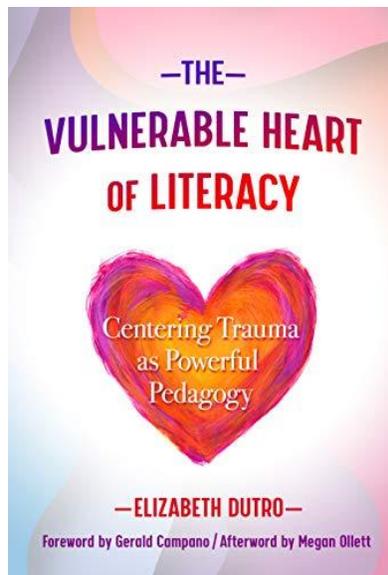


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**Review of *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy:  
Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy*  
By Elizabeth Dutro**

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Dutro, E. (2019). *The vulnerable heart of literacy: Centering trauma as powerful pedagogy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

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*“Difficult experiences have been and will evermore be present in the lives of children entering schools. In the literacies and lives shared in classrooms, a goal to honor trauma—to feel and feel deeply, to attune to encounters with children’s lives, to be the witnesses they deserve—is desirable. It is necessary. It is possible. It is also perilous. Centering trauma as powerful pedagogy in classrooms is all of those things”* (Dutro, 2019, p. 104).

### Overview

The practices of trauma-informed education and instruction are growing rapidly in visibility. I regularly encounter articles, blog posts, curriculum examples, essays, and TED talks about the way that trauma circulates in K12 classrooms and affects both students and teachers. Not only does the frequency at which these articles appear and go viral speak to the energy surrounding these ideas, but so do comments from administrators, parents, and teachers who write about the impact these ideas have on learning communities. Reading these articles, I often experience a mix of engagement and tension. I agree that teachers and school communities need to care for and be responsive to students’ experiences both in and outside the classroom. My tension stems from the way I see practitioner texts, public facing scholarship, and research reports centered on trauma often focused disproportionately on minoritized students in stereotypical ways. These texts frequently present trauma as a problem of the downtrodden individual more than as the consequence of broader systemic discrimination. These texts are, in many cases, recruited to allow teachers—85% of whom are White—to heal students through the English curriculum.

In Gerald Campano’s Foreword to Elizabeth Dutro’s

(2019) book, *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy: Centering Trauma as Powerful Pedagogy*, he argues that “Dutro’s scholarship makes an urgent intervention into current discussions of trauma and education” (p. viii). This intervention speaks directly to my concerns and hopes. This slim, but heartfelt and heavy, volume is divided into six chapters and followed by an afterward written by Megan Ollett, one of Dutro’s teacher collaborators who is featured prominently throughout the book. To explore the complexities and intricacies of engaging trauma in a literacy classroom, Dutro tenderly crafts her book around stories: stories from her own life, stories shared by teachers she has collaborated with, and stories of the elementary students she has learned from. Through these stories, Dutro deftly advances an argument that teachers, and specifically literacy teachers, need to tend to the trauma that both students and teachers carry with them into classrooms. She offers readers theory and examples of teaching to guide their own work with students. Each chapter concludes with prompts readers may use to engage in personal reflection or discussion with a reading group in order to move their thinking into action.

In this review, I will provide a summary of each chapter and reflect on the book as a whole with my critical response. Before beginning my summary, I want to be clear about the choices I make in describing the contents of each chapter. Dutro invites readers to catch a glimpse of students and teachers who share their vulnerabilities with tender narratives in ways that are intimate and moving. I will not retell the narratives that power this book. I do not want to risk unintentionally rendering them without the compassion and dimension characteristic of Dutro’s writing. Instead, I’ll draw out the arguments and lessons advanced through narrative.

## Chapter 1: What Does Trauma Mean for Literacy Classrooms?

Dutro begins with two anecdotes from her life and schooling to illustrate that “the hard stuff of life reverberates” (p. 1) and to emphasize how “children carry deeply difficult experiences into classrooms” and “so do teachers” (p. 2). This isn’t news to readers, but rather an invitation to sit with the presence of pain in school communities. This vulnerable start implicitly models how to make space for the challenges of life in ways “that don’t inflict *more* harm, [or] create *further* marginalization” (p. 3, emphasis in original) that are more explicitly discussed throughout the book.

