

BOOK REVIEWS

ESSAY REVIEW

LANDON E. BEYER (EDITOR). *Creating Democratic Classrooms: The struggle to integrate theory & practice*. New York: Teachers College Press (1996). 171 pp. US\$20.95. ISBN: 0-8077-3518-3 (paper); 0-8077-3519-1 (cloth).

RENATE SCHULZ. *Interpreting Teacher Practice: Two continuing stories*. New York: Teachers College Press (1997). 154 pp. US\$18.95. ISBN: 0-8077-3558-2 (paper); 0-8077-3559-0 (cloth).

DANIEL R. MEIER. *Learning In Small Moments: Life in an urban classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press (1997). 162 pp. US\$18.95. ISBN: 0-8077-3626-0; (paper) 0-8077-3627-9 (cloth).

PRACTITIONER INQUIRY SERIES

The *Practitioner Inquiry Series* is a relatively new and expanding targeted series of volumes from Teachers College Press in New York City that is specifically designed to bring timely and topical issues to the wide-ranging and evolving educational marketplace. Under the general editorship of Marilyn Cochran-Smyth and Susan Lytle of the University of Pennsylvania, assisted by a small representative advisory board, this series clearly exemplifies a standard of practical professionalism and insight that is most refreshing to witness. According to the series' general editors, as stated in the Forward of the first volume in the series, the *Practitioner Inquiry Series* "will include teacher research, action research, participatory research, and related forms of inquiry in education by teachers, administrators, staff developers, teacher educators, and others."

To date, the *Practitioner Inquiry Series* consists of three exceptional volumes that have certainly provided a most intriguing and eclectic base upon which future volumes may build in a safe and collegial atmosphere. The current volumes in this series are listed above.

Landon Beyer has brought together seven young and somewhat inexperienced elementary and secondary teachers and has provided an opportune structure and framework within which they can share their experiences in attempting to deal with that illusive 'thing' called integration. Much space is given in the general educational literature base related to classroom practice to the notion of 'integrating theory and practice', and Beyer's several teachers share their struggles in an honest, forthright, and at times humorous manner. Mostly drawn from the elementary and second language ranks, these seven youngish professionals would not normally be considered a representative sample of teachers-at-large; however, they are indeed young professionals at the beginning of their careers and are perhaps much more representative of a new generation of thinking, questioning, and reflecting practitioners.

As an aside, I found the personal visions that emerged from the narratives to be most true-to-life. These teachers did not disguise their classrooms within a 'Pollyanna' balloon, but dealt with their students and their difficulties, and their own weaknesses, in a realistic manner that quite endeared them to me. These are honest to goodness beginning professionals seriously questioning what is going on in their classrooms and attempting to find humane and 'democratic' solutions to some very serious problems many of which have their origins outside of the classroom and even outside the framework of the teacher and the school. Yet, these neophyte professionals are internally struggling with their own views and attempting to combine these with the reality of the school situation such that their pupils will learn within what might be generally termed a 'democratic' landscape.

I was particularly enamored with the story of Ushma Shah who describes her family's somewhat negative reaction to her decision to become an elementary school teacher. One family member even implied that such a choice could only have been made due to some major academic deficiency. She forcefully noted in reply to these, and perhaps to all such nay-sayers:

My decision to become a teacher was not based in bad SAT scores, bad advising, or bad karma. My decision to become a teacher emerged from hope for a just world and broader commitments to democracy, equality, and social change. (pp. 42-43)

Shah juxtaposes her extended practice teