BOOK REVIEW

Anita Wadhwa, *Restorative justice in urban schools: disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline*. New York: Routledge, 2016, 180pp., ISBN: 978-1138911291 (hbk).

Anita Wadhwa's *Restorative justice in urban schools: disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline* is an ambitious project in a small package. Though well under 200 pages, the book not only aptly articulates the problem of the school-to-prison pipeline but appropriately contextualises it within other peculiar institutions, such as slavery, black codes, hyper-ghettos and Jim Crow. The term 'our peculiar institution', Wadhwa explains,

> was actually a euphemism for slavery, commonly used by slave owners in the antebellum period … not … to describe something strange, but instead [to connote] a sense of ownership – that is, the institution of slavery is peculiar to the South' (26).

Taking her cue from Wacquant (2000) and Alexander (2012), Wadhwa describes mass incarceration as the latest of several peculiar institutions designed to 'define, confine and control' (17) black Americans.

Like these other better-known texts, Wadhwa provides ample data to support her argument. Thus, we learn that the number of students suspended annually in the United States has more than doubled since 1973 (to 3.3 million). Using Chicago as a case-example, Wadhwa provides data showing that suspensions increased 51% from 1994 to 1997, while expulsions increased a mind-warping 3,000%, from 21 in 1994–1995 to 668 just three years later (6). Importantly, the suspended students are not a cross-section of Americans but rather are disproportionately black, Latino and Native American. For example, black students comprise just 17% of the public school population grades 6–12 but are 49% of those who are suspended. White students, in comparison, are 56% of the population but only 21% of those suspended (5).

These statistics are important, Wadhwa tells us, because the suspended students not only lose valuable education time but also typically become more and more disengaged from school. Rather than learning from their mistakes, they more likely resent what they typically perceive as arbitrary enforcement of school policy, begin to view the school as a place where they do not belong, and seek acceptance and belonging from 'deviant' peers who rely on drugs and other criminal activity to gain both respect and material goods.

Wadhwa argues that mainstream school discipline practices that rely on punishment not only harm the students who are suspended but also the students who remain in the classroom. As evidence, she cites a longitudinal, three-year study of 17,000 students in Kentucky (Perry & Morris, 2014), which found that higher rates of suspensions in a school correlated with lower math and reading end-of-semester scores for non-suspended students (7). I was unfamiliar with

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these types of collateral consequences and wondered if perhaps schools with more disciplinary problems had more chaotic classrooms, which resulted in both more suspensions and worse academic outcomes. That is, maybe this was a classic spurious correlation in which variable A (chaotic environment) led to both B (more suspensions) and C (worse academic scores), but B and C were otherwise unrelated. I decided to look up the original study. According to Perry and Morris (2014), the adverse effect of exclusionary discipline is evident in the most disorganised and hostile school environments but is actually strongest in schools with high levels of exclusionary discipline and schools with low levels of violence. In other words, the collateral consequences of exclusionary discipline can be found everywhere.

These early chapters, the ones that seek to describe the social context in which young people today are growing up and going to school, are rich and crucial to understanding the restorative projects described later, but they are dense and it took some effort to get through them. I suspect that some readers may skim them or stop reading altogether. I hope they opt for the former, because starting with Chapter 4, the writing style changes and the pace picks up. Whereas the earlier chapters tried to summarise what criminologists, education scholars and social scientists have learned to this point, the later chapters focus on Wadhwa's own participant-observational research in the two high schools. In these chapters, her vivid descriptions of how specific kids and teachers engage the Circle process in the context of little structural support and sometimes life-threatening home environments provide the reader with the rare opportunity to get to know the young people and their teachers as full human beings and see the restorative process in all of its complexity.

