion of preschool expulsion statistics from the U.S. Department of Education: Shalaby cites rates as much as 3.8 times higher for black preschoolers than white ones (p. xix).

Shalaby identifies suspension, expulsion, and high rates of challenging behavior as symptoms of systemic problems. In stories about children, teachers, and parents, Shalaby observes how the interaction between school institutions

and children works to erode values of love, freedom, and social justice. Shalby conducts qualitative "portraiture" research, curious where these children are doing well, as she asks "What is good here?," leading her to observe across settings and engage directly with families (p. xxxi). She presents her findings in classroom and home vignettes, embeds quotations from family and teacher interviews, and includes conversations with children. *Troublemaker* is written for a public audience. The weight of her research and expertise is present, but she writes in accessible language and format. Such a choice is deliberate for Shalaby. It reflects a personal commitment to the children she followed and embodies her democratic concerns.

There is a section of *Troublemakers* devoted to each child and arranged around an organizing element of his or her story, such as Zora's inspirational quotes at home and Lucas's favorite book. Shalaby observes children's activities across settings, their relationships, and family circumstances (including single-parenting and incarceration) as well as wider historical, social, and political factors. To illuminate and synthesize, she also incorporates a wide range of companion thinkers: W.E.B. Dubois, Maya Angelou, illustrator Mo Williams, and "Hidden Curriculum" educational researcher Phillip Jackson, among others in her reflections.

With restraint and impact, the author connects the children's stories to national discipline policy debates. She writes of the Los Angeles Unified School District's 2013 decision to stop suspending and expelling students for "willful defiance," broadly interpreted to cover talking back to a teacher, causing a classroom disturbance, and "refusing to take off a hat" (p.109-110). In California, willful defiance charges accounted for over half of all suspensions and a quarter of expulsions, with students of color vastly overrepresented. Shalaby explains that such "[p]unishment for willful defiance does not only violate the individual civil rights of young people. It also threatens democracy more broadly" (p. 110). This is a recurring theme in *Troublemakers*: as Shalaby unpacks the interplay of power, truth, and dignity, the classroom concerns of young children echo larger social justice conversations.

Throughout the book, Shalaby explores the idea of *trouble-making* and the *troublemakers*, passionately revealing how these children are resisting a system that rejects their full selfhood and makes community membership contingent. This is particularly poignant for Zora, a spirited young girl, unintimidated by authority, with a vibrant family life, who is the only brown-skinned child in her classroom. In Shalaby's candid conversation with Zora's teacher, Mrs. Beverly, the educator describes her own internal conflict: a resistance to perpetuate racial power dynamics and a drive to prepare Zora through discipline and conformity (p. 26, 34).

In revealing moments--and there is at least one with each child--Shalaby describes an interaction where a child's response prompts Shalaby to reflect on her own actions and assumptions. For instance, in planning to meet with Lucas, Shalaby believes she will need some tangible prize to coerce

his participation. She makes him some pictures of his favorite character, Sonic. When she invites him to meet with her, however, he goes willingly without the rewards. At the end of their meeting, she gives him the pictures anyway. He says: "You made these just for me?...You really care about me because you know I love Sonic!...Thank you so much!" (p. 65). Shalaby explains: "I required his cooperation and I was trying, in a mild way, to coerce his participation...But Lucas assumed the best of me, and he humbled me" (p. 65). In Sean's story, Shalaby resists her own "teacher" training and permits Sean extended time at the park: "I was trained in consistency, in following through... Was all well that ended well?" (p. 93). Teachers reading *Troublemakers* may recognize these moments. Often young students, least empowered by circumstances but also least indoctrinated, can cut through stances of obedience and authority and inadvertently end up becoming our teachers if we let them.

Shalaby candidly includes moments that serve as profound, and troubling, instances of "the wisdom of children." Insights from Marcus may be the most troubling in this respect. He values personal relationship but his connections are chronically curtailed. For instance, Shalaby's computer becomes a tangible point of conversation. One day, Shalaby sees Marcus is "ramped up;" he has been to see his brother and teenage sister in a nearby classroom and his sister was crying. (Later Shalaby learns they will be going to visit their father in prison that evening.) Shalaby describes their exchange:

"Its my brother's birthday," he tells me when I sit.

"I know," I reply, short because I don't want to be caught chatting him up.

"Did you type a lot today?" He asks. I don't respond. I am trying so hard to respect [the teacher's] authority that I resort to ignoring him. I deny my own knowledge that he needs to be authentically heard (p. 132-133).

The children's desire for social connection with adults and peers manifests in calling out, refusing to obey, responding bluntly, and cracking jokes. They struggle to make friends. Sean's attempts with his classmate, Ilan, are frequently rebuked. Sean defies group assignments to be with Ilan. Sean's bids are reinforced when the boys share a rare moment of laughter--even if it is calling each other names to the teacher's disapproval. As Shalaby concludes: "These children risked punishment, risked their relationships with the teacher, to carve out a thread of belonging in the social fabric of the classroom" (p. 161).

