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Review: *Why We Teach* by Sonia Nieto

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Why We Teach by Sonia Nieto. New York: Teachers College Press, 2005. 242 pp. ISBN 0-8077-4593-6.

As the pillars of American public schools, teachers are charged with the often thankless job of educating future generations. Despite their importance to the educational process, many policymakers and researchers have failed to meaningfully document what motivates teachers to teach, how they teach, and what qualities effective teachers should possess. Officially, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation has defined “highly qualified teachers” as meeting the following criteria: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) demonstrated knowledge in the subjects taught (US Dept. of Ed., 2006). Sonia Nieto’s book entitled, *Why We Teach*, contests official definitions of what a “highly qualified” teacher might look like by focusing on “what teachers think about the issues that define teaching in today’s classroom.” (p. 1)

Within this volume, Nieto, along with 21 public school teachers, sets out to develop a counter narrative to NCLB’s official account for why teachers remain in public urban schools, how teachers meaningfully educate, and the qualities that make for a “highly qualified teacher.” This narrative is grounded in a critical theoretical orientation to the way school and society interact. Nieto suggests that policymakers must increase moral and material resources for teachers, including higher respect and pay for educators in public schools. Furthermore, Nieto asserts that educators should reflect on their own biases and that teacher education programs should not only emphasize the acquisition of knowledge but also the development of five core qualities as defined by the teachers in the book. These qualities include: “a sense of mission; solidarity with, and empathy for, students; the courage to challenge mainstream knowledge; improvisation; and a passion for social justice.” (p. 204) Critical questions and inspiring stories fill the pages of *Why We Teach*, generated by teachers who collectively possess over 350 years of experience “teaching outside the lines” in order to offer hope in the face of structural inequities and an ever-expanding achievement gap.

In addition to Nieto’s introduction and conclusion, *Why We Teach* is organized into 23 short chapters composed of 21 personal narratives by teachers. Moving beyond naïve romantic idealism, these teachers “get something back” from their students and in turn the reader gets something back from the teachers’ narratives (p. 167). For example, Ambrizeth Lima shares her eye-opening and uplifting story of “Teaching as a Spiritual Journey” that brings her in “direct conflict with the powers that be,” often because she believes her students have the “right to their identities and their languages.” (pp. 88, 93). Another passionate educator profiled in this book, Mr. Dunn, contests the notion of underperforming by offering a compelling critique of standardized tests as linguistically and

culturally biased. The illuminating Mr. P challenges teachers to look within in order to redefine what it means to be a committed educator who fosters a critical ontology rather than feeding students the “critical” response (p. 164).

The teachers’ narratives illustrate how critical and caring pedagogy gets translated into practice and what praxis looks like for committed educators engaged in an “intellectual, political and spiritual struggle.” (p. 72) These teachers give life to the process of teaching. In the “inherently stressful profession” where educators “constantly try to improve” and “keep on moving and never arrive” teaching is a “revolutionary act” that requires “reflection, creativity, courage and humility.” (pp. 179, 141, 177, 89, 148). “Classrooms must transcend traditional conventions” and teachers, while sometimes “angry” must help one another and “courageously be...” themselves in the practice of teaching (pp. 130, 177, 145).

In *Why We Teach* educators provide a wide array of thoughtful answers to the question that is the title of the book. They teach because “my students need to know that poverty does not equal stupidity” and because “teaching is a job where you get paid to learn with other people.” (pp. 182, 192) Many teachers teach for “love, learning, political commitment and social justice,” while others teach, “as a way to bring the world in” and maintain “hope.” (pp. 73, 103, 89). Most agree that teaching simply makes them “a better person.” (p. 141).

While Nieto’s book does an excellent job of giving voice to the caring, committed, critical teacher, there is little variability in her sample. To a great extent this book suffers from a somewhat myopic vision of teachers due to this lack of representative sampling. While the teachers come from a broad range of backgrounds, they all reside in the Northeastern United States and share a common set of assumptions about the way society and education should operate. Since the intent of this book is to provide a “counter narrative,” the homogeneity of teacher type does not necessarily detract from the power of the book. Nonetheless, greater heterogeneity, and particularly regional diversity, of the teachers would have strengthened the implications section, in which Nieto urges teacher education programs across the US to incorporate the five core qualities into their course curriculum.

While the teachers’ stories stand alone as powerful critiques and alternative visions for the practice of teaching, the introduction and conclusion to the book could also have been strengthened. Both sections attempt to link current research on teacher effectiveness with the book’s five core qualities of caring and committed teachers. As a leading Freirian scholar, Nieto would have done well to clarify the theoretical underpinnings guiding teachers’ narratives. Certainly, the reader would have benefited from an introduction to critical educational theorists, such as Freire, Giroux, and Ladson-Billings. The twenty-one teachers all demonstrate an inclination towards Freirian pedagogy, which asserts that schools and teachers should strive to 1) transform inequity and injustice in society, 2)

empower individuals and society, and 3) use curriculum and pedagogy based upon the lived experiences of the oppressed (Freire, 1970).

Why We Teach could have also benefited from some historical contextualization of dominant discourse around teaching in order to strengthen the counter narrative provided by the book's twenty-one teachers. More specifically, Nieto could have compared the current definition of "highly qualified teachers" with the definition that educators provide in the book. It would also have been useful for Nieto to historically situate the role of teaching within the current urban public schools context, where the market driven forces championed by NCLB has forcibly changed classroom practices. While it is important that teacher voices be privileged, a historical and theoretical contextualizing of teachers' critiques would make their voices even more powerfully heard in the national discourse around "highly qualified teachers" and in policy conversations around teaching and education.

Although *Why We Teach* suffers from a limited theoretical and historical framework and less than rigorous sampling, this book remains a powerful examination of teaching in American public schools. All policymakers, researchers, and educators who are invested in improving education, especially in urban schools, should read this book. Judith Kauffman Baker, an experienced Boston High School English teacher explains how she has "tried to make questioning the domain of the learner" an important point of reflection as she develops more critical, learning-centered pedagogical practices in her classroom (p. 28). In the same way, *Why We Teach* returns teaching to the domain of the teacher in order to emphasize the importance of teacher voice to quality educational research. This book is an important contribution to educational literature, not only for its depiction of what critical and caring pedagogy practices might look like, but also for its explorations of what it means to be a critical educator. *Why We Teach* provides the hope and critical insights necessary for engaging in struggle towards improving public education.

References

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Reviewer

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