



SHUT UP

and listen

TEACHING WRITING THAT COUNTS IN URBAN SCHOOLS



CHRISTOPHER KNAUS

Less than fifty percent of African American students graduate from high school. Their educational failure is built into the racial structure of curriculum, standardized testing, teacher preparation programs, and even teacher recruitment pathways. *Shut Up and Listen* argues that African American students should be taught to navigate and resist the racism perpetuated in every aspect of society and schools, and that to do so requires the development and expression of a culturally-rooted voice as a foundation for multicultural, multilingual, democratic communities. *Shut Up and Listen* focuses on the voices, perspectives, and experiences of urban African American students—and on their writing, to remind educators of the power of voice, and how far schools are from addressing the reality of racism.

"Christopher Knaus' new work is a bold addition to the corpus of academic scholarship on urban education. *Shut Up and Listen* provides a clarion mandate to 'hear' the lived experiences and cognitive perquisites of the children and families that subscribe to urban schools by zone, by choice, by lottery, or by districting. This book is a thunderous invitation to ensure that no child is left behind accidentally or intentionally. It is required reading for every urban educator." —M. CHRISTOPHER BROWN II, PRESIDENT, ALCORN STATE UNIVERSITY; AUTHOR, *THE CHILDREN HURRICANE KATRINA LEFT BEHIND: SCHOOLING CONTEXT, PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION, AND COMMUNITY POLITICS* (LANG, 2007)

"Teachers will see their students' faces and hear their unspoken thoughts in this book. District administrators, always ready for reform, need only read this text to gain insight around allowing students to be authentic within classrooms. Christopher Knaus takes the reader on a journey that is vivid and alive, but is also a true depiction of the way we, as educators, need to provide opportunities for our children's voices to be heard. Finally!" —RACHELLE ROGERS-ARD, MANAGER, TEACH TOMORROW IN OAKLAND, OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

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Christopher Knaus studies and teaches in urban schools, working with African American and Latino youth to understand the silencing impact of racially biased curriculum and pedagogy. He earned his doctorate in multicultural education and policy from the University of Washington and has published numerous articles as well as poetry about the role of racism in shaping urban education. Dr. Knaus is currently Associate Professor in the College of Education at California State University East Bay, where he works to develop educator pipelines that identify and nurture culturally responsive urban educators of color.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR

Shut Up and Listen

“Voice is the offspring of vision. If the ability to speak isn’t fully cultivated, then human capacity to dream envelops into the unexpressed nightmare. If heaven is to express, then we have condemned a generation of American youth to hell...harness the voice of a child and you feel the world of the oppression of itself. Now, *Shut Up and Listen*.”

—LEALAN JONES,

YOUTH ADVOCATE, WRITER, AND AUTHOR OF

OUR AMERICA: LIFE ON THE SOUTHSIDE OF CHICAGO (1997)

“If our educators and our politicians truly want to stop the so called ‘achievement gap,’ they need to understand what Christopher Knaus articulates in this book—that all of us ‘educators’ must truly shut up and listen to our youth, to their pain, to their truth, to their experience, to what they need in order to make school meaningful. His message here is real, raw, and needed. Knaus moves beyond the safety of theoretical discussion to model what relevant education looks like, and how it can empower our students to be critical, creative, constructive thinkers who will have the tools to make democracy work, and who will be able to live peacefully and respectfully in a very diverse, multicultural, multilingual world. Everyone who works with urban youth should read this book to be reminded that all of us must be held accountable for the welfare of our young people—from the classroom teacher to the counselor, principal, janitor, and school nurse.”

—DEBORAH COCHRANE,

DIRECTOR, PORTLAND TEACHER’S PROGRAM

Shut Up and Listen

BLACK STUDIES & critical thinking

Rochelle Brock and Richard Gregory Johnson III
Executive Editors

Vol. 7

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Christopher Knaus

Shut Up and Listen

Teaching Writing that Counts
in Urban Schools



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*To the students
I was never able to reach*

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Despite the incredible people who have helped me deepen my thinking, clarify my philosophies and approaches, and edit these pages, this book still contains faults in writing and thought. I am fully responsible for all omissions, errors, incorrect assumptions, and any ill-conceived ideas put forth in these pages.

