

Illuminating the struggles and triumphs of the emerging educational justice movement, this anthology tells the stories of how black and brown parents, students, educators, and their allies are fighting back against systemic inequities and the mistreatment of children of color in low-income communities. To address the racism within our education system and in society, the contributors argue that what is needed is a movement led by those most affected by injustice—students of color and their parents—that builds alliances across sectors and with other social justice movements addressing immigration, LGBTQ rights, labor rights, and the school-to-prison pipeline.

Representing a diverse range of social justice organizations from across the US, the essayists recount their journeys to movement building and offer practical organizing strategies and community-based alternatives to traditional education reform and privatization schemes. *Lift Us Up, Don't Push Us Out!* will outrage, inform, and mobilize parents, educators, and concerned citizens about what is wrong in American schools today and how activists are fighting for and achieving change.

"Lift Us Up, Don't Push Us Out!" is a bold and exciting book that presents the stories we never hear—powerful stories of successful grassroots organizing in schools and communities across the nation led by parents, students, educators, and allies. The lessons we can learn from these inspiring activists and campaigns need to be spread far and wide."

—**KAREN LEWIS**, president of the Chicago Teachers Union

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MARK R. WARREN
WITH DAVID GOODMAN

LIFT US UP, DON'T PUSH US OUT!

VOICES FROM THE FRONT LINES OF THE EDUCATIONAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT

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#SCHOOLISMYPHUSTLE

Activist Scholars and a Youth Movement to Transform Education

– Vajra Watson –

University of California, Davis

The transformation of education is not solely the work of the K–12 school system but demands a new kind of involvement from higher education. Research should not be conducted merely for knowledge production but also in service to social change. Scholar activist Vajra Watson offers a collaborative model that connects the university, schoolhouse, and adjacent neighborhoods. She tells the story of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks, which pairs community-based poet educators with classroom teachers to provide young people with the opportunity to empower themselves through hip-hop, poetry, and performance. Drawing upon the powerful words of young people, Vajra shows what can happen when a university-based researcher reimagines her role and relationship to young people and their communities and schools.

I FOUNDED SACRAMENTO AREA YOUTH SPEAKS (SAYS) in 2008. Over the last decade, SAYS grew from a writing workshop with five students into a movement that reaches and teaches thousands of students each year. Through the training of poet-mentor educators, SAYS is able to bring the community into classrooms, connect the streets and school, and foster connections between neighborhood knowledge and the curriculum. As a result, student attendance has substantially improved, high school graduation rates have increased, and so have students' grades. While these measures are significant, they are not the soul of the story. The essence of SAYS is

the unabashed, truth-telling, multilingual voices of young people who are courageously creating spaces that transform lives.

STEP 1: A PARTNERSHIP FOR YOUTH VOICE

Just a couple of weeks after I graduated from Harvard University in 2008, I started at the University of California, Davis, as the director of education partnerships in the School of Education. I soon realized that to ground my work in the needs of the local area, I would have to get out of my office. Since I was new to the region, I spent my first two months meeting with various superintendents, teachers, and school leaders in nearby Sacramento.

In each of these encounters, I heard similar stories about student disengagement from learning. Everyone referenced a literacy crisis across the region: low-income youth of color were not passing the writing portion of the CAHSEE, the California High School Exit Examination. As a former high school teacher and community organizer, and now as a scholar, I wanted to find ways to help the youth of Sacramento succeed.

To strategize about solutions, I held an initial meeting in 2008 and called it a “partnership for youth voice.” I invited a wide range of stakeholders, including local community-based organizations, superintendents, district personnel, principals, teachers, and program officers. During the meeting, we broke up into small groups and began thinking across sectors about the ways we were (or were not) supporting students. We used school-based data showing disproportionate success in literacy to guide the conversation and focus our plans.

We came to a jarring realization: we were not working alongside youth to design solutions to student disengagement. In fact, we had not even invited them to this meeting on “youth voice.” I realized we were replicating part of the problem: we were leaving them out of the conversation.