Dutro addresses being “troubled by much of the policy, rhetoric, and analysis around trauma in schools” (p. 3). She argues that the word *trauma* and how it is frequently applied to children can cause harm. Dutro situates her work outside these troubling discourses by acknowledging the divergent definitions of trauma that come from many different disciplines and centering her work with trauma in the realities of classroom learning communities. This focus necessitates paying attention to how the curriculum, classroom environment, materials, and routines are constructed in ways that inclusively and regularly provide students with support. Dutro further differentiates her stance from others by critical attention to the relations of power circulating when students and teachers talk about the difficulties they experience. She suggests that readers do the same beginning by questioning the term trauma and how it is used in school systems through asking what counts as traumatic and who is deemed traumatized (p. 5).

Next, Dutro previews what she identifies as the *touchstone ideas* that will guide her book:

“testimony and witness, reciprocity and vulnerability, and the extraordinary in the ordinary” (p. 6). She introduces each of these ideas with anecdotes that illustrate how these ideas work and foreground the critical aspects of her proposed pedagogy. In describing critical witnessing, she draws out the need for teachers to ensure that opportunities for witnessing reckon with the different stakes for different students from a stance of advocacy and justice. Dutro further reminds teachers that to create a community where students feel safe sharing their whole selves, teachers need to engage in reciprocal acts of vulnerability. After thinking about the conditions necessary to engage in centering trauma, Dutro also confronts an anxiety that many teachers may have about engaging in this work: responding to students’ stories of difficulty. She replies first with the assertion that teachers don’t need to be experts or psychologists to respond with genuine care and connection. She also cautions teachers not to view students who share their hardships as damaged or fragile, which strips students of their agency. The alternative, seeing students as in need of healing from teachers, according to Dutro, is done by regularly and routinely making space for all of students’ life experiences, that run the gambit of joyful to sorrowful, in the classroom. This approach enables teachers to avoid pushing traumatic experiences away.

The first chapter concludes by introducing readers to contexts they will visit as they read this book, the classroom teachers from whom they will learn, and the content of subsequent chapters. Dutro notes that she will continue to draw on her own experiences, implicitly touching back to her idea of reciprocal vulnerability and the stories of students in the elementary classes where she situates this project.

## Chapter 2: Pedagogies of Testimony and Critical Witness in the Literacy Classroom

In this chapter, Dutro explores more deeply the concepts introduced in Chapter One. She returns to her concern about how trauma-informed moments can be found everywhere and invites readers to think critically about the foundational beliefs of these programs. She offers up two areas for her concerns: 1) that in trauma-informed programs, there is an “emphasis on the medical, biological, and cognitive impacts of trauma [that] can position children as damaged,” and 2) “teachers are often positioned as healers in these approaches, while children are the wounded” (p. 17). With these concerns, Dutro draws out the binaries that position teachers and students as separate from one another and further marginalize children by limiting expectations. Educators need to reframe their approaches to student trauma because “It never works to a child’s advantage to create yet another form of us/them division” (p. 19).

Dutro proposes that this reframing come from “pedagogies of testimony and critical witness” (p. 22) rooted in trauma studies. She defines testimony as “attesting to experiences” and broadens the definition from the traditional legal account of speaking or writing about an experience to include bodies, objects, and gestures as aspects of a testimony. She differentiates testimony from the “testimonio” that comes from the storytelling practices of “Latin American indigenous communities” (p. 23). By explaining how testimonios reveal the impact of colonization, racism, and marginalization on the speakers and their community, Dutro cautions that “when using the term testimony, it matters *who* is sharing their story” (p. 23, emphasis in original).

After unpacking key terms, Dutro transitions into the three tenets of her pedagogy that centers

testimony. First, “testimony and witness are reciprocal” (p. 25). Reciprocity is a crucial move that helps teachers avoid the hierarchical positioning of teachers and students, those giving testimony and those engaged in witnessing. Bound up in the expectation of reciprocal vulnerability, Dutro responds to the inevitable question of “what if I haven’t experienced anything comparable to what some of the children in my class have gone through?” (p. 28) by reminding readers that sharing isn’t about comparing. Even if stories of hardship are different, students and teachers alike will find resonance with the experiences of others that can lead to generative conversations, relationships, and writing.

