Book Review: Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal

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Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal

By Bettina L. Love

St. Martin’s Press, 2023, 352 pages.
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Bettina L. Love’s Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal (2023) perspicuously describes the epistemological and ontological violence Black children in the United States (U.S.) school system endure because of white supremacy, white rage, institutional racism, neoliberalism, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Love makes this clear in her articulation of the educational survival complex:

... the exploitation of compulsory education by the ever-expanding carceral state, private corporations, wealth managers, philanthropy, education reformers, local and state politicians, real estate, the testing industry, and each U.S. President to fill school buildings with Black

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children who are educated to make profits for the uber-rich and to undo American’s democracy. (p. 9)

Here, Love shows how the education survival complex centers (and recenters) all stakeholders responsible for disrupting Black children’s quality of education and right to dream.

Love begins Punished for Dreaming: How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal by identifying the entry point on the assault of Black education: white rage after Brown v. Board of Education. Drawing on Anderson’s (2016) work, White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide, Love emphasizes white rage is what built America’s institutions, cunningly crafting laws, policies, covenants, and approaches that undercut democracy, halt Black advancement, and cage Black bodies while leaving white supremacy intact and often even stronger. Anderson argues the trigger of white rage, inevitably, is Black advancement. It is not the mere presence of Black people that is the problem; rather, it is Blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. Throughout the first chapter, Love encapsulates how Black individuals faced repercussions. Following the Brown v. Board of Education ruling, over 38,000 Black teachers lost their jobs, signaling systemic challenges. Love details how white rage evolved to hinder Black progress. From 1975 to 1985, Black teachers dwindled by 66% due to legal displacements and certification demands.

Love then delves into systems and laws responsible for the punishment of Black children and the schools they attend. She highlights how, for example, in 1991, U.S. President George H. W. Bush launched “America 2000: An Education Strategy” focusing on school choice and standardized testing. Love continues with a critique of the promise of school choice, noting its damaging effects on Black children attending majority-white schools. Despite seeking better education opportunities, Black children face soul-crushing social challenges. Similarly, Dumas (2014) portrays schools as sites of Black suffering. While at face value, many of these schools felt like great opportunities and moments of temporary advancement of potential life chances, Love emphasizes:
the burdens of choice, travel, and risk falling on non-white families. Then, as now, school choices rely on Black resiliency, Black ambition, and Black people’s relentless pursuit of education to create a facade that our children have choices in life to mitigate racism and anti-Blackness. (p. 67)

In the following chapter called “Scraps,” Love jarringly describes the extent to which the burdens of school choice, travel, and risk impact Black families seeking an equal and equitable education. Love illustrates how the intersections of neoliberal educational policy, private corporations, and the federal government work strategically to siphon public money and sell Black children’s education. Love urges readers to reflect on the role private corporations, neoliberal policies, home and virtual schools, and vouchers have served in funneling out public funding from public schools populated by Black students; Black students and families are left with educational scraps.

Throughout the next chapter, ”No Entrepreneur Left Behind,” Love meticulously exposes the individuals and institutions responsible for disrupting Black education and the right to education. Teach for America (TFA) is highlighted as a central agent in this destruction. Love illustrates how TFA experimented with placing uncertified teachers in classes with vulnerable students, ultimately jeopardizing Black children’s lives and education. Love also discusses the transformation of white rage into white paternalism and a savior complex, demonstrating the direct link between white supremacy and Black educational abandonment over recent decades, asserting that such disparities are not accidental. She underscores the disparate treatment within education, noting the scarcity of TFA teachers in suburban schools and the absence of uncredentialed teachers in predominantly white, middle, or upper-class institutions.

Love subsequently underscores the theme of erasure, examining white resistance to accountability and culturally responsive pedagogy, and revealing how lawmakers – like former President Donald Trump and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis – have enacted bans on books, theories, and even words while attacking positions like directors of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Love depicts these actions as contemporary manifestations
of decades of organized, well-funded, and cruel educational white rage, resulting in Black erasure.

Towards the book’s end, Love uncovers the contradiction between what DEI is on paper versus what is in practice. In practice, as Love puts it, the result of DEI and anti-racism amounts to attempting to help white people learn to be less racist. While she attacks the symbolic approach to DEI, Love also emphasizes how real, meaningful, and substantive equity work attempts to repair, undo, heal, and atone for generations of violence, trauma, and racial, educational, and economic inequities while simultaneously recognizing Black people as a mighty people with a beautiful history of resistance, refusal, strength, and creativity. One compelling illustration is through the experience of Lia, a DEI director at a predominantly white school in Virginia, whose job is supporting students of color who deal with racist incidents in school and helping white teachers, donors, and parents understand why equity and inclusion work is important. Love shows the hypocrisy of the DEI position, not for the work itself, but for its limited capacity to uphold and transform:

Black people are confronted daily by a world in which the systems of education, health care, criminal justice, social services, housing, transportation, climate change, and the economic development of urban areas cause racial health disparities...imagine facing these deadly disparities and your job is to heal this nation’s school as a DEI worker. (p. 232)

In the closing pages, Love presents a solution-oriented approach grounded in love, joy, and justice, emphasizing the need for healing, repair, and acknowledgment of Black humanity. She challenges readers to consider what is owed to Black children and families harmed by systemic violence in education. Reparations, she argues, are deemed necessary to address the enduring impact of racism and white supremacy. Love collaborates with experts to quantify reparations for Black people, highlighting the ongoing struggle for freedom and justice. Love ends the book with a powerful message:

Repair and transformation are the hope for the future, a future where Black folx are safe and where we all thrive together. Repair, healing,
and transformation are the only hope for our crumbling democracy. The path to and through repair and transformation is long overdue, but it is possible. Possible if we see a future where “Black children dream weightless, unracialized, and human.” This is our dream, a dream that heals this entire nation. (p. 288)

_Punished for Dreaming; How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal_ brought me to tears. This is a must-read book for all educators in the fields of education, education policy, and parents. For myself, it brought to reality all my experiences growing up in the Philadelphia School District. I, too, was the subject of many policies, reforms, charter schools, and the defunding of public education in real-time. Bettina Love’s _Punished for Dreaming; How School Reform Harms Black Children and How We Heal_ is a book readers will continue to revisit as it is packed with so much insight, data, and experiences that cannot be overlooked.
References

