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Toxic Schools: High-Poverty Education in New York and Amsterdam

By Bowen Paulle

University of Chicago Press, 2013

Reviewed by Ariel H. Bierbaum

Bowen Paulle's *Toxic Schools* is an often-riveting transatlantic comparative ethnography that focuses on the psychosocial dynamics of high-poverty high schools in New York City and Amsterdam. Paulle, a native New Yorker and US-trained sociologist, is a professor of social and behavioral sciences at the University of Amsterdam. His work builds not only on sociological theory, but also on public health and epidemiological research. Paulle argues that the heightened levels of violence and stress in high-poverty schools and neighborhoods are toxic to the health, well-being, and life trajectory of both students and teachers. His novel approach to toxicity offers rich material and insights for planning scholars and practitioners who work at the intersection of public health, education, and poverty studies.

Planning scholars and practitioners understand that access to high-quality education, adequate health care, well-paying jobs, and affordable housing and transportation are the key components of people's "geographies of opportunity." While volumes of urban scholarship and policy today aim to build more equitable geographies of opportunity, this work's focus on the metropolitan or regional scale does not allow for careful interrogation of the everyday reality of living in high-poverty neighborhoods and attending high-poverty schools. *Toxic Schools* helps fill this gap, bringing to life the uneven geographies of opportunity and raising important questions for our methodological approaches as planning scholars and practitioners that shape the contexts and built environments in which these high-poverty schools persist.

Paulle's narrative is based on six years of ethnographic fieldwork as a full-time high school teacher in the South Bronx of New York City and as a part-time high school teacher in southeast Amsterdam. Both neighborhoods and schools had high concentrations of poor and minority students. According to Paulle, in both locations students and teachers described their schools similarly as "the ghetto" and invoked metaphors of "dumping grounds" and "garbage cans."

Paulle uses his introductory chapter to situate the reader theoretically as well as geographically. For those not already familiar with scholarship in

educational sociology, the robust description of the theoretical conversation may feel a bit overwhelming, but Paulle makes excellent use of elaborative endnotes and successfully weaves in his two field sites as illustrative examples.

His empirical chapters offer a holistic understanding of life in a high poverty school. Chapter 2 explores social hierarchies and peer group dynamics. In chapter 3, Paulle delves deeply into the practice of violence that seems ever present in these young people's lives. Chapter 4 provides a broader perspective by examining students' reactions upon traveling from their insular home environments to more affluent and less segregated parts of their cities. In chapter 5, Paulle focuses on two students who overcame the "toxicity" of their school and neighborhood environments and, with extracurricular supports, found more successful trajectories. Finally, Paulle more reflexively looks at teachers in high-poverty schools. His conclusions return to the sociological literature and critique scholars' approaches to studying urban education.

Paulle convincingly concludes by debunking three myths that persist in the literature. First, he finds that ascribed racial categories (e.g., black, Latino, white, etc.) are not very meaningful for young people. They rarely deploy static notions of ethno-racial identity in their interactions, relying rather on much more relational and interdependent concepts. Second, he argues that young people's actions—particularly the antisocial or violent ones—are not necessarily intentional or the result of some cognitive process. Rather, they are intuitive and emotional reactions, "largely if not entirely beneath the level of discursive consciousness" (p. 206). Third, and similarly, while previous theorists have suggested students act out as a form of proactive resistance, Paulle's data reveal that students' behaviors are not a function of conscious opposition. In fact, he argues that, in many ways, these young people harbor more conservative values and hunger for the kinds of structure and expectations demanded of their counterparts in higher-income communities. This finding echoes poverty-studies research, which finds that, rather than a "culture of poverty," men and women living in poverty articulate mainstream middle-class "American" values and aspirations.

Toxic Schools thus provides tremendous insight into high-poverty schools and neighborhoods. Specifically, the findings about the dynamic and relational nature of racial identity is valuable to planning scholarship, where reliance on census data and case study research often overlooks the dynamic aspects of race. The richness of detail of youth's lives also provides texture to the oft-discussed geographies of opportunity. Understanding the ways that students' social networks and dynamics operate could help planners as they search for an effective combination of place-based investments and mobility programs that can foster economic opportunity.

Throughout the book, Paulle's accessible writing style and detailed accounts of daily interactions leave the reader with a visceral sense of the intensity of the on-the-ground situation in these schools.

Paulle defends his choice of international comparison because it finds commonalities across high-poverty schools in countries with very different approaches to the welfare state, but this still leaves the reader wanting more discussion of these national policy frameworks and contexts. The time period of his data collection, 1996–2002, also raises questions beyond its scope. This period coincides with research on “the underclass,” which dominated poverty and urban studies in the mid- to late nineties, and which centers on the cultural influences young people embody and articulate in their daily lives. While Paulle brings his conclusions up to date, questions remain about how the specific political, economic, and social conditions may have shifted in the decade between fieldwork and the book's publication in 2013.

Despite these flaws, Paulle's in-depth ethnographic work fills a gap in our understanding of geographies of opportunity. The value is not only in the substantive and theoretical findings, but also the methodology. Many ethnographers work as volunteers to gain access to high-poverty environments as research sites; while they build relationships to gain “insider's” trust, they still maintain an observer's “critical distance.” Paulle, however, in working as a teacher embedded himself more fully with a particular set of interests and incentives for both himself and his students. He argues for a “somatic sociology,” an engaged inquiry in which the researcher is attuned to his or her own physiological and emotional responses to the research context. This unique position provides entrance into rich methodological reflections relevant to planning practice and scholarship. For planners working in diverse communities, this approach reveals a new way of articulating self-reflexive ethnography and deeper acknowledgement of qualitative researchers as the “instrument” in their inquiries.

With the push in planning scholarship to interrogate the intersection of public health and planning, *Toxic Schools* holds promise to expand the intersection beyond questions of environmental hazards and include issues of toxic stress and violence in the context of urban education. Paulle's poignant reflections on his own position, suggestions for methodological innovations, and rich insights on human behavior and social relationships point to complex influences of neighborhoods and systems of inequality on young people's daily lives.

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