

Tanya Domi:

Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to The Thought Project, recorded at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Tanya Domi:

This week's guest is Professor Wendy Luttrell, who is a sociologist committed to social justice research, especially in the field of education. She is a professor at The Graduate Center, CUNY, where she currently serves as the executive officer of the urban education doctoral program. In addition to urban education, she also has appointments in sociology, critical social psychology, and women and gender studies doctoral programs. She is the author of four books, including the recent *Children Framing Childhood: Working-Class Kids' Vision of Care*, Bristol University Press, Policy Press, 2020. Welcome to The Thought Project, Professor Wendy Luttrell.

Wendy Luttrell:

Thanks so much.

Tanya Domi:

So you are the author of the recently published *Children Framing Childhood: Working-Class Kids' Visions of Care*. You describe your book by framing urban education research practice and policy. And as you describe your book, I actually feel like I'm reading The New York Times because you say that the situation, the surround of K-12 in the United States seems to be seized with problems of brokenness, stigma, and blame, so much it's truly negative about K-12 as reported by the media today. Just last night in the Democratic presidential debate, Elizabeth Warren lamented the abuse of high stakes testing of children in America. So you present in this book an alternative angle of vision and you use associated platforms that tell a visual story as well of the children you followed. You picked the City of Worcester, Massachusetts. Why Worcester?

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, for a couple of reasons. First, this project started as part of a redesign of a course called Thinking Like an Educator that I was part of at the Harvard graduate school of education. And the course was using Worcester public schools as a case study. And each of us who were involved had a different focus that we were to emphasize so that students taking the course could explore topics like language literacy, culture, and also to emphasize the stakeholders who were involved in the system, teachers, parents, the administration.

Wendy Luttrell:

And I was really interested in bringing kids views in. So that became my passion in the project and that allowed me access. I'm sure it would be very hard to do this project now given all kinds of IRB parameters and department of education requirements and ideas about what children should and shouldn't be doing in school. But in 2003, it was really an open territory. Really exciting to work with both the superintendent and the principal of this particular school.

Tanya Domi:

That's pretty amazing. So our listeners know I used to live in Massachusetts when I was in the US Army, and I used to go to Worcester all the time as a young private. And it was even then back in the '70s, it was a working-class community. It's an old mill town history of manufacturing and had that look of a has been gone era. So I thought that was really interesting because I am personally familiar with Worcester.

Wendy Luttrell:

That's actually the second reason that I wanted to pursue this project beyond the classroom, is the historic and contemporary working class quality characteristic of Worcester. And its history is as a town that welcomed lots of different immigrant groups and existed with so many different patterns of migration and languages that early on Emma Goldman decided she needed to leave Worcester, where she actually owned a candy store and go to Lowell to do her organizing because there were too many languages being spoken and not enough opportunities for working-class immigrants to intermingle in Worcester.

Tanya Domi:

That's really notable. I didn't know that about Emma Goldman. I did know that she was in law though for sure, how interesting. So when you were at Harvard, did you come up with the concept of this book? Because it's not just a book, it's a multimedia lens that you use to study children in this working-class, multi-immigrant community. And the other thing that I was really taken by with the book is not only is it the word care in the subtitle of your book, but the word care is also reflected in three of the six chapter titles. And I was really taken with that because right now I feel like I'm somebody like me who deals with the media every day that everything associated with education is about problem. And it's not about care or concern for children. We have problems, we have to fix them. And the children aren't performing at the fifth grade level or the sixth grade level and it's problem. It's fraught with concern about accountability of politicians, but not about children.

Wendy Luttrell:

You put that very well. I think one of the big things I learned was just how care conscious the kids were from age 10 all the way through age 18, speaking in a very different kind of language than what educators talk about the importance of performance or underperformance. Performativity was not what they were talking about regarding school. What they were talking about in terms of school in the homeschool relationship was much more about care, who cared for them, how they cared for each other, what people actually do in order to care. Everything from the lunch lady providing food and their appreciation for her, which they evidenced by taking her photo, teachers who had different strategies of care, again, that they evidenced their moms, all of the pictures that were taken by the kids and I can explain the process behind that.

