

BOOK REVIEW

Kaplan, E.B. (2013). *We live in the shadow: Inner-city kids tell their stories through photographs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 193pp. ISBN: 978-1-4399-0790-0.

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In the volumes of academic and practical literature about inner-city neighborhoods, families, and schools, what is usually missing from the discussion? In my experiences and readings of neighborhood and school reform literatures, the missing piece to the academic puzzle is youth voice. Knowing how children understand the complex environments in which they live on a daily basis seems to be a natural place to start when studying the challenges experienced by inner-city residents, yet it is often ignored. *We Live in the Shadow* attempted to fill this gap with a rich, textured, and complex investigation into a group of black and Latino children who attended an enrichment program in South Central Los Angeles. The book problematized the general perception that inner-city youth are “ghetto thugs” who are only failing because of their individual shortcomings (p. 15). By offering the children’s perceptions of their place in society, the author argued that current theory can be enriched by understanding the processes at play that reproduce inequality (p. 157).

Author Elaine Bell Kaplan used the Photovoice methodology to critically examine exactly how inner-city youth perceive their everyday lives: in schools, neighborhoods, and families. Using this methodology, the author created a youth-centered dialogue about their lives and made the subject matter come to life. The sample of fifty-four drew from youth who either participated in the Academic Neighborhood Initiative (NAI), a University of Southern California college preparatory program, or in a local community-based after-school program (at times, it was unclear which students participated in which program). Most students “are trying to turn around their lives in one way or another,” leading me to infer that this was a study of so-called resilient youth. For example, NAI students were required to make certain social concessions, such as not joining a gang.

Kaplan divided the book into five parts. The first part explained how the author came to the study while also explaining why she chose to use Photovoice. Part two described Los Angeles in depth, which was helpful to get a sense of the social setting for the study, while also laying the theoretical landscape. In so doing, she took on the oppositional culture theory advanced by John Ogbu claiming that students in this study did adopt a mantra of educational success and seemed to not be worried about “acting white.” Further, she unpacked and problematized the “culture-of-poverty” perspective advanced by such people as Bill Cosby. This author took a side, not just in this part but throughout the book, by exposing the deficiencies inherent in these perspectives. In the next three parts, Kaplan explored how children perceive their schools, neighborhoods, and families. In these sections, she unraveled the complex ways that these children experience life in these different, yet reinforcing, contexts.

Across the five parts of the book, Kaplan did a fine job of presenting a different take on inner-city children and the lives they lead. Readers should be reminded that the author

showcased the students who “are asking for more than to succeed academically” and not just routinely attend school so they can maybe get a low-paying job (p. 163). These students wanted, the author claimed, to become caring citizens who can care for others, but frequently are met with obstacles—gangs, neighborhood violence, unstable family situations, and unsupportive adult role models.

As someone who works with schools and advocates openly for public education, it was troubling to read some of these students’ perceptions of schools and teachers. Common stories surfaced about disheartening interactions with teachers. These teachers should be supportive adults that could serve as motivational figures, but were instead positioned as obstacles and served to perpetuate the “ghetto thug” image. Yet, one of the most profound insights of Kaplan’s analysis is the institutional dimension to the production of inequality. The children in her study have been ignored by actors within institutions who “favor” the culture-of-poverty view of children—inner-city kids engaged in gang culture. Kaplan did not imply that the world was rosy, but she attempted to give voice to an ignored group: children who wanted to succeed and who desired to improve their social position. The analysis revealed that children were aware of their social realities—that they were on the losing side of a battle to succeed in life. The neglect, as she called it, that these children experiences “result[ed] from both a lack of institutional support and insufficient care by adults in authority” (p. 163). She acknowledged that children live in conflicted worlds—from the “good” of participation in the academic programs to the “horror” of being surrounded by violence (p. 109)—yet they did not blame their families. The question of who students blamed, or how students perceived that these conditions originated, would be an interesting one for further study. Still, an examination of individual factors distorted reality, and this analysis will force scholars to confront institutional environments if they expect to truly understand the reproduction of social inequality.

The book’s strengths came in its use of photos, its presentation of youth voice, and its unearthing of difficult and unpleasant realities. For example, people have heard about inner-city neighborhood violence. However, what people may not have heard was a story of children who called the police after a shooting in their neighborhood, only to have the police respond *two days later*. People may have heard that children socialize with each other in school. However, what people may not have heard was how some children literally create fake families in schools and in neighborhoods to create another support network. Stories shared by children were a combination of shocking, heartfelt, raw, and insightful. For example, one child took a picture of a fence because he “felt we live our lives behind them” (p. 162). Bringing these kinds of stories and rich accounts addresses a serious gap in the literature. I also appreciated the use of “in vivo” terms to name almost every chapter. Youth voice shined through in this book.

No book is without its flaws. Missing from the book was any attempt at discussing implications, even if the implications were only limited to her relatively small sample. The Photovoice methodology, in line with participatory action research, can offer invaluable opportunities to have research participants discuss their thoughts about what could be done about the social problem under investigation. The author failed to discuss how her investigation could shape policy and practice—a missed opportunity. Further, because the study focused so much on the “academically-inclined” students who were positioned as exceptions, I felt that the “other” students (not under investigation) were dismissed. The

author made the distinction clear between these students under study and other students who perhaps were not academically-inclined. Interestingly, by treating these groups separately, it almost furthered the culture-of-poverty perspectives that the author so much wanted to combat. For example, the idea of escaping the ghetto was raised on a few occasions as one way to improve conditions (p. 87, 154). While one or two children expressed a desire to stay in the distressed neighborhood out of obligation to their families, the issue was glossed over. When the discussion becomes shaped by the idea that children must escape by means of a college degree, it legitimizes the relentless focus on individual and culture-of-poverty arguments in that it is incumbent upon the individual to work hard, escape the ghetto, and achieve life success—completely ignoring the issue of neighborhood transformation. The author paid scant attention to the processes by which conditions were created and maintained in the South Central LA setting—conditions that impact all children. Given that her argument advanced the idea that institutional failures resulted in the children’s experiences and insights, a discussion about institutional forces that created the ghetto would have been welcomed. The issue of critical consciousness (e.g. whether or not students had an understanding of the reasons and factors that caused their social situations) was noticeably absent.

At times, the author also did not take enough time to address her positionality as a researcher. In one section, the author explained that her childhood experiences of growing up in Harlem probably influenced her perspective (p. 11-14). Her positionality mattered because her work with the USC NAI effort and her close relationship with the children certainly influenced her perspectives. An up-front discussion about how these positions influenced her interpretations and commentary would have strengthened this qualitative research. On another methodological note, the author was not explicit about the sampling method. It appeared that the sample was a purposeful one specifically sought out to uncover a counter-narrative, though this was my inference.

Still, these flaws notwithstanding, the book’s point was well-taken: the story of how children experience distressed neighborhoods, failing schools, and stressful family situations is a complex one that cannot simply be written off by culture-of-poverty arguments. It is more convenient to lump all “ghetto thug” children together, complain that they valorize gang culture, and that their failures can be attributed to individual shortcomings. In the end, the book raised more questions that warranted further study about the reproduction of social inequality and the process of social change. In order for Kaplan’s work to be complete, we (as a society) have a lot of soul-searching to do if this kind of inequality continues to be reproduced, in part, by the way we “explain away” the tragic situations in which these children find themselves by pointing to individual factors. The struggle and journey continues.