Wadhwa does not hide her enthusiasm for and endorsement of restorative justice. She positions herself as part of the restorative movement and sees it as one of the few viable strategies for creating social change, particularly as a possible strategy for interrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and creating conditions for young people to engage in academic learning and in creating a better world for themselves. Some of her stories, like the one about Tania and John, reveal and highlight the transformative potential. Originally sceptical when invited to a Circle, both Tania and John eventually became leaders and ambassadors of restorative justice in their school. All of us who have done restorative justice work in schools have stories like these. They are the ones that sustain us, that keep us going when things get rough. These are the stories we pull out when we are asked to describe what restorative justice is and how it works. And, of course, these are also the stories we tell when we forget about the importance of free choice and try to persuade others that they should be doing restorative justice (more on this later).

But there are other types of stories, and Wadhwa does not shy away from them. Her narrative makes it clear that her aim is not to spread the restorative Gospel but rather engage in the work of self-reflection and truth-telling. Not all of the truth is pretty. Sometimes, the teachers and school administrators are too under-resourced or not sufficiently experienced to act restoratively, as when an outside consultant brought in to teach the Circle process starts with an explana-

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tion of 'the rules'.[1] Sometimes, they do respond restoratively but some of the high school students, for one reason or another (the book unpacks many of them), are not able to fully join them in that space, as when a young man expresses himself authentically and respectfully in Circle only to steal something from another Circle participant later the same day and when a group of boys in a Circle about racism engage in constant side-talk and snide remarks and actions that seem clearly intended to be sexually demeaning. Sometimes, the perseverance and resilience of both staff and students pay off, only to have city officials snatch defeat from the jaws of victory and close down the school.

Wadhwa's truth-telling reveals a challenging terrain. There are many obstacles and pitfalls to overcome, and anyone interested in doing this work in urban schools is likely to stumble and fall, not once but many times. After dusting oneself off for the umpteenth time, it is no doubt tempting to look for or even demand a roadmap from someone who has already travelled this path with some success. There have been efforts (most notably by the International Institute for Restorative Practices) to provide such a map, but Wadhwa wisely rejects that approach. As her interview with Janet Connors describes in Chapter 6, the community-based principle of restorative justice runs counter to 'large-scale, institutional ways of doing business' (106). The problems with evidence-based practices, Wadhwa points out, is that (a) the best approach is typically one that is developed for a particular community by the community itself, (b) it sometimes takes years to see the impact on students and (c) the best facilitators and community organisers (in terms of creating a restorative system)[2] are often those without higher education or formal credentials. A standardised, evidence-based approach – what Wadhwa (and Connors) refer to as the 'McDonaldization of restorative justice' – would, by definition, exclude many of the restorative flames[3] and likely most of those who would form the lifeline of the community's restorative system.

In the spirit of truth-telling, I also want to offer a few critiques: Besides the relatively high price (the cheapest used copy on Amazon is over US$40) that unfortunately is characteristic of most academic texts today, my largest issue is that, while each chapter flows well, the flow from one chapter to the next often lacks a coherent structure and connection. And there are occasions when, on the heels of a long block quote, Wadhwa starts her analysis with an unnecessary summary. But neither of these really gets in the way of the book's purpose – to pro-

1 While it is important that there is a shared reality about what happens in a circle and agreement to participate accordingly, because restorative justice is a community process that seeks to give everyone an equal voice, top-down rule-making is generally not congruent with restorative values.

2 'Restorative system' refers to a specific restorative practice utilised in a community and the procedures used by community members to access that system.

3 Like restorative justice innovator Dominic Barter, I use 'restorative flame' to refer to a person who has embraced the values of restorative justice even before learning about the restorative movement and its specific practices. Thus, like embers that are already hot when the wind starts to blow, a restorative flame burns hot and strong when the winds of restorative justice blow into the community.

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vide a window to the challenges of implementing restorative justice in urban schools.

In many ways, *Restorative justice in urban schools* leaves the reader unsatisfied. There are no easy answers to complex issues like McDonaldisation and no clearly distilled strategies about what works and what does not in regard to implementation. Instead, Wadhwa's patience, honesty and love for the students and teachers she interacts with, as well as for the restorative movement itself, have allowed her to write an essential book for those already doing restorative work in urban communities, those aspiring to start, and those just wanting to better understand the challenges that face the restorative justice movement in this particular context.

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