Around this time, I was asked to host a table at the annual “Fundraiser” for Youth Speaks in San Francisco. I was on their advisory board, and I decided it might be serendipitous to invite the entire group from the youth voice meeting. My colleague Kindra Montgomery and I provided rides, and we were a bit surprised that most stakeholders decided to attend the meeting, driving two hours each way. It was that drive that led us on a path that would shift youth services in Sacramento.

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At the Youth Speaks event, young people's voices filled the room. Spoken-word performance poetry resonated with each of us, and my colleagues were adamant that they wanted something similar for students in Sacramento. By the end of the evening, we made a collective commitment—in word, deed, and resources—to foster spaces for soul-stirring performance poetry.

But how would we do it?

STEP 2: IF YOU'VE GOT SOMETHING TO SAY? SAYSOMETHING!

I created a flyer for a writing workshop that would fuse critical literacy and leadership development. I circulated it to my colleagues in the schools and asked them to personally invite their students, particularly their so-called hardest-to-reach youth. I planned for thirty youth to show up. Only five came. At this inaugural meeting, these five students were adamant that they needed an outlet for their pent-up anger and aggression. They pleaded for help, saying, "We're starving for social justice out here, this is not the Bay." In response, I challenged them to seed the solution. I said that I would help them start an organization based on "youth voices for social change." However, to actualize our ideals, they would each need to bring five friends to the next meeting. One month later, fifty-eight students arrived for the writing workshop.

SAYS was born in the hearts of these courageous students who committed themselves to organize one another and lead the way. But not everyone was eager to write. There was one student, Forrest, who sat in the corner and did not want to participate. He had come for the free food and nothing more. I asked him a simple question: *What do you love to do?* He told me that he had dropped out of high school to pursue his art. This young white kid, with his punkish style and skateboard, loved to draw. I asked him to create a logo for SAYS. By the end of our second meeting, Forrest had drawn the logo that we still use on all of our materials.

From that moment onward, SAYS started growing exponentially. More than one hundred students attended each of the community-based writing workshops. We decided to hold these sessions at the Sierra Health Foundation, free of charge. This venue is spacious, and the setting, perched on the Sacramento River, is stunning. Students would eat delicious meals on the deck and watch the sunset. Although this detail might seem unimportant,

it was critical to participation and morale. A student told me at one of the very first gatherings, "I know you love us." "How do you know that?" I retorted. "Because of the food!" A community began to form. These middle and high school students who were struggling in school began to feel comfortable with one another and themselves. They started to own the space, not just occupy it.

Because the sessions were growing so rapidly, we started using a microphone and sound system to accompany the writing workshop and open mic. Music became another significant cultural cue that demarcated this youth setting. For instance, a grand piano sat in the foyer of the foundation. When SAYS first started, nobody touched the piano. After a few sessions, students began playing the piano while their friends beat-boxed and rapped during one of our many impromptu hip-hop sessions. When the foundation would close, we did not want to leave. On some nights, we would stay in the parking lot, conversing for hours.

The students were engaged and committed to SAYS, but most of them were uninterested in school. As a former high school teacher, I was dismayed that their grades were dangerously low while their intelligence was so high. We began to have serious conversations about education. "Why should I care about school?" a student argued with me. "School does not care about me!"

STEP 3: IT IS NOT A CRIME TO BE WHO YOU ARE

Although the writing workshop still focused on spoken-word poetry, I added another element that focused on educational justice. I believed that to fully address *root problems*, we must *seed solutions*. That's what we tried to do. For example, in one session, I devised a lesson based on a slogan by the antiapartheid activist Steve Biko. I asked the students this question and developed a series of prompts to accompany it: "What is the greatest weapon in the hands of the oppressor?" Toward the end of the class, I provided Biko's answer: "The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."¹ At the end of each writing circle and dialogue, students stepped to the mic to share their spoken-word performance poetry pieces, which were personal, political, and educational.