Tanya Domi:

Yeah, I want to get into that. So I want to talk about all of that, but can we talk about the role here of the Collaborative Seeing Studio at The Graduate Center? I had no idea that we had such a body of people who get together once a month. But please share because this book and project contains over 2,036 photos and 65 hours of video. It's remarkable.

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, first of all, the Collaborative Seeing Studio is a monthly meeting that has been founded since 2011 when many of us work together on the second stage of my research.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Wendy Luttrell:

So some of those people were research assistants and some were doing their own visual research. And one other person, David Chapin, is a faculty member in environmental psychology. And the beauty of our process is to have a space for people to really experiment and to bring multi-modal data to a group that is trying to join the way that the researchers is trying to work with the material rather than to be directive. And we've sustained that group. Members have come and gone since 2011 and it's just been a huge resource for me in finally putting together lots of puzzles and pieces of this book, which never intended to be what it turned out to be.

Tanya Domi:

Well, I have to say that I was very impressed. The curation of it is another matter. I'm sure you had to deal with that. But you had three cohorts of children, the years, 2003 to 2004, 2004 to 2005, and 2005 to 2006. And the demographics of these children and families pretty... It has a lot of nuance to it, doesn't it? Which is really nice.

Wendy Luttrell:

Yes, I purposely wanted a very diverse slice of the students who go to the school in general. These cohorts had 12 kids in them, and they were selected by the principal and the teacher to represent those demographic differences as well as ability differences. And so I'm really indebted to the teacher and the principal for their hand in that. The importance of having a diverse group working together as the kids talked about their photos was one whole part of the project that was very distinct from when an interviewer would talk with an individual child about the packet of photos that he or she had taken. And that's part of the story that I tell in this book is just how much we have to understand the context in order to make meaning of what we see and what kids say.

Wendy Luttrell:

So, for example, many photos that were taken that the kids shared information with the individual interviewer were presented in what I call efforts for them to show themselves as good students. So I took this picture of a book because that's what I do at home. It's important to read. And I'm spoiled because I have a television. But if I didn't have a television, I would definitely be reading and it's good for kids to read. So that whole discussion with the interviewer, the adult interviewer tells a very different story than that same book that is then discussed by the kids amongst each other and an adult-directed, where they start to exchange their favorite books, or they would never have taken a book because the fact is all they do is watch television. So there's this tension between the meanings that the kids wanted to exchange with each other and what they wanted to portray with an adult.

Tanya Domi:

With an adult figure. So did you give cameras to each child? Each child was given a camera-

Wendy Luttrell:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

... for the purpose of this project?

Wendy Luttrell:

Yes, a very old time technology of disposable analog cameras is hard to find even now. And what was beneficial about that particular tool was that there were only 27 exposures on it. So there was a limit to how many pictures they could take. An answer to the large prompt, the big question, you have a cousin who's moving to Worcester, take pictures that will help your cousin know what to expect. And then as a group, we brainstormed together about pictures that the kids thought that they might take. So the kids offered statements like take pictures of what you do before and after school, or take pictures of where you feel respect, which I thought was a very telling prompt to begin with that they were clearly interested in concepts that we would not necessarily associate with 10-year olds. Take pictures of where you feel comfortable, take pictures of what concerns you. And there were others along the way, but those disposable cameras as opposed to today's technology where they could have just kept taking-

Tanya Domi:

With their phones, yeah.

Wendy Luttrell:

... pictures over and over and over again, put a certain important limitation that also made them think about more what they wanted to take an answer to all those questions.

Tanya Domi:

So I watched all the videos and I thought, to be really honest with you, my favorite was Feeding the Family. That was my favorite because you get this such a sweet insight into the child and how the child felt about their mother principally. You also you had in the process of your videos where the child would actually cut the picture up, and they would put it back together again talking about it.

Wendy Luttrell:

That was actually me [crosstalk 00:14:18].

Tanya Domi:

That was you, right?

Wendy Luttrell:

Exactly.

Tanya Domi:

That was you doing that?