After detailing the kinds of experiences that may be shared as testimony in the classroom, Dutro defines the other half of the relationship: critical witnessing. Witnessing is compassionate connection that stems from listening to one another. For Dutro, adding “critical” to witnessing is a meaningful change. The critical stance reminds teachers to pay attention to the relations of power and stakes at play in testimony to trauma. Dutro asserts that being a critical witness for students means “pulling others’ experiences close, connecting to shared feelings, fragility, and tenuousness of human experience” while “At the same time, it requires holding others’ stories at a far enough distance to recognize, analyze, and advocate within the very different ways lives are interpreted and impacted by systemic and sustained oppression” (p. 31). Teachers may experience apprehension about how to be critical witnesses that offer students the ideal, supportive response. Dutro empathizes and shares that she, too, struggles at times, but that “embracing imperfection is necessary to being a critical witness to children’s lives” (p. 35-36).

Dutro’s third tenet, “Testimony and Critical Witness are Woven into the Fabric of School Literacy,”

emphasizes that making space for students to share their whole lives needs to be a consistent, daily practice. Teaching practices that can support testimony and critical witnessing include how teachers physically position themselves in relation to students, the conversations they have at the margins of a lesson or day, the books or curriculum they design, the invitations to write about topics that are personally relevant, and other regular routines in the classroom. Before delving into examples of how teachers have done this work, Dutro notes that teachers work in myriad contexts with differing amounts of professional freedom. This acknowledgement is key and supported by Dutro's promise to highlight ways to do this work through subtle reframing and the creation of small spaces to share within possibly confining curriculum expectations.

Dutro then turns to the nitty gritty of how to build learning communities conducive to testimony and critical witness. Her first suggestion centers around teachers planning their testimony as a part of a read aloud, lesson, or other routine class activities. She notes that "If I were to make a very concrete recommendation of how often a teacher's testimony to difficult aspects of life should occur, I would say about once or twice in each unit" (p. 38). This suggestion is a caution against both avoiding the hard stuff and over-emphasizing it. That being said, Dutro asserts that opportunities for teachers to engage in testimony and for students to be critical witnesses should begin early in the school year to set a precedent. These opportunities can be planned, but they may also be flexible and responsive to the needs of a student or the class in a moment. Dutro offers a few more guidelines for engaging in this work. The first is necessary: "making intentional space for stories of trauma is always posed as invitation, *never* as a requirement" (p. 38, emphasis in original). Second, doing this work should not be a radical shift in classroom culture. Dutro

recommends subtle changes such as making purposeful text selection.

### **Chapter 3: Pedagogies of Testimony and Critical Witness in Practice**

While the previous chapter introduces key concepts in Dutro's pedagogies of testimony and critical witness, this chapter demonstrates how they work in the classroom of a second-year elementary school teacher named Megan. Many of the classroom narratives that Dutro recounts are deeply evocative portraits of grief, heartbreak, and illness. Readers observe how second grade students decide to share testimony in response to mini lessons and how a caring teacher responds as a critical witness. One narrative Dutro details centers on a student with a life-threatening illness, highlighting simultaneously the simplicity of Megan's instructional choices, while illuminating how these moments build a supportive community.

The second half of this chapter focuses on a specific narrative writing project that Megan named "The Lemonade Club Unit" and built around *The Lemonade Club*, a picture book by Patricia Palacco (2007). Megan selected the text because it echoed some of the life experiences of her students, including that of her student with a life-threatening illness. With the mentor text, the tapestry of testimony, and the strength of the class community, this unit was a clear demonstration of how a unit can center Dutro's pedagogies of testimony and critical witness. Dutro first walks readers through how the unit worked and then explores students' participation through samples of their writing. Woven around the students' narratives, Dutro provides context to their writing, the things she notices and appreciates about their pieces, and explanations of the kinds of teaching that supported these children. The structure is reminiscent of writing workshop books, like Katherine Bomer's (2010) *Hidden Gems*, that model an appreciative