A provocative piece by Mercy Lagaaia is layered with creative criticism and rhetorical reasoning. She draws important parallels between schools

and prisons and challenges teachers to accept students in their entirety and encourage them academically, emotionally, and culturally. She recites, "Yo board of education! Why we so bored of education? . . . It seems like every time a colored kid pulls up, a disorder is being ordered and our education seems to be the cost of all this trauma. . . . I know I'm smart, but I was taught to never forget where I came from. So for you to see the good in me, best believe you gon' see the hood in me. . . . School and prison are the same language and I'm all too fluent. . . . So tomorrow will just be another day of prison, I mean school."

STEP 4: SCHOOL IS MY HUSTLE

During the winter and spring of 2009, the youth and I met on a regular basis. On many occasions, the writing workshops ended late, and I needed to drive students home. Each time I met with families, a pattern emerged that I found disconcerting. To my dismay, parents expressed a genuine disbelief that a program from UC Davis took an interest in their children. In subsequent conversations, I learned that none of the students or their families had ever visited the university, even though it was less than thirty miles away. UC Davis, as an ivory tower, simply felt out of their reach and beyond their worldview.

Only a narrow causeway divides the college town of Davis and Sacramento, the capital of California. The space between this top-tier research university and its adjacent city is not just physical but ideological, racial, and economic. Two-thirds of residents in Davis are white, while Sacramento is heralded as the tenth most diverse city in the US. The average family income in Davis is \$134,000, compared to \$33,000 in Del Paso Heights in Sacramento, where the SAYS Center is located.² We may witness the same sunset, but our horizons are viscerally different.

Based on my burgeoning partnership with schools, my close relationship with the Sierra Health Foundation, and a newfound ally in the college's student affairs office, I was able to secure seed funding to bring 350 disenfranchised youth to UC Davis from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. for the first annual SAYS Summit College Day. These students had a 1.5 or lower GPA and/or consistent disciplinary problems at school. We held it in May 2009, when SAYS was just five months old. The theme was "School Is My Hustle."

Although we geared the summit toward youth, it seemed to have the greatest impact on teachers. I received a barrage of phone calls that night and over the weekend from educators who told me they needed SAYS in their classrooms, immediately. They saw their students come alive through this form of literacy. Eventually, the dedication and persistence of these classroom teachers brought SAYS into schools across the district from 2010 onward.

Student feedback from the SAYS Summit College Day at UC Davis included the following: “I felt free today. That never happens to me. Thank you so much.” and “SAYS is really powerful. It makes me want to be somebody and make a change in my community, society, world. I love the vibe.”

STEP 5: WRITE TO LIVE

To meet the demand from local teachers to bring SAYS into schools, I went back to my research on community-based educators and realized we had a unique opportunity at UC Davis to bring the community into classrooms. Blending together a grassroots community and youth organizing framework, my colleague Amaya Noguera and I developed a training program that would prepare nontraditional educators from the neighborhood to work alongside classroom teachers.

Now in its ninth year, each cohort of community educators partakes in a six-week training program in three core areas: critical pedagogy, social justice youth development, and literary arts. Once the course sequence is completed, the participants can be hired as part-time university employees at eighteen dollars per hour. Over the years, we have trained more than thirty poet-mentor educators who are all people of color ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-plus. They represent a unique mix of community activists, hip-hop MCs, and spoken-word artists. The majority grew up in the Sacramento region and attended schools in the area; some even dropped out of the very schools in which they now work.

According to SAYS coordinator Patrice Hill, “Some of us are facilitating workshops at the same schools that expelled us. . . . We are these young people! We sat in the same classrooms, went through the same experiences! . . . It’s a lifelong commitment to the uplifting and empowerment of our babies. This calling is indeed the pedagogy of our lives.”