FOREWORD

Shut Up and Listen makes a compelling case for the therapeutic and liberatory capabilities of writing for students in trauma. It focuses more on these attributes than the more conventional views of writing as an essential part of literacy. Undoubtedly, the students who are led to and facilitated through writing learn valuable technical skills in the process but this is not the primary concern of the author. Instead, he encourages students of color who are victims of racism, poverty, and violence to write about their experience to recovery, to heal, to transcend the atrocities foisted upon them by vicious families, friends, schools, and societies. Thus, writing is presented as a means to achieve psycho-emotional well-being and personal empowerment. The specific medium for the delivery of these messages is what Knaus calls “voice-centered” teaching in which African American and Latino American high school students in urban schools speak their experiences with racism, violence, and poverty in writing.

Chris Knaus is not the first author to give credence to the importance of voice in teaching underachieving, marginalized students. But, he does so in ways that are unusual and exceptional for three important reasons. First, he provides detailed and operational descriptions of voice. In other words, he explains what it means in behavioral terms, thus moving voice from the realm of theoretical and analogical abstractions into the arena of instructional action. Other scholars who write about voice tend to be vague and somewhat illusive in defining the concept. They speak about the importance of activating and accessing the voice of silenced individuals, groups, and communities without clearly articulating what it is, or how it can be actually cultivated and facilitated in classroom instruction. Knaus also shifts the center of the discussion of voice from it being a goal or a precursor of academic engagement. As a fundamental feature of personal understanding and emancipation, voice is a precondition for the academic participation of the students profiled in this volume. Even more so, it becomes a lifeline for many of the individuals introduced, most of whom are challenged students, disenchanted with schools, with poor records of attendance and academic performance. Yet, the same students are highly motivated achievers in the voice-centered writing classes taught by Knaus. These explanations of what voice means conceptually and operationally, and its redemptive effects on students make this book a much-needed and valuable contribution to the scholarship on making education more relevant for marginalized students of color.

A second feature of the discussion on voice that makes it exceptional is the author sharing his own story about how he came into his own voice after years of violence and poverty. This is a bold and courageous step, especially since it defies many conventions of educational scholarship. While narrative is growing as a respective source of knowledge and an instructional technique, few authors have been as graphic in telling their own stories as Knaus. There are no holds barred; nor any attempts to soften the ugliness and intensity of the physical, emotional, psychological, and educational abuse and neglect he suffered. This narrative is not presented for shock effect, or as a model of how the author successfully broke the bonds of silence for others to emulate. It demonstrates, powerfully, that voice is liberating, and it is a statement about allegiance and identity with the students, whom the author wants to help access and express their own voices. It conveys an authentic insider's perspective that convinces the reader that Knaus knows what he is talking about from personal and up-close encounters with poverty and violence at home and in school. It establishes credibility and places him within the community of students whom he writes about and whom he teaches how to survive adversities and go beyond them. The personal and professional are unified in analyses of silence and its antidote, voice. This union begins in the opening chapter with the author's personal story and continues throughout the rest of the book as various students are introduced and their struggles with trying to give form and substance to their voices are described.

A third reason why the portraits of voice in this book are exceptional is because they are not presented as panaceas for all the complex problems poor students of color encounter in homes, schools, and societies. Few of the students Knaus writes about are successful in school according to conventional standards. Nor do they automatically become good school citizens, high academic achievers, and good writers (in a technical sense) as a result of the voice-centered interventions Knaus introduces. But, they are resilient survivors, they have much that needs to be said, and they develop means to speak their thoughts and feelings. Being able to finally speak clearly and cogently gives these students a sense of dignity, command over their own destiny, and a deep understanding of self that they have never known before. These accomplishments are imperative to comprehensive human development and are too often neglected or overlooked in the haste of schools to teach academic content and raise standardized test scores.

Knaus is unequivocal about the importance of these kinds of skills, and associated attitudes and values, and his commitment to helping abused students actualize them. He sees no need to dim their luminance by periodi-

cally reminding his readers that “academics are important, too.” This distinguishes him from some other scholars who take unconventional and radical positions on educational issues, who feel that they must temper these somewhat by reminding readers that what they do not include in their advocacy is important as well. Chris feels no need to do this. While he is adamant in his advocacy of voice for African American and Latino American urban students, he is not apologetic, arbitrary, or arrogant about it. Rather, his advocacy is deeply grounded in knowledge, experience, passion and compassion, thoughtfulness, and critical reflection.

No one can READ this book without being deeply affected in some way or another, probably many and varied ways. And, rightfully so, for it is a compelling presentation of traumatized youth and the potential of genuine education to redirect the course of their lives. Some readers will resonate with the poignancy of the life experiences described, while others may be repulsed by the brutality of the situations and the rawness of the language that is sometimes used. Some readers will experience feelings of helplessness by the magnitude of the challenge of teaching students like those included here, but others will be energized by the idea of and strategies offered for voice-centered teaching. Some will see themselves or someone they know mired in oppressive situations similar to those of the students profiled, while others will know or be a teacher like Chris who demonstrates caring, compassion, conviction, and activism in helping youth in schools who need assistance the most. And, many readers will know students who have compelling feelings, thoughts, and experiences about poverty, racism, and abuse that need to be said but do not receive any opportunities and assistance in saying them; who are silenced by the mere act of oversight by educational programs and personnel if not by deliberate intent. Despite the ugliness of the brutality that is a central feature of this book, not for dramatic effect, but because it is a fact of life of the students presented, an undercurrent of hopefulness (without fantasy or naïveté) runs throughout this book. It is conveyed through the message that even the most troubled and under-achieving students have potential and promise that innovative, dedicated, and competent teachers can cultivate.

In addition to offering slices of genuine life lived by many students, this book provides a wealth of examples for how many prized general educational principles are actualized in practice. These include relevance, scaffolding, critical thinking, caring, communities of practice, cooperative and collaborative learning, prior knowledge, peer coaching, high expectations, trust, and reciprocity between students and teachers. Several principles of culturally responsive teaching also are apparent throughout the scenarios of

living, the interpretative commentaries, and the instructional strategies provided for students to work through their social and emotional dilemmas. Among them are using multiple means to achieve common learning outcomes, teaching students through who they are, and social experiences and cultural funds of knowledge as resources for teaching academic skills to ethnically diverse students. The author demonstrates how teachers should not be judgmental about students' lived experiences even when they are personally undesirable and unacceptable. All of these ideas and related actions are grounded in beliefs that schools need to provide opportunities and assistance for poor racial minority student to look critically and analytically at their lived experiences as symptomatic of dysfunctional families as well as larger histories and systems of economic exploitation and insidious racism. The case studies throughout this book exemplify the power of storytelling, and transparent and caring teaching, along with the importance of knowing students as a precondition for designing effective instruction for them, and empowering them through the development of their voice in written and oral forms. Therefore, voice in *Shut Up and Listen* is a means of personal liberation and political activism for oppressed and marginalized students of color. As such it is another critical, but often overlooked, dimension of school achievement.

Geneva Gay
University of Washington, Seattle

Introduction

I was fascinated by book and music stores in South Africa. The range of offerings, the shelves of books and CDs by authors and musicians from across Africa was what I had been looking for in American stores for years. But in America, with all our wealth and access to everything that exists anywhere in the world, we simply do not have much access to Black authors, and particularly not from outside our borders. With the exception of a few Black-owned bookstores, I simply could not have stumbled across *Coconut*, by Kopano Matlwa (2007) in the States. I cannot think of a more appropriate introduction to my own book about voice than a book I stumbled across 15,000 miles from home. Because people around the world talk about voice, use words like preserving, maintaining, sustaining, and developing as they sing songs in indigenous languages, and write books, even in English, that call attention to the silencing power of colonization, imperialism, racism, and schools. Listen:

They laugh nastily, Lord. You cannot hear it, but you can see it in their eyes. You feel the coldness of it in the air that you breathe. We are afraid, Lord, that if we think non-analytical, imprecise, unsystematic, disorderly thoughts, they will shackle us further, until our hearts are unable to beat under the heavy chains. So we dare not use our minds.

