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THIS IS NOT A TEST: A NEW NARRATIVE ON RACE, CLASS, AND EDUCATION. JOSÉ VILSON. CHICAGO, IL: HAYMARKET BOOKS, 2014. 220 PP.

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For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

—Paulo Freire, 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

I was in the midst of reviewing a new book on the critical role districts play in school turnaround efforts when I attended the First Annual Network in Public Education (NPE) Conference in Austin, Texas in March 2014. The conference was invigorating and exciting. At it, I had the pleasure of meeting countless heroes of public education—teachers, students, administrators, parents, and other activists who, despite the prevalent condescension wrought by the current policy environment, have stayed positive and continue to fight to revitalize public education and protect the democratic nature of schooling.

After the conference, as I sat waiting for my plane to take off for Philadelphia and struggling to make it through another data-driven profile of an "innovative" district, I had an epiphany. I was fired up and excited about the politically engaged and impassioned group of educators I met at NPE. So, rather than continuing to suffer through a review of a book that I found dry and uninspiring as I attempted to straddle the line between academia and activism, I thought: Why not use this book review as an opportunity to highlight the story of one of public education's heroes for a scholarly audience? Why not seize the moment and use the power of storytelling to humanize politically charged conversations about education reform and the teaching profession? After all, as Phillip Cantor, a teacher at the NPE conference, beautifully stated: "Data doesn't win hearts and minds; stories win hearts and minds."

I rushed to message José Vilson, a man who wears many hats. He is an educator, activist, father, poet, web designer, writer, and renowned education blogger. I had the pleasure of meeting him at the NPE Conference and was struck by his message of inclusivity on a Common Core State Standards (CCSS) panel that had seemed destined for controversy. I implored him to send me an advanced copy of his forthcoming book so that I could review it. He agreed.

Vilson's book, *This is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education*, is 228 pages of raw, soulful prose that reads as if it were a single spoken word poem rather than 27 distinct chapters. These chapters are neatly organized into three parts that narrate Vilson's life, describing his path to teaching, his experiences as both a teacher and teacher leader, and his growth into an education activist. As he tells his story, Vilson reflects on his past experiences, analyzing race- and class-based obstacles he encountered growing up; interjecting anecdotes from his more recent years teaching; and incorporating lively commentary on his lived experiences, teaching, and education policies. From his roots in an impoverished neighborhood on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Syracuse University where he earned a degree in computer science, Vilson paints a vivid picture of how he defied teachers' expectations, overcame adversity (and a rejection from Teach for America), and worked hard to follow his intuition—that he was born to teach. As Vilson (2014) puts it: "When I step into a classroom, it feels like everything else I have done with my life until now was meant to direct me there, like everything I went through was training for this" (p. 112). The pseudo-chronological structure of his narrative with an emphasis on critical reflection that ties the past to the present is appropriate, if not deliberate. In the introduction to the book, Vilson (2014) writes: "What you're about to read is the most honest account of my life up to this point and how my sense of self has influenced my identity as an educator" (p. 6). That sentence really says it all. Vilson's book is about race, class, and education, but it also transcends these important topics to tell a coming-of-age tale about stepping into one's identity, showing up for what you believe in, and being brave enough to raise your voice and share your truth.

Vilson's book is drastically different from any book I have read on public education reform. His writing is impassioned but not acrimonious. Consider this excerpt from his chapter: "To Make Sure It's Broke (On Teacher Voice)":

The more experienced I have become as a teacher, the more I have started to filter out people who don't bring any solutions to the table—even those whose educational ideologies match mine. It's important for teachers to come together and air our frustrations. But some people seem to love swimming in quicksand, hoping others will join them, as if the movement downward is an actual movement. I love making an irreverent joke about Arne Duncan's latest speech as much as the next activist, but after a while, my question is always, "OK, and so?" When sarcasm and vitriol are the only ways of discussing educational policy, we all lose. (p. 171)

Vilson reflects on, but does not rant against, testing or current education policies. He does not attempt to persuade the reader to choose a side in the great debate on how to reform public education, but rather emphasizes the nuances of policies and the value of thinking critically about them. And, while Vilson does share his opinions on No Child Left Behind, the Race to the Top, Common Core State Standards, and other education policies, he does not do so in a way that denigrates those who may not share his beliefs. In essence, Vilson offers criticisms of our public education system without being critical in a negative sense, creating a safe, inclusive space that will hopefully inspire others to share their own stories and experiences with education.

At first I found it difficult to place Vilson's book within the broader context of the literature on teaching. Vilson covers a lot of ground topic-wise—discussing everything from teacher evaluations and testing to murder and racism—and, he writes in a unique lyrical and autobiographical style that stands in stark contrast to well-known academic profiles of the teaching profession (Lortie, 1975; Rousmaniere, 1997). Initially, his intended audience seemed ambiguous. Reflecting back on his book, I see that Vilson's audience is anyone with a stake in public education and, perhaps most importantly, those who, like me, work in public education but could use a reminder about the prominent role race and culture play in shaping students' and teachers' identities, and therefore the implementation and outcomes of our policies.

