

Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Schooltalk: Rethinking What We Say About—and to—Students Every Day

by Mica Pollock

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Have you ever questioned the usefulness of labels such as “at-risk,” “special needs,” or “underachiever” that are used to describe the young people in your teaching context? Have you ever been part of a conversation where speakers made assumptions about a young person’s abilities due to race, class, gender, or ability? Have you ever questioned simplistic rationales for inequality that blame young people and forestall conversations seeking more fully informed explanations? Have you ever considered how language shapes young people’s lives in their classrooms and outside school walls? My personal answer is yes, to all of the above. I have most often considered these questions in the context of conversations about Indigenous students. Mica Pollock’s *Schooltalk: Rethinking what we say about—and to—students every day* provides readers with a detailed account of how the language used to describe young people in everyday conversations is inseparable from the opportunities they are offered inside and outside of school. The book goes on to detail concrete suggestions for interrupting harmful discourses and redesigning how we talk about young people. *Schooltalk* continues Pollock’s long record of research into educators’ daily efforts toward antiracism and equality. She brings complex theories to

life by using real-life and relatable examples, and the multitude of anti-racist scholars that she references across chapters support her arguments, supplying a rich theoretical and empirical backdrop. *Schooltalk* continues Pollock's style of presenting concrete examples of anti-racist and equitable 'talk' in clear and accessible language that will leave educators hopeful and inspired about taking her ideas into their own schools. The book consolidates her earlier work by illustrating that striving for equity happens in everyday interactions with colleagues and young people and within the most basic thing that people do all day—talk.

Schooltalk is divided into two parts, preceded by an introduction that outlines "The foundational principles of schooltalking for equity." Pollock refers to these principles in each chapter, providing readers with an organizational framework for thinking through the concepts. Key to this framework is a foundational question Pollock asks educators to apply to every example of schooltalk they encounter: "Does this communication help support equity (the full human development of every student, and all groups of students, or not?)" (p. 8). Part 1 (Flipping scripts: Countering fundamental misinformation about young people) is divided into four chapters representing patterns of schooltalk that Pollock argues require close attention because they represent the classic taken-for-granted and underinformed claims that adults reach for when they talk about young people. Part 1 begins with a brief history of the harmful language that circulates in schools today, which she then describes in subsequent chapters. Readers learn that race was socially constructed to justify colonialism, slavery, and systems of racial inequality; the myth of race as biological continues to be maintained in schools when educators assume students' "variations in appearance indicate that [they] are fundamentally different types of people on the inside" (p. 49). This happens through language and through what Pollock refers to in her book as "scripts" in order to imply that they do not originate within the speaker but are readily available and widely used. Anyone who works with young people will recognize these "scripts," described by Pollock as inaccurate, simplified, shallow, and dangerous because they "keep adults from fully supporting young people—and keep young people believing falsehoods about themselves and their peers" (p. 20). Chapters 1 through 4 are organized into four themes. "Group Talk" asks readers to consider whether the labels used to describe students are helpful or harmful. "Inequality Talk" exposes the meritocratic assumptions underlying typical claims about why students do or do not achieve

and provides a model of inquiry that leads to more complex and informed explanations for young people's outcomes. "Smart Talk" explains the consequences of what Pollock argues may be the most influential schooltalk, "thinking and talking inaccurately about intelligence and ability" (p. 127), while "Culture Talk" shows how simplistic claims made about groups of people not only "make getting to know actual people seem unnecessary" but overlook all of the other factors involved in students' outcomes—including educators. Each chapter in Part One contains examples of each type of talk in action: "Oh, he's a Special Ed kid" (p. 36), "Poor kids drop out because they don't really try" (p. 74), "There are no gifted kids here" (p. 127), "Latino and Black parents don't really care about education, so their kids don't achieve" (p. 166).

Part 2, "Designing schooltalk infrastructure: Enabling informed schooltalk that supports young people," provides readers with rich and concrete examples of "flipping the scripts." The principle idea behind Part 2 is to identify the types of communication necessary to support students and show readers how it might be designed and set up. "Data Talk" asks readers to consider the kinds of information about students that need to be generated and shared and then used to connect young people to resources. "Life Talk" provokes questions about how we can communicate with young people about their lives to better connect them to opportunities and supports; and, finally, "Opportunity Talk" is about designing communication to include stakeholders, specifically parents, who are often excluded from conversations about young people's lives.

Pollock's book is brilliantly designed to set readers up to do the very thing she insists is crucial to support young people and equity efforts—talk. Thought-provoking questions that would ideally be answered in a group dialogue are peppered throughout each chapter and every chapter ends with multiple "take action" assignments and "think/discuss" scenarios. Because of the relevance of the questions, assignments, and scenarios to all educators, readers are reminded of the applicability of rethinking schooltalk in every teaching context. The interactive format of the book makes it especially well-suited for a course text. The rich and layered content of this book is at once its strength and at times a drawback. While Pollock's detailed descriptions, real-life examples, and nuanced analyses show the rigor that went into anticipating questions or counter arguments readers might raise, at times I found the ideas slightly repetitious. Repeating key concepts and diagrams throughout the book reminds readers of its significance but does at time feel redundant, and, at 408 pages, the book may feel daunting to some. For example, Pollock

presents both a shortened and a full version of her “Guide to talking effectively with educators.” Pollock makes up for this with her punchy writing style, the compelling and interesting examples, and by keeping readers convinced of the relevance of the content to our own teaching contexts. The book is also free from any finger pointing or assigning blame to individuals for the harmful scripts that circulate in schools—she reminds us to “attack the script, not the speaker” and Pollock’s intellectual humility shines in her use of herself as an example throughout the book to demonstrate her own (un)learning and her foibles along the way, emphasizing the always incomplete process of becoming an anti-racist educator.

Geared towards educators but pertinent to anyone who works within institutions that (dis)advantage young people, *Schooltalk: Rethinking what we say about—and to—students every day* provides concrete suggestions for redesigning schooltalk. Pollock shows us how anyone can revise talk, “the most basic thing we do all day” (p. 2). Equally important, this book has led me to question my personal use of language and provided me with the tools to identify where I have shallow understandings about young people; it has given me the tools I need for deeper inquiry. While this book largely draws on research from the United States, I hope that readers will draw the obvious parallels with our Canadian context. It is uncommon to find a book deeply applicable to and likely to resonate with anyone who is concerned with moving young people towards opportunity, no matter their practice context. Mica Pollock’s *Schooltalk* is one of those rare gems of a book.