Wendy Luttrell:

Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Okay, well, let's get to that. But the Feeding the Family absolutely was my favorite because you could see how their mother played a major role in the family and clearly kept the family together and how they felt about their mothers. And it was just so uninhibited that was just so authentic and so very sweet. It really was. My favorite quote was, "My mom helps me with many things. There are mom rolls, clean up your room. And she helps me with being a child." I love that quote so much. Very endearing. But the child knew that, that his mother or mother, I can't remember the play correct.

Wendy Luttrell:

His.

Tanya Domi:

His mother helped him negotiate life. This is very remarkable, I thought.

Wendy Luttrell:

And of course, he ends with, "I love her so much I could explode." [Crosstalk 00:00:15:25].

Tanya Domi:

I know. Oh, it was so sweet. Oh, God. And how old was he at that time?

Wendy Luttrell:

10.

Tanya Domi:

10 years old. So all these pictures and you curate them on video too, I saw that. That was pretty amazing. And then at some point, you have a final exhibition. So tell us about that. That must've been a moment of great pride, I would think.

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, each year we did an exhibition.

Tanya Domi:

Oh, okay. So there were multiple?

Wendy Luttrell:

Yes, definitely.

Tanya Domi:

Wow.

Wendy Luttrell:

And we also had an exhibition in City Hall one year in Worcester, and we had exhibitions both at the school and at the Harvard Graduate School Of Education and at other neighboring universities, Lesley University, for example.

Tanya Domi:

Is Clark nearby? No, it's probably too far.

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, no, Clark would have been a great other place to do it. I did the bringing them to Cambridge field trip because they were very excited about wanting to see "[crosstalk 00:00:16:34]."

Tanya Domi:

Go to Boston and see Cambridge.

Wendy Luttrell:

Right, they picked the places in Worcester.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Wendy Luttrell:

And they really wanted to exhibit in their school and at City Hall.

Tanya Domi:

That's very empowering for kids. Very empowering. So you're really looking at through these cohorts and you're meeting with them. How regularly did you meet with the children?

Wendy Luttrell:

Each year, I would go weekly because this was just one element of what we would refer to as ethnographic exploration. So sometimes I was just there hanging out in the building, going to different classes, going to performances in the gym, and hanging out at lunch. And these activities were done in a structured way that took a two-month period of time from the very beginning when they were given the cameras to the end when they selected the photographs they wanted to exhibit, which by the way was again another really interesting insightful difference between the pictures they wanted to share with teachers and the pictures they wanted to have as an exhibition. They chose pictures for teachers that really focused on family as if to say, "I want you to know more about my family." Whereas for the public exhibitions, they chose pictures that amongst each other they thought were more quote artistic.

Tanya Domi:

Wow.

Wendy Luttrell:

So they were already taking up the different kinds of conventions of what they thought audiences-

Tanya Domi:

Should see.

Wendy Luttrell:

... should see, and-

Tanya Domi:

So they were making discriminating decisions?

Wendy Luttrell:

Very. And that's really part of the important message is that even though I think adults, like you were saying, are moved by the sweetness of the kids, that they were incredibly insightful, a kind of wisdom about how they were seeing and what they wanted to show others.

Tanya Domi:

So they had some agency in this process.

Wendy Luttrell:

A lot of.

Tanya Domi:

They had a lot of agency, didn't they?

Wendy Luttrell:

And part of my interest was to trace as much as I could what their intentions were.

Tanya Domi:

And so this was part and parcel of identity development. And what are the other aspects that you were saying you wanted to know their intentions? So what other aspects of this experience were you probing?

Wendy Luttrell:

One of the things I was interested in especially was how they would take this quote assignment and make it their own. And a lot of them use the camera for reasons completely unrelated to the project, like letting their mom use it to take pictures of her sister's party-

Tanya Domi:

Oh, really?

Wendy Luttrell:

... or giving their grandparents the camera when they went to Puerto Rico and then came back. And the idea that some kids were using the camera as a belonging, as a possession as opposed to an instrument of documentation, I found very interesting and counter. And both of those examples that I just gave of recording or documenting the sister's birthday and giving the camera to grandparents, going to Puerto Rico, I view as an exercise of care as part of the many different examples.