To put it simply, Vilson (2014) schooled me on the power of language and culture with his purposeful choice to code switch—which Vilson defines as switching "between the English spoken in the schools and the English spoken by the broke" (p. 38)—throughout the book as well as his frequent references to rappers such as Rakim, KRS-One, and Immortal Technique that left me searching the internet to unpack the meaning of his prose. In refusing to alter his authentic voice to cater to the needs of each and every reader, I believe Vilson demonstrates a profound truth about teaching and learning and the intersection of race, culture, and education, namely, that it is critical to view learning as a human act (e.g., Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001). Just as it is important to meet students where they are at and take their stories—their background and culture—into consideration when crafting curriculum (Dewey 1938; Freire, 1970), it is important to meet teachers where they are at, truly hearing their voices and considering their experiences and culture when crafting policies and planning their continuing education (Korthagen, Kessels, Koster, Lagerwerf, & Wubbels, 2001). This is perhaps the most valuable lesson Vilson's narrative has to offer any reader: To effect change at any level, one must get personal.

For policymakers, this is not a new lesson. In fact, it is a lesson supported by decades of research on the gap between policy and practice (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Elmore, 1995; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000; Dutro, Fisk, Koch, Roop, & Wixson, 2002) as well as by research on the critical role sensemaking plays in the successful implementation of reforms (Peterson, McCartney, & Elmore, 1996; Spillane, 1999; Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; McLaughlin, 1987). Essentially, if we wish to improve public education, we must first recognize teachers as the real changemakers (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane, 1999), and second, we must view teachers as learners whose stories, experiences, and backgrounds are just as important as those of the students they teach. To effect change in schools and classrooms, policymakers and administrators must meet teachers where they are at and engage in collective sensemaking with them, thereby facilitating the development of practices that are aligned with policy goals and grounded in the practical realities of the teachers' classrooms and schools (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; King & Newmann, 2001; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; Lieberman, 1996; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000). This collaboration, inquiry, and reflection facilitates the continual improvement of the teaching practice and helps teachers, administrators, and schools to make informed decisions that can further the learning of their students (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Dutro et al., 2002; King & Newmann).

These conversations about teacher identity and sensemaking parallel a critical question Vilson (2014) posed in a chapter on creating safe spaces for students: "How do we as educators recognize each person's humanity?" (p. 120). In an effort to emphasize the critical role of teacher identity and voice in crafting and implementing effective policies and reforms, I wish to expand this sentiment and ask: How do we as researchers, policymakers, and administrators—as humans—recognize each person's humanity?

To begin, we can take Vilson's advice to start actively seeking and valuing teacher input on policies and reforms. As Vilson (2014) argues: "Anyone who claims to represent us should either come from our ranks or keep their fingers on the pulse of what teachers think and experience in schools every day" (p. 176). I agree. And, to understand what teachers think and experience in schools every day, we, as current or future policymakers and administrators, must be willing to listen and learn from those with boots on the ground. However, seeking and valuing teacher input is only one piece of the puzzle. While Vilson's rhetoric

underscores the importance of recognizing teachers' humanity and shaping policies that are both inclusive and respectful of teachers' experiences, the book itself underscores the importance of teachers developing their own voices and sharing their personal stories. As Vilson (2014) points out: "We [educators] also have to believe in ourselves as powerful change agents or else we perpetuate the same power structures we say we're against" (p. 108). There is work to be done by all parties: Researchers, policymakers, and administrators need to work on listening to and respecting the input of teachers, and teachers need to work to develop a voice, which Vilson (2014) defines as "*the collective and individual expression of meaningful, professional opinion based on classroom experience and expertise*" (p. 175).

Improved professional development that treats teachers as learners (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999), promotes inquiry and reflection (Weiner, 2002; Lieberman, 1996), builds a shared knowledge base (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Little, 1993), and creates opportunities to learn from external networks (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002; Sparks & Hirsh, 2000) is one way to promote both the development of, and respect for, teachers' voices. Once policymakers begin to see teachers as part of the solution rather than an impediment to school reform, we can make the "shift from policies that seek to control or direct the work of teachers to strategies intended to *develop the capacity* of schools and teachers to be responsible for student learning" (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996, p. 203). In other words, we can engage in bottom-up reform. As Little (1993) explains: "One test of teachers' professional development is its capacity to equip teachers individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters, and well-informed critics of reform" (p. 130). Professional development is a policy lever that has the ability to create space for teachers to hone and share their stories, empowering them as agents of reform and additionally providing them with the knowledge, tools, and opportunities to reflect on and refine their teaching practice in ways that ensure the continuous learning that is absolutely necessary to reform our schools and improve public education.

What Vilson did not receive from either his training as a New York Teaching Fellow or his professional development as a public school teacher, he sought out on his own. Tapping into social networks, grassroots movements, and rap music to both discover and hone his voice, Vilson created his own professional development, positioning himself as a powerful change agent. The result of his critical reflection and inquiry is a fierce piece on what it means to teach and be a teacher. As Vilson (2014) puts it:

After coming along on this journey with me, I hope you've gotten a sense of what it is like to teach—not just in urban schools, but within the parameters of any space in which we are beholden to a certain set of children, a certain set of adults, and a certain set of conditions. These are the variables that determine the type of teacher you become. And of course, the teacher you become is an extension of the person you are at that moment. (p. 211)

This book is a product of the inquiry and reflection that anyone involved in public education should engage in so they can share their story and leverage their voice to influence policy and reform. It is my sincere hope that Vilson's courage in baring his soul will inspire others to do the same, engendering important conversations about the intersection of culture, race, and education—conversations about what teachers bring with them to the proverbial educational table, and why it matters for school reform.

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