SAYS hires poet-mentor educators because of their poetic prowess and neighborhood knowledge. Inside their classrooms, inquisitive sharing circles and radical writing activities move students' narratives into the center of instruction. As a result, decrepit, depressing, under-resourced classrooms become radiated with a light of love for learning.

One high school teacher offered this feedback:

OMG, to quote my kids. First class with poet-mentor educators. One of my two MOST difficult classes, the one that's caused me more times than once this year to question (seriously) this profession. WOW! Every single one of them is enthralled. The quiet kids. The disruptive kids. The followers. The leaders. All of them. And they're asking about when are you coming back again, how can I get involved with SAYS. WOW!

STEP 6: #SAYS4LIFE

SAYS provides a platform for a new dimension of public scholarship as students present their ideas to a wide range of audiences, from their peers to policy makers and from school superintendents to university academics. The students' insights serve as a call to action—or, as we say, a “poetic service announcement.”

Over the last decade, a single seed has grown into a forest. SAYS began with five students and now works intensely with hundreds of students in five school districts throughout Northern California every year. SAYS has provided an opportunity for young people to become *the authors of their own lives and agents of change*.

Asani Shakur (aka Geno) is just one example of the transformative power of SAYS. I met Asani in 2012 when he was coming home after serving a seven-year prison sentence. He was unable to return to Richmond, California, because of a court-ordered stay-away. I was told by a colleague that he had a powerful message for the youth, and he soon started working for SAYS. He took a hiatus to go to UCLA, but now he is back in Sacramento and working at UC Davis. As he reflects upon his journey, he finds an outlet through poetry. He writes:

What do you see when you look at me?

Young Black male with tattoos?

*He must have felonies.
While this might be partially true, you are only seeing from one side of view.
Yes, I moved weight to get my muscle.
Then I met Vajra and she taught me that school is my hustle.
A Black rose that grew from the Richmond concrete.
Neglected from the sun and the water.
A product of the mis-education system.
A product of the school-to-prison pipeline.
I returned home to SAYS
Now look at me.
I graduated the top of my class—straight A's—from a top tier university!
En route for my law degree
These are my damaged petals.
Tell me what you see?*

—ASANI SHAKUR

SAYS itself has also flourished and grown in many ways. The SAYS Summit College Day now serves a thousand middle and high school students each May; we have a robust curriculum for our in-class residencies and after-school programs; we oversee an internship program for UC Davis undergraduates to work alongside poet-mentor educators in the community/schools; we organize Sacramento's Youth Poet Laureate competition and MC Olympics; and we recently received funding from the City of Sacramento and AT&T to address youth violence through our intensive mentoring initiative called Project HEAL—Health, Education, Activism, and Leadership.

STEP 7: WARRIOR SCHOLARS

In her book *Decolonizing Educational Research*, Leigh Patel challenges us to consider “whether an entity borne of and beholden to coloniality could somehow wrest itself free of this genealogy.”³ Applying this to SAYS, I wrestle with the ways that education—or more specifically, the school site—is both the doorway into social control as well as the window out of it. Since learning can literally mean the difference between life and death, between a dorm room and a prison cell, how do we reimagine and embody education as the praxis of freedom?

In Paulo Freire's seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he asserts that critical literacy is a vital component of self-actualization and agency. "Human beings," he writes, "are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection."⁴ As a collective, we seek to embody the vision of Sacramento Area Youth Speaks. SAYS stands on the side of equity, social justice, and democracy. Our life's work is in service to this struggle—a struggle that is real but also really beautiful.

*Our legacy is louder than the ivory tower
Older than borders that divided us into being something we are not
Somehow we forgot
To put tongue in rightful place
Use words to transform space
So hear we be
From privilege and poverty
Accepting no praise or pity
Just mouth-full of poetry
Centered in space
Speaking between the past and this place
Future
Calling us forward
For inside us
Lives the next generation
Now choose
Genocide or education?*

—VAJRA WATSON