Shalaby's "portraiture" approach also brings needed engagement with the children's family life and avoids deficit analysis related to school behavior. Rather than seeing family as adjacent to school, or reporting home life second-hand, Shalaby talks to families, visits homes, and sees parents and children in relation. Her conversations with parents are touching and illuminating, situating the children's behavior patterns in context. This is particularly helpful in the story of Sean. Shalaby sees his consistent objections, the source of power-struggle in the classroom, are met with greater acceptance and accommodation by his mother. Marcus is the only child that Shalaby does not visit at home. In describing the circumstances that prevent the

visit, including parental hesitation and family demands, Shalaby acknowledges an understandable lack of trust and reflects on the constellation of factors for Marcus, including parental incarceration, behavioral challenges, demands of family responsibilities under one parent, as well as race and class, which may have prevented the visit. This consideration itself is an important moment in *Troublemakers*, reflecting with humility the circumstances surrounding teacher and family engagement.

Throughout *Troublemakers*, Shalaby notes Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus's determination to be authentically seen. Instead, they alternate between being *invisible* or *hypervisible*, objects of attention and ridicule, nuisances to be ignored and marginalized (p. 165). Shalaby finds that the children spent a significant portion of their time segregated from their class due to disciplinary and social ostracization: "...the more they misbehaved to earn a place in community, the more they were excluded from the community" (p. 161). By the end of book, the reader has seen all four children prescribed medicine for ADHD or anger. Shalaby does not make individual judgements but describes the complex factors for the families in making decisions about medication. Broadly, however, the author is concerned. She calls for a moral account of "the extent of our willingness to change children, coupled with the extent of our unwillingness to change schools" (p. 159-160).

Concluding *Troublemakers*, Shalaby makes specific calls for open-hearted teaching and engagement in social activism. While it is hard to arrive at the final section unmoved, teachers may wonder how to accomplish these changes with the pressures of school norms and high-stakes assessments. In a final section, "A Letter to Teachers," she rejects the notion of a set of tips and strategic accommodations. Shalaby evokes freedom and love as qualities of practice and ways of being. She seeks understanding of these qualities not in abstract definition but by first wondering what they might look and feel like in the classroom. This wondering, often in the form of questioning, allows Shalaby to draw out an intuitive response from readers, which she extends using examples from her case studies.

Speaking directly to teachers, Shalaby contrasts "The Regular Way" with "Towards a Loving Way" of teaching. Typical practices like posting "classroom rules and norms" are juxtaposed with conversations about "the meaning of freedom, and the rights and responsibilities of free people" (p. 175). She suggests an alternative to exclusionary discipline: Considering "a human need that the behavior may be signaling, and decide together on a way you will try to meet it. Revisit, over time, whether this attempt has been successful. Are people suffering less?" (p. 176). Shalaby provides guiding questions for classroom practices: *Can we wonder, together, how the problem we are seeing in our classroom might be related to a problem we see in the world?* (p. 178). Having familiarized the reader with the stories of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus, Shalaby takes up Marcus's story specifically and invites the reader to consider how working "Towards a Loving Way" might offer an alternative classroom experience.

While Shalaby's focus on love and freedom might seem overly abstract or unrealistic, it indicates her stance, which asserts the full humanity of young children at the same time that it interrogates the instrumentalization of schooling. Early in *Troublemakers*, Shalaby emphasizes "institutional and state-sanctioned violence—historic and ongoing genocide and terror; criminalization and mass incarceration; segregation and poverty; patriarchy, homophobia, and sexual violence; colonialization and imperialism; xenophobia, racism, and the enduring supremacy of whiteness" (p. xvii). She wonders about the extent to which the schooling experience promotes and perpetrates such violence. By the conclusion of her book, Shalaby has built a compelling case for the reader, even one unfamiliar with early childhood education, that these concerns about violence, power, and agency are manifest in the elementary classroom.

In contrast to the violence of the American education system, Shalaby refuses to pathologize the children whom she studies. Instead the author seeks to understand the children's behavior as indicators of systemic problems, and she does not evoke behavior and mental health diagnosis for classroom defiance. Rather, Shalaby advances a vision for children free *from* subjection, abuse, and ostracization, as well as free *to* express, exercise autonomy, and form relationships in the classroom.

She calls on teachers to look to children's imaginative capacity to envision a way forward, pointing out that children may be keenly able to see alternative paths. She further suggests bringing whole classroom communities into conversation about their interactions. These conversations should be entered into not with the intent of finding a consequence or answer. Rather, the intention is to model inclusion, recognize behavior as social not individual, and "invite curiosity, understanding, forgiveness, transformation" (p. 177-178). Shalaby uses the language of activist thinker Grace Lee Boggs, suggesting that students may become "solutionaries", revolutionary problem solvers with audacious imaginations" (p. 179). In this vision, the classroom becomes a site where "problems of power" are collectively explored in order to learn how to enact change together.

Shalaby ends *Troublemakers* on the topic of collective action. While Shalaby finds individual work necessary, she also points to organized change. She lists resources and references for reading, teaching, and organizing. (All royalties from *Troublemakers* go towards supporting Education for Liberation Network, for which Shalaby co-edits an annual social justice lesson plan publication: *Planning for Social Justice*.) Shalaby's concludes with "A Note to All Readers" from the 2016 Michigan teachers' strike, which reads as a kind of field report addendum. This provides a needed connection between classroom resistance and social and political change. The final message of *Troublemakers* is one of solidarity. Shalaby writes: "The visible activism of

organized educators in cities across the country is an invitation to all of us--educators and non-educators alike--to participate in their lessons" (p. 187). It is work that requires courage, humility, and love and which the stories of Zora, Lucas, Sean, and Marcus inspire.



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