stance toward students' writing. Many of the students' "lemon" examples that Dutro chose to include involve weighty topics including the death of a family member, parental incarceration, and deportation. She offers balance with the "lemonade" tales that reflect the affection, joy, and knowledge these students experience. I read this balance as an important reminder that sharing and writing don't always need to be about hard stuff. Likewise, Dutro notes that she and Megan "found that the pedagogies [of testimony and critical witness] supported all children in bringing what mattered to them to their literacies, while also facilitating support and connection for those experiencing particularly difficult circumstances" (p. 44). Inviting entire lives into the classroom means inviting in the joy of a new puppy or a family tradition as well as the trauma.

#### **Chapter 4: Testimony and Critical Witness to Trauma Across Genres**

The fourth chapter adeptly explores how testimony and critical witness can be woven into many genres in a writing curriculum, including poetry, letters, informational genres, and narrative genres. For each genre, Dutro describes 1) the context of the unit, 2) how teachers engaged in meeting the instructional expectations for the genre while using pedagogies of critical witness and testimony, and 3) how students responded to these writing invitations. Ultimately, this chapter serves as tool to help readers envision this kind of work in their own practice.

Discussing writing instruction more broadly, Dutro emphasizes the importance of a writing curriculum that ensures that students know that their writing is meaningful and creates community as a foundation for the work done in any genre or writing unit. This strong, supportive writing community is necessary for "children [to] weave their deeply felt, difficult

experiences into their school literacies — with all the knowledge and insight those experiences hold" (p. 58).

Poetry, according to Dutro, is exquisitely suited for students to write about their whole lives. She suggests that "when children are offered encounters with poets (their teacher, as well as published poets or other mentors) who fill the frames of language and form with the heart, muscle, tissue, and bone of struggle, loss, fear, longing, they so often seize this genre" (p. 60) and write their own moving poems. The poetry work described in this chapter comes from a thematic unit built around the novel *Because of Winn-Dixie* by Kate Di Camillo (2015) and the teacher's model poem of remembrance for a dog she no longer has. This model of teacher testimony makes it crystal clear that testimony needn't be about life or death experiences. Testimony in this model is about deeply felt experiences, and critical witnessing is about connection and resonance. This lesson also demonstrates how students took up the invitation in their own poetry, sometimes evoking feelings of loss as their teacher did or other feelings including anger.

Next, Dutro turns her attention to letters as a genre that is often overlooked in standards documents and curriculum maps. Although the work with poetry was thematic, this unit focuses on the structure and audience of letters. She argues that letters as a genre are ideally suited to centering trauma in writing work and worthy of time in the classroom. In order to enact pedagogies of testimony and critical witness, the teacher "expanded the possibilities of who a letter could be addressed to" (p. 67), which opened them up for students to write to people they don't get to connect with regularly. This genre was particularly powerful for students, and in data analysis, Dutro "found many more letters drafted than had been 'required' in this writing unit" (p. 71).

Dutro takes up informational genres to show how they, too, can be a rich opportunity for personally relevant student writing. She suggests that “the resonance between the stories of our lives and non-narrative genres are often unpredictable, but [that] those connections can be profound” (p. 72). Teachers can shake up the expectations about informational writing in how they talk about it in comparison to other genres, incorporate mentor texts, and demonstrate their own writing of informational texts. Dutro also draws on scholarship from writing workshop and culturally sustaining pedagogies to argue that, when possible, students should be able to choose their own topics. The value of choice is evident in the research unit she reports and when she reminds readers that “research is often deeply connected to autobiography” (p. 73). Enabling students to choose their own topics for informational genres is the primary way for inviting students’ lives into this kind of writing. Dutro appears to be advocating for a full writers’ workshop for most of the book, but in this section she includes a portrait of Marie, a teacher working in a school with curriculum mandates that precludes long writing units characteristic of writer’s workshop. With Marie, Dutro is able to show how a teacher can create or take advantage of the pockets of flexibility that are hiding within constraining instructional contexts to enable student choice and voice in genres like informational texts.

