

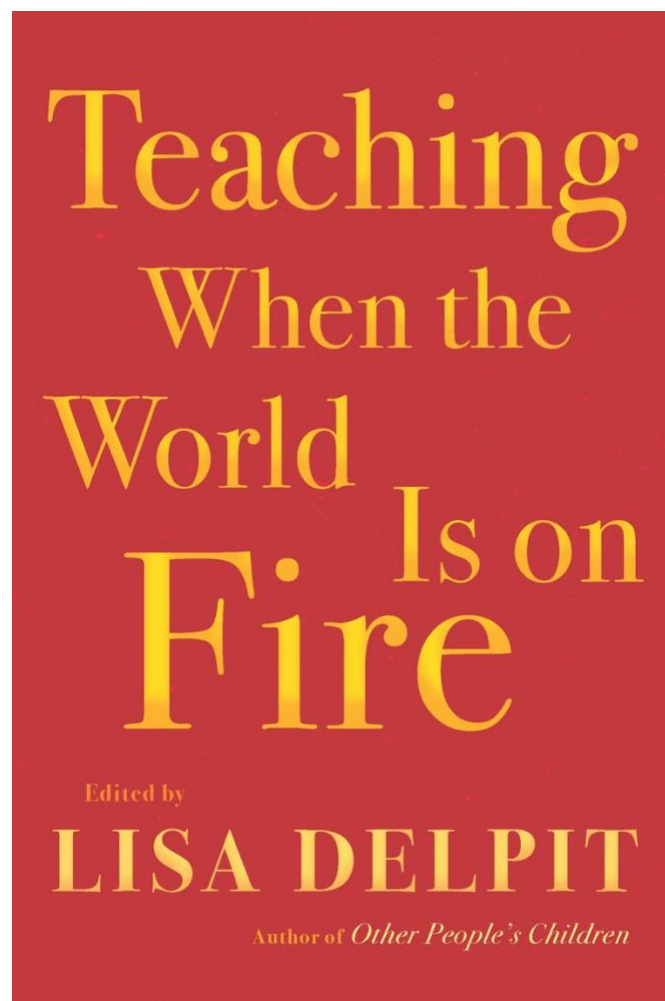
RADICAL TEACHER

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

Review

Teaching When the World Is on Fire

Reviewed by Tanya Friedman



TEACHING WHEN THE WORLD IS ON FIRE BY LISA DELPIT

Delpit, Lisa. (2019). *Teaching When the World Is on Fire*. (The New Press, 2019)

At dinner recently, I found myself recounting a scene from Ocean Vuong's exquisite memoir, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, which led to a conversation with my 11-year-old daughter about the Vietnam war that touched on the draft and its racial and socioeconomic disproportionality, the country's treatment of veterans, napalm, and the dubious motivation for US involvement. She sank down in her chair and asked if there ever was a time the world wasn't so bad. Her nascent political consciousness has evolved in the shadow of Trump and his never-ending affronts to the safety of people and the earth, and somehow she thought there had been a time before Trump when things were better. In the introduction to her new book, *Teaching When the World Is on Fire*, Lisa Delpit speculates that for children in the United States today the onslaught of "racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, irrationality, and despotic blunder" and general loss of moral high ground from government leadership has made "the world feels more frightening now" (xii) than ever before. As Delpit unpacks this idea, she asks what it means for children to "find themselves victimized by their highest leaders and the policies they enact?" (xii).

The 27 chapters (plus a list of books about immigration for young readers) that compose the volume each grapple with the question of what education can and should be for young people whose lives, families, communities and planet are regularly disregarded, denigrated and attacked. Organized by theme into sections titled Politics Matters, Safety Matters, Race Matters, Gender and Sex Ed Matter, Climate Matters, and Culture Matters, *Teaching When the World Is on Fire* includes essays, advice, anecdotes and lists from well-known educators, theorists and activists like Pedro Noguera, Bill Ayers, Chris Emdin, Bill Bigelow and Mica Pollock, as well as offerings from other academics, journalists, principals and teachers. The chapters reflect Delpit's belief that teachers are among those who can (and should) instill hope in students by giving them the knowledge and tools to navigate our unjust world and take action for justice. Teachers need support to educate and empower students, especially in a political moment when they—and their most vulnerable students—are so often disrespected, blamed, or overlooked. Delpit positions the collection as an offering of solidarity, encouragement and inspiration for teachers, and many of the essays do that in insightful, innovative and heartfelt ways.

As a teacher and teacher educator, I was drawn to the chapters that described how to help students interrogate challenging issues in their lives and communities in ways that maintain hope. Julia Putnam's account of a challenging moment at her school illustrates the paradigm shift, ongoing self-reflection, and time commitment that schoolwide Restorative Justice demands of adults better than anything else I've read. Frederick Scott Salyers reminds us that "it's a near impossible task to educate Black children in a society that constantly interrupts that work with violence" (55) and shares the texts and methods he employs to create space for students of color to name, move through, and hopefully heal from the daily trauma of

an unsafe world. In Camila Arze Torres Goitia's description of her students' remarkable response to their school administration's lack of urgency around sexual harassment, the students' ability to organize shines, while Goitia's critical self-reflections on how and when to offer guidance are as useful as the narrative of her students' thoughtful and inclusive activism.

