

The Metaphor

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Among the millions of words in the thousands of articles and books about urban education written during the last couple of decades, I find none has the power, truth, and simplicity of Jean Anyon's metaphor about urban educational reform: "Attempting to fix inner city schools without fixing the city in which they are embedded is like trying to clean the air on one side of a screen door."

In the 16 years since Jean wrote the metaphor, the wisdom of her insight has been validated by the race, ethnic, and social class gaps in school achievement and attainment indicators that persist in the face of local, state, and federal reforms. Yes, yes, it is true that some of the test score gaps are closing in some grades in some subjects. Without dismissing these hard won accomplishments, it is still necessary to point out that the slight narrowing of the test score gaps is not equivalent educationally or morally to eliminating them. That's the point. Their persistence reflects the fundamental bankruptcy of major school reform efforts of which No Child Left Behind is emblematic. Jean's metaphor helps us understand why decades of reform have essentially failed to make more than a superficial dent in the larger problems of urban education.

Like so much of what she wrote throughout her academic career, Jean's early works concretizing and theorizing the striking

class and race differences in elementary school opportunities to learn grew out of her experiences as a classroom school teacher. Later, her position as professor and chair of the education department at Rutgers, Newark required her to go into the local schools to supervise students in their teacher education program. *Ghetto Schooling* arose from the years Jean spent in Newark's schools. Mark Zuckerberg's donated millions to Newark's schools are not likely to erase the squalor, dysfunction, corruption, and miseducation that lead to the alienation and disengagement Jean witnessed and then described in painful detail in *Ghetto Schooling*. She expanded her critique, analysis, and prescriptions for school reform in her 2005 book *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and a New Social Movement*, in which she connects school reform to broader social reforms. She calls for a new social movement to address growing economic and racial inequities and places education at its center. She completed the manuscript for the 2nd edition of *Radical Possibilities* weeks before she died.

Jean's early work had a profound effect on my formation as a sociologist of education. I first met Jean through her early writings when I was finishing my dissertation in the mid 1980s. A fellow graduate student offered me a copy of one of her articles in response to a conversation we had had regarding some finding with which I was wrestling. I inhaled her articles "Social

Class and School Knowledge” , “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work” , and “Ideology and U.S. History Textbooks.” I still recall my reactions to reading them. They were the missing pieces in my own theoretical understanding of my own findings. How had I missed encountering them? I was both frustrated that I’d never read her work before and grateful that I finally had. She was my new hero: a cogent writer who grounded her analysis of urban education in the messy reality of the classrooms, an intellectual with a seemingly fearless political edge and an acid tongue that dissolved the empty rhetoric that passed as the conventional wisdom in the field.

The first time I heard Jean speak she was discussant at a session of the American Educational Research Association. She was the essence of cool. After the authors presented their papers, she strode up to the podium, noteless, with a lidded styrofoam cup in her hand (it was probably tea) wearing European-style grey-tinted glasses. Her demeanor was memorable, too. I recall her as confident and impatient, and her remarks as sharp and on target. She was impatient because while the papers had this or that strength, they collectively failed to identify the core structural issues underlying what the authors’ reported. Sitting in the audience, I recall thinking that she nailed the essence of both the authors’ contributions and their papers’ shortcomings, all while peering out of the fashionable grey tinted glasses and sipping her hot beverage. My hero was amazing in the flesh, too.

A couple of years later I met Jean when she was one of my roommates at an academic conference. The two other colleagues with

whom I was planning to share the room invited Jean to be the 4th person. Share a room with Jean? I initially felt like a groupie getting to meet the rock star. But Jean disarmed my hero worship with her lack of pretension and humor. We hit it off immediately and became friends, confidants, and colleagues. She opened her home to me whenever I came to New York and for years we were roommates at academic conferences.

I learned how she had to balance her career as a public intellectual and academic with being a single mother in Manhattan. She explained to me that the decade long gap in her research productivity that ended with *Ghetto School’s* publication was how she coped with the enormous demands of being a single mother of a young child, a department chair, and professor in a teacher education program.

Jean adored her daughter, was immensely proud of her brother’s family, indulged her small dogs, nurtured and rigorously trained her students to be teachers and scholars, inspired and supported her colleagues, and played with her friends. With them she was generous, loving, and forgiving. But she did not suffer fools lightly, as those who were the targets of her anger or criticism can attest. This was especially true for educators, scholars, politicians, or policy analyst who did not place the well being of children, especially low-income youth, ahead of their own personal or professional self-interest.

Jean had a good sense of herself and she taught me some valuable life lessons. Once I shared a conference hotel room with her and another person who didn’t want the air conditioner running at night. We went

to bed. I was hot and miserable but feared I'd anger the AC-adverse roommate. After 30 minutes or so Jean jumped up, slapped on the air and said, "Sorry, I need the air for my allergies; use another blanket." I slipped off to sleep thrilled by her self-assertiveness and the cool air. During one of my visits to her home I witnessed a particularly heated argument between Jean and her then-young teenaged daughter who had not yet learned to control her tongue. At the time I was having a particularly difficult time with my own teenaged daughter so I empathized with Jean's anguish. I recall Jean excusing herself to spend 20 minutes vigorously exercising on her Nordic track, explaining that doing so helped her dissipate her anger and be a patient parent to her child. Jean's deep and healthy relationship with her adult daughter was one of the singular joys of her later life.

Let me end this reflective essay about Jean with two final anecdotes. Once Jean explained to me the origins of her last name. Her immigrant father arrived at Ellis Island and was asked his name. He responded that he was anyone, by which he was referring to the universality of the working man. The clerk turned "anyone" to "anyon." I don't know how accurate my memory of this anecdote is but I like the story of her last name's origins because it captures the groundedness, humanity, and the left politics apparent in her life and what she wrote. I end with the second one. A couple of years ago Jean got new glasses. She playfully called them her "post-modern glasses" because the lenses fit slightly outside the boundaries of the frames. They attractively fit Jean's face and aptly captured her approach to challenging the mainstream framing of urban education reform.

So here we are in 2013. Income and wealth inequality are approaching levels last seen in the gilded age; levels of racial, ethnic, and class segregation in public schools are approaching those last seen in the late 1960s; student demographics in California, Florida, and Texas where children of color are a majority foreshadow the coming transformation of the national public school population; and income inequality, school segregation, and student demographics continue to predict school outcomes even though we've had decades of reforms. Why? I believe Jean's metaphor is a starting point for any useful answers. Educators, politicians, and policy-makers would be wise to revisit the metaphor and heed its essential wisdom.

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