We dare not eat with our naked fingertips, walk in generous groups, speak merrily in booming voices and laugh our mqombothi laughs. They will scold us if we dare, not with their lips, Lord, because the laws prevent them from doing so, but with their eyes. They will shout, "Stop acting black!" "Stop acting black!" is what they will shout. And we will pause, perplexed, unsure of what that means, for are we not black, Father? No, not in the malls, Lord. We may not be black in restaurants, in suburbs and in schools. Oh, how it nauseates them if we even fantasise about being black, truly black. The old rules remain and the sentiments are unchanged. We know, Lord, because those disapproving eyes scold us still; that crisp air of hatred and disgust crawls into our wide-open nostrils still. (p. 31–32)

In this book, I take Matlwa's sentiment captured here in so few words, spread it across chapters, and try to clarify how educators can transform our schools from the silencing, oppressive places they are and into places that foster voices to capture exactly what that *air of hatred and disgust* is made of in order to overthrow it finally, permanently. While Matlwa writes about South African racial oppression, the U.S. mirrors the racial history of Apartheid South Africa. As one of my friends in South Africa clarified as we drank rooibos tea in the shadow of a huge sparkling new stadium erected by

indigenous black hands for an almost exclusively White soccer fan audience in time for the 2010 World Cup, “*White people around the world are different, but our racism is the exact same, extracts the exact same toll.*” This book is part of my continued attempt to add my voice to a growing list of activists dedicated to educating African American students to be themselves, to know and honor and be proud of who they are, how they are, and why they are.

I didn't always have a song. I was very hurt and sad as a child. I had low self-esteem, was always self-conscious, and constantly felt alone and unloved. I could barely see the point in living if it was going to be such misery. I never talked to anyone about how I felt, and that eventually led to the development of a stomach ulcer. At that point, I knew I had to find some way to express my voice. Therefore, as a young girl, I started writing songs and singing them to myself whenever I felt like my emotions would just swallow me up. They would be slow, sad songs that were just a way for me to wallow in the depths of my despair, but I kept on writing, and I kept on singing. —Regina

Regina, a Black undergraduate student in my African American Studies writing course, had never thought of herself as a writer. She came into my college writing class with trepidation and fear; she had long since believed what her previous teachers had taught her: her voice should remain silent as she was not a good writer and not a good thinker. In our class, I intended to directly confront previous negating experiences with academics through reminding students of how racism and sexism frame education, frame what we think of as “good” writing, and frame the way we think about what counts as “knowledge.” And through such a class, Regina was encouraged to remember that expression was not *her* problem, but instead was framed by *her schools and educators* as her problem. As a high school student, she was told she was too personal and too emotional in her writing. Yet as Regina began making sense of how she was silenced by schools, she began to sharpen her voice, and her writing came alive.

Several years past her collegiate graduation, she now teaches math in urban schools, trying to engage students who disengage from school for many of the same reasons she did. Regina is a warm, engaging presence in the classroom, where students circle around her, laugh, giggle, and yet still struggle through math lessons. Her classroom feels fun, and students are continually at work, often helping one another through a particularly difficult problem. And now, as the only African American teacher in a school that serves an entirely Latino, African American, and Southeast Asian student body, she is reminded that her voice-centered approach to teaching is not collaborative and not based on the standards. Not supported by her principal, who seems to see her as less effective than other teachers who often kick

their African American students out of class, Regina is labeled non-collaborative. From my vantage point, however, Regina allows students to be themselves, and provides opportunities for students to talk about who they are outside of the classroom. In essence, she allows students to be themselves, and is told by other educators that she would be more effective if she structured classroom time to limit such discussion. Yet it is her very approach that results in students being more at home with her, and students reach out to her in ways they simply do not (and will not) with other teachers that focus on teaching to the standards, while ignoring issues that might be going on at home.

While Regina has relearned how to sing on the page, and has developed a capacity to capture and express her voice, full of emotion, rage, love, and the details she most strongly values, she still faces silencing pressures. Her foundation in voice and her belief in herself, are precisely what led her to teach, and have helped her build up a teaching practice that centers student experience as a way of ensuring students *can* engage in math lessons. Her approach is unique at her school, and reflects culturally responsive approaches that many of her White and Asian teacher colleagues are neither familiar with nor have been trained in. Yet her approach directly reflects her commitment to exploring, developing, and expressing her own voice; as an educator, she realizes that many urban students live in violent, racist, poverty-stricken communities, and this context directly impacts capacity to engage in academics. Voice, for Regina and her students, is a means of developing a sense of self, and while not directly related to math standards, is directly related to students' capacity to be present during math (and any other) class.