Tanya Domi:

So caring for their family.

Wendy Luttrell:

Yeah, as a real intentional activity that they used as well as documenting evidence of care like moms and kitchens cooking.

Tanya Domi:

Right, cooking. So care, as you say, it's in three of the chapter subtitles and the title of the book. What did you learn about care and children? What did you learn? What are the big takeaways in your view?

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, one very big takeaway, which I applauded Elizabeth Warren last night when she said she'd get rid of high-stakes testing is how much the kids understood that the conditions of high-stake testing actually pits them against each other, makes them not able to care, and makes their teachers, and some of them were very explicit about how this would work, not be able to care for them because they couldn't give them help. They made them separate their desks, which they were used to being in groups. So there were all kinds of insights about what care means that we don't typically associate with care. And the idea that their elementary school was promoting what... They often took pictures of the five B's, be here, be ready, be safe, be respectful. Overall, the kids saw those signs as signs of care. So-

Tanya Domi:

That's a good thing. Yeah, that's a good thing to-

Wendy Luttrell:

That's a thing.

Tanya Domi:

... reassuring, to reassuring.

Wendy Luttrell:

As an educator who sees education having been hijacked by neoliberal logics of accountability and performativity and high-stakes testing, I think the kids offer a very different look about being on the ground and being learners where care is centered as opposed to, but it's fraught because they feel like it's getting undermined.

Tanya Domi:

Yes, the high-stakes testing is... I can't imagine it because it was bad enough going to school to do your homework and to be ready for the teacher and then you have to throw in these standardized exams. It's got to be just very, very pressured and really difficult. I have a lot of empathy for them. So one of the things that comes out of this is how you've identified care and saw care, perceived care is you yourself... As you told me earlier, you yourself went through the photos and you cut them up and put them back together. Why did you do that?

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, I used a lot of different analytic strategies for analyzing the photos, everything from content analysis to discourse analysis, etc. And there was a period of time where certain photographs, I didn't feel as though I was really seeing in the way that I wanted it to be able to communicate about how the

kids were seeing them. And part of it is in that Feeding the Family video, the way that the kids actually held and touched and caressed the photographs of their moms was so hard to portray in words. And so I had used collaging as a research activity in a previous project, but it was with pregnant teens making the collage, not me.

Tanya Domi:

I see.

Wendy Luttrell:

So I decided to turn it around with great hesitation because as a researcher, I was walking into very unknown, uncertain territory to start cutting-

Tanya Domi:

So you yourself become part of the participation in the project. Interesting reversal.

Wendy Luttrell:

And what happened as a consequence of that was it slowed down my scene. It really made me pay exquisite attention to the way that the moms had organized their kitchens, all the details, the spatulas, the clocks, the stuff on the refrigerators, the magnets that had escaped my initial just general views of-

Tanya Domi:

Observation.

Wendy Luttrell:

... here's the kitchen scene. And I thought that that was important. It was a more care full way of looking. And so now, I'm a big advocate of collaging as a visual scrutiny.

Tanya Domi:

That's very interesting. And you went back and you remet all the kids that participated. Talk about that. Obviously, a reunion would be a really pleasant thing. But was there a bigger purpose in it than just simply a reunion?

Wendy Luttrell:

Definitely. Each cohort I worked with when they were in fifth grade and then sixth grade, and at the end of sixth grade, I asked each of them whether they would be interested in having me follow up with them when they were at the end of middle school. And they were all very excited to do that. They all agreed. And then I moved from Harvard to here, The Grad Center. And so that put off my timing a bit just because it was a lot of logistics. And when I got back in touch, it was the first year of their high school instead of the last year of-

Tanya Domi:

Junior high.

Wendy Luttrell:

... junior high. And first of all, so many of them were absolutely astounded that I came back. That was the opening word, "I can't believe you found me." And it's interesting because they were all in one elementary school, but they were 10 different-

Tanya Domi:

High schools.