Teaching When the World Is on Fire provides a middle ground between theory and prescription. Instead of examples to replicate, there are strategies others have used to tackle complicated issues, compelling stories of student activism, and models of self-reflection and collaboration. When I introduce critical literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy to preservice teachers in their literacy courses and to teachers in professional development sessions, they inevitably ask for examples. Critical literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy hinge on teachers listening to the actual humans in the room, coming to know and value their lived experiences, histories and cultural contexts, and responding with curriculum and instruction that affirms and expands their identities and ways of knowing, so while I am all for examples, I am wary of supplying blueprints or lesson plans for teachers to implement. Still I understand that centering students' interests, communities and cultural identities in your curriculum and instruction is not easy to do or envision, especially if you've never experienced or witnessed it or if you were educated during NCLB, as many preservice teachers I work with were. Most chapters could, at least, prompt important discussions and reflection, while others will inspire replication and action.

As I read the volume, clear uses and specific audiences came to mind immediately for many of the essays. When I finished Dale Weiss's narrative of young students' shifting perspectives on gender self-determination, I immediately texted a second-grade teacher who is doing a year-long inquiry around gender as an entry point for critical consciousness development, eager to share some of the activities Weiss describes. A fourth-grade teacher has been struggling with helping students recognize and unpack how forces of structural racism impact social issues the students chose as the foci for their service learning projects (littering, hunger and homelessness); Cami Toloukian's account of the steps she took to help her Kindergarten students understand the Syrian Refugee crisis gives multiple examples of how to approach complicated social issues, along with details of her planning and results. Teachers and preservice teachers I work with often struggle with how to take up some of the political and racial issues that students raise, and H. Richard Milner IV's essay, "Yes, Race and Politics Belong in the Classroom," offers actionable tips that direct teachers to hold both an academic and socio-emotional lens as they consider how and when to engage students. Similarly, I felt relieved to read James Loewen's chapter that advocates for teaching Confederate (and all) history accurately as opposed to leaving it out or accepting the narrative currently perpetuated by the alt-right. Loewen's perspective may help teachers and student teachers, who feel pressure to teach "both sides" and worry about teaching ideas that may conflict with what their students' families espouse, to remember there are historical facts and accepted ideals to ground the conversations.

The essays, however, are uneven, and some lacked the urgency, creativity and radical response the world on fire merits. The most compelling chapters contained the author or teacher's reflexivity, their reckoning with how to support critical perspectives in a world that devalues critical consciousness. Only a few chapters, notably Amy Harmon's incisive journalistic take on teaching climate science in Trump country and Toloukian's aforementioned teaching about Syria and refugees, dealt directly with student or parent resistance. When teachers examine their internal and external barriers to raising politicized issues with students, fear of resistance from administration or student families comes up frequently. More guidance on how to respond to resistance would go a long way to making the essays more immediately relevant to educators in a broader range of contexts and to those just beginning this work.

While I found most chapters valuable, there are not many people I would urge to read the book in its entirety. I believe the organization of the anthology contributed to my sense that the sum was not greater than the parts in this collection. Despite the clarity of grouping the essays by content, I found myself recategorizing them by format, by whose story and voice were foregrounded, by the age of the students involved, or by the site and drivers of the activism. In the introduction Delpit points to societal forces of racism, sexism and anti-intellectualism that the president has intensified and accelerated. Explicitly pulling these threads through the individual essays, examining how capitalism, misogyny and white supremacy collectively and separately drive the crises the chapters address, would knit the essays together and also situate the book in a larger historical context, which matters since assaults on people of color, women, poor people, and the environment predate—and will outlast—Trump.

Ultimately, it was the stories from teacher's classrooms, their efforts, creativity and insight, and their students' resistance and activism that moved me most and which will inspire teachers to help students take action to work toward a world that is, at least, better than before. I shared several of the stories with my daughter. We talked about Carla Shalaby's account of a student who gently interrupts his teacher's urgency around the curriculum to assert the importance of "being human together in school" and about Deborah Almontaser's suggestions for making schools more inclusive of Muslim children. She was interested in the different ways students protested and organized around Black Lives Matter in Seattle and climate change in Portland, and we talked about the importance of individual and group action. I also remembered to tell her about the demonstrations and marches against the Vietnam war that did have an effect on the United States military finally leaving.

My biggest takeaway from *Teaching When the World Is on Fire* is that we cannot highlight and publicize the activist work of teachers, collectives and youth leaders enough. But we need to do this alongside our own efforts, lest the expectation that young people lead become another

burden we lay on them. I think this is in line with Delpit's vision that the collection inspire readers to engage, empower, listen, guide, as well as follow youth. They are the literal and metaphoric antidote to our burning world.



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