Dutro returns to the narrative as her final genre in this section, considering both fiction writing and the personal narrative. She argues that the return to narrative is “well worth spending additional time with narrative as a central context for honoring the knowledge, and the pain, wrought of difficult experiences in children’s lives” (p. 78). Dutro sees fiction as an opportunity for teachers to learn more about students’ lives through their imagination when writers inevitably pull details from their own

lives into their creative writing. To attend to these autobiographical inclusions requires that teachers practice careful attention and an appreciative stance. Personal narratives, on the other hand, are more direct opportunities for pedagogies of testimony and critical witness. In these units, teachers can use mentor texts to model engaging in critical witnessing of experiences that they do not share but may serve as mirror for their students. The examples from Megan’s classroom are useful models for teachers who want to incorporate a wide range of diverse perspectives and lives in their classrooms in writing lessons.

### **Chapter 5: Tracing Children’s Testimonies to Trauma Across the School Year**

Chapter 5 builds on the idea that making space for trauma in literacy classrooms isn’t accomplished in a single writing opportunity, mini lesson, or unit. Rather, this work ebbs and flows in ways that reflect life. Dutro engages readers in “tracing how children bring trauma to their literacies over time” (p. 88) in a way that adds depth to the example classroom narratives and returns readers to the critical stance that is at the heart of enacting pedagogies of testimony and critical witness. Dutro employs a concept she named *pillar experience* that refers to the difficult, life-changing experiences that people carry with them close to their core. Throughout this chapter, Dutro shows how students kept returning back to their pillar experiences in their talk and writing. By looking at student examples, readers see how these experiences can be explored and written about from different angles and across genres. Dutro urges teachers to read students’ writing with an attentive eye, so that they are aware of the vulnerable threads students weave into their compositions across time. She also suggests that teachers pay attention to how students respond to and take up the testimonies of others in their talk and writing.

The most compelling aspect of this chapter is Dutro's revelation about "how many given moments of testimony and wittiness are spun up with others" and that classrooms can be thought of as "sites of swirled stories" (p. 95). Relationships and networks are built through the sharing of testimony and the responses of critical witnesses. These connections happen spontaneously with students in instructional moments, but also require careful instructional planning.

### Chapter 6: Conclusion

In the final chapter of this book, Dutro reviews core aspects of the instructional practices that undergird her pedagogies of testimony and critical witness in literacy work. The commitments she urges readers to hold dear include 1) questioning of the term trauma with a critical stance, 2) providing opportunities to share that offers students the choice to write about their entire lives, 3) selecting mentor texts that connect to the lives and experiences of students, 4) avoiding comparison of difficult experiences, 5) being purposeful about reciprocity in sharing with students, 6) balancing conversations about trauma with those that center joy, and 7) remembering that the personal is political particularly when trauma is at stake. Of this list, the one that warrants lingering on here is the idea that focusing on trauma also means focusing on joy. Dutro draws out the idea that:

joy amidst trauma arrives in connection with others, in riding vulnerability, in opportunities to see and absorb children's capacities for empathy and compassion, in experiencing how a child's investment ignites when bringing the depths of life to school literacies, in resisting messages of broken and damaged children, and in attuning to the moment-to-moment and year-to-year pursuit of our most heartfelt commitments. (p. 108)

The narratives she highlights were places where students could share all kinds of experiences, and, although those centered in this book are of trauma, they aren't the only experiences valued, shared, and written about in those classrooms.

Dutro also uses the final chapter of the book to begin a conversation about teachers' wellbeing, which is an important consideration when engaging in care work. Centering pedagogies of testimony and critical witness is complex work that opens teachers up to many emotions, some of which might be contradictory, and also provide the sense that teachers are serving their students in meaningful ways. Although this topic is far larger than the space it takes up here, Dutro has teachers explain the impact of this work on their lives. She notes that "they often used identity-focused language to talk about their take-up of these kinds of pedagogies" (p. 109), pointing to the idea that this work is a key component of their teacher identities. Dutro highlights the way that teachers have sought balance and space in their lives in order to be intentional, responsive, and respectful to the students in their classrooms.