Wendy Luttrell:

... high schools that they ended up in. And again, I was very grateful to the principal who was no longer at that school helping me track the kids down. And out of the 36 original kids, there were 26 who were still in Worcester or could be found. I knew of some who had really moved out of the city, but I could only trace 26 of them. But even that's pretty high in these kinds of longitudinal-

Tanya Domi:

[crosstalk 00:27:58] for sure.

Wendy Luttrell:

... and particularly among populations that are moving around all the time for work. So of those 26, they all agreed to look at their pictures that they had taken as children, but many of them couldn't participate in the photo taking and video making part of that project. So only 18 of the 26 could.

Tanya Domi:

Participated. And so I watched that video, which was really interesting and clearly were older. And typical teenagers, young teenagers, and they said some things like, "Well, that's not who I am now. I'm different." Was that a pretty typical comment or how did they express looking back?

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, that definitely captures the idea of looking back was how much they had changed, whether it was physically or just in terms of their clothing style. That was a big one, how could I ever have worn my hair that way or dress like that. The opportunity to look back and recall why they might have taken a particular photo was very interesting in light of what they had said as kids. And so it was a different moment when they were providing an intention, a kind of agency about what was important about their child's eye that is now different, like they would not have taken pictures in school like they did. Some of them would not take pictures of teachers now.

Tanya Domi:

It's a distinguishing difference. That's very interesting. One of the parts of the book I noticed was that you did talk about the fact that children aren't playing now. Everything's really scheduled, and this is also part of, I think about the pressure of high-stakes testing, like kids just don't get to play. They don't get to run around on the playground, scream, yell, get excited, play on the monkey bars, all this stuff that we did as kids. It actually makes me sad because everything has to be organized. You have to be on this team, or that team, or some sort of organized activity. You just don't go out and run around, ride your bike, hang out with your dog, just play. It's no spontaneous play anymore. That has to affect a child psychologically I would think.

Wendy Luttrell:

Well, a lot of people have written about that. Yes.

Tanya Domi:

Sure. I know maybe we're getting off a little bit, but you do mention it in the book.

Wendy Luttrell:

Yes, right. And I think what I think is so important about it is that there is a class and race divide in who gets to play and what kind of play that is. So that when we talk about the disappearance of play for children, we have to really look more carefully at that because we have some kids who are being denied play because they are being over punished. And then we have other kids who are being denied play because they're over-scheduled by their middle-class parents who are looking for a competitive advantage to help their kids succeed and get-

Tanya Domi:

Get into an Ivy league school. Well, I have to say, Wendy Luttrell, this is a great contribution. I can't imagine it could be used in the Academy to teach people about how to study with a new eye, but if I were you, I would send it to the chancellor of New York City schools, and I might send it to the higher ed education committee in Albany and the education committee here in City Council. This is a great contribution. What actually surprised you the most about the book? If you look at the book project, was there any surprise that you would have never anticipated?

Wendy Luttrell:

There were a lot of surprises. I would say, first of all, as I said earlier, I did not intend to write a book like this. It evolved over time as I use the photographs with teachers and teacher professional development with graduate students who I was helping learn how to do visual research. And the way that audiences engaged the kids materials started to really affect me. As you know, this is an important story about how adults are seeing these that was not part of the initial project. So that's one thing that surprised me. The other is I did not anticipate how forceful the kids as teenagers would talk about their lack of time and the time pressures that they felt between working, going to school and their own self-blame in a way about not "juggling or balancing their time in the best way. And of course, a lot of time they talked about was also online time, social media time.

Tanya Domi:

Of course, that takes up more time now. It's another activity. I want to congratulate you. It's a terrific accomplishment. And we should talk about coming back to the thought project and maybe talking about high-stakes testing and what that might look like in a new administration in Washington.

Wendy Luttrell:

I would love that in two ways, a new administration and getting rid of high-stakes testing.

Tanya Domi:

Thanks for tuning into The Thought Project and thanks to today's guest, Professor Wendy Luttrell, of The Graduate Center, CUNY. The Thought Project is brought to you with production engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolfe of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.