This book is about students and educators like Regina, students who want to express themselves powerfully, but who are repeatedly punished throughout their educational experiences when they try to do so. While not all students end up being teachers, Regina serves as an example of what can happen when voice is fostered; as young people grow up, the more supported they are in expressing who they are, the more they can foster this in others. In this book, I focus on African American students developing voice, because these are often the students I work most closely with, and because there is an intimate historical connection between African Americans and expression of soulful, artful, culturally rooted voice that sharply captures how racism serves as a foundation for global society. This connection, I believe, is systematically and purposefully silenced in schools, and yet has paradoxically become stronger because many African American students consciously resist educational silencing through maintaining a voice that

reflects cultural values and forms of expression. I am interested in the purposeful sharpening of such voice, and argue that schools should specifically focus on developing culturally rooted voice. A similar focus could and should be conducted with Latino, Pacific Islander, Southeast Asian, and indigenous students. My focus here, however, remains with Black youth because of the unique historical role of education in strongly alienating and punishing Black people who try to learn what they need in order to survive in a racist society that schools teach does not exist.

While most schools in the United States result in the systemic silencing of students who do not fit mainstream notions, not all students remain silent, and not all educators silence all students. Indeed, in many urban schools, developing culturally rooted voice has been an increasing focus for the past few decades, and many urban high schools have poetry classes or spoken-word programs that center conversations about how to express oneself in culturally affirming, critical ways. While there are often unspoken shared teaching tenets that many urban poetry-focused educators share, perhaps the most important is that reinventing the wheel is exactly what developing voice is all about. Students must come to develop their voice on their own, and as educators, our responsibility is to create the conditions through which voice can thrive; be critiqued, edited, and refined; and ultimately reflect exactly what each student lives, sees, feels, and knows.

This book is an attempt to clarify the ways I center student voice, partially because there are few examples of White educators who use student-centered, race-conscious approaches that directly center cultural expression, rather than, for example, centering on their own whiteness. Yet I am able to develop student voice because I do a tremendous amount of work preparing myself to listen to my students, working through my own internalized oppression and my internalized privilege that promotes arrogance and ignorance. If White educators are to be successful in teaching African American students in ways that arm students to resist the continued racism perpetuated in every aspect of society and schools, then efforts have to remain in deeply rooted understandings of race, racism, and African American expression. In short, White educators have to continually engage in self-critical analysis of the impact of racism on people of color and ourselves; this cannot be done in isolation from African American colleagues, communities, or sharp, critical, antiracist Black voices. That means additional work must be undertaken to prepare and sustain White educators for effective teaching of any students of color, and in particular, African American students, because educator preparation programs do not prepare educators to recognize racism, much less to counteract how these forces shape us.

Why Voice?

The purpose of this book is to clarify how I work with urban African American students to develop voice. I believe firmly that democracy is based upon the critical expression of those most oppressed in a society. Particularly at a time when the United States is led by the first African American president, when many school teachers remind Black students that anyone can now be president, and when many mainstream corporate media outlets declare that President Obama's election somehow ushered in an end to racism. As President Obama leads the charge for a nationally aligned educational structure wherein children in Ohio and Alaska and California and Mississippi are tested on the same core curriculum, the U.S. further embraces a one-size-fits-all educational approach. This national school system is structured upon standards-based curricula developed by corporations and sold to school districts across the country.

As celebrations of the first Black president recede, educators are increasingly held accountable to test score increases (at the threat of job loss), and schools continue to silence students who speak multiple languages. We live in a world of schools that are increasingly standardized, where the rule is the more easily measured, the more it guides curriculum and teaching practices. This fetish with numbers, with statistics that claim to measure academic success and intelligence directly correlates with a collective unwillingness to listen to student voices, which most often challenge these numbers and statistics. As the focus on alignment to standards increases, so too does the drop-out rate for African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Pacific Islander students. The realities behind dropout numbers are scary: nationally 50% of urban students do not graduate (Stillwell, 2010). These are not coincidences; the more irrelevant, scripted, and standardized the curricula are, the more students of color will choose to not learn the material their teachers are being held accountable for. This is because urban students have more pressing concerns to contend with, such as navigating poverty, violence, drug use, and high unemployment rates.

In this context, with a nation obsessed with measuring irrelevance and assessing meaningless statistics on knowledge of trivial information and test-taking skill sets, poverty continues to increase in African American communities. The focus on standards and assessment completely avoids the reality that students of color do not live in the same world as many of their teachers, and certainly not the same world as the policy makers who shape the purpose of school. In today's world, students communicate in milliseconds on handheld devices yet still go home to empty refrigerators. Students do not e-mail or type on keyboards, they text on phones the size of a small calculator,