Teachers needn't do this work alone. Attention around trauma in education is growing, and Dutro comments that this is an opportunity for teachers to collaborate with one another, as well as with administrators, policy makers, counselors, and community members. She also opens herself up to collaboration with readers through her website, calling for readers to "build a supportive community together" (p. 111). Furthermore, Dutro acknowledges that her text is optimistic. But, she argues, a pedagogy of testimony and critical witness requires optimism to continue connecting, growing, learning, reflecting, and supporting students in myriad ways. The optimism is a crucial foundation for an inquiry stance to teaching and building relations with students, just as it is necessary to power the belief that "we can always do better" as we inquire into how to be advocates for students.

## Reflections

Before embarking on a critical reflection on the content of this book, I want to begin with an appreciation of Dutro's writing. The prose is delicately wrought in ways that invite readers to witness gently and thoughtfully the stories of the author and those of students and teachers with whom she has worked. Her loving care for the people she includes in her book was palpable for me as a reader. And just as she reminds readers that there is joy even in the midst of life's difficulties, Dutro sprinkles this book with humorous asides that keep the heaviness of the content from becoming too overwhelming. Reading this book, written for teachers, is like talking with the best kind of mentor and friend about hard stuff. Dutro offers both understanding and wise words that push readers to think deeply about the connections and relationships they might foster in their classrooms, as well as the frontiers of their understanding that they need to grow with critical compassion.

In her concluding chapter, Dutro asks, "What does trauma *do* in literacy classrooms?" (p. 103, emphasis in original). I would argue instead that this book is less about what trauma itself does, and more about how teachers might consider what she calls students' loss, pain, yearning, and struggle in their curriculum development and community building. The strategies that Dutro offers are based in the choice writing pedagogies often connected with writer's workshop instruction. The writing pedagogy that Dutro features is not novel; it has been detailed in many volumes on running writing workshops. This facet is not a weakness and may be a strength in that its familiarity enables teachers to incorporate attention to trauma into a well-known and practiced approach. Many teachers do not need to radically alter their instructional approach to do the work in this book.

Dutro's unique focus to writing workshops includes two features. First, she highlights the teachers' focus on trauma and hard life experiences. These teachers craft mini-lessons and offer invitations that focus on students' testimonies and critical witnessing. This attention to trauma in students' writing, she implies, is compatible with conventional writing workshop goals such as developing an identity as a writer. The writing done in workshops thus has the potential to serve as the manifestation of teacher care as students' express their experiences with trauma in a sympathetic environment.

Second, Dutro engages in critically unpacking the baggage of the term "trauma" and how the word is wielded in school settings. Dutro assumes that trauma-informed instructional movement may leverage the best intentions of teachers who want to enact care, yet acknowledges how this care can be compromised by unquestioned assumptions about who needs care and why, often based on stereotype, adding complexity and nuance to the conversation. This book isn't about offering "the answer" for how to support students. It does, however, provide an opportunity to think about how literacy teachers might engage in consistent support for their students by crafting learning opportunities that make space for their entire lives, including those experiences that have traumatized them. If I have a concern, it's that her examples tend to represent extreme trauma—death, disease, incarceration—and not lesser everyday trauma, such as friends moving away or the death of a pet, that tends to infuse the classroom's emotional life with grief and the need for care.

I'm not currently in a K12 classroom, but I can envision keeping this book on my desk and using it as a model for my teaching. My instruction was grounded in reading and writing workshop, and I taught in contexts where my administrators gave me autonomy. And although this book works for me,

Dutro also goes to great lengths to acknowledge that many teachers work in contexts with more restrictive expectations and curriculum mandates. Throughout the text she sprinkles in comments and suggestions for how to make curricular or instructional adjustments when teachers don't have the latitude for a full workshop curriculum that can open up space for students. Dutro also illustrates what teachers have done in more restrictive settings, a refreshing and powerful divergence from books that offer up idyllic best practices without considering the actual constraints teachers navigate daily in their schools.

In sum, this book offers teachers myriad ways to address the trauma that seeps in to English classrooms through conversation, reading, and writing. She also provides guidance on the vexing question of how to respond to students' trauma-driven writing. Dutro's conclusions are simultaneously urgent and deliberate. Every class is touched by the hard parts of life, and *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* has the potential to help teachers build them into students' literacy engagement so that their writing is meaningful and helps them navigate the emotional challenges that inevitably face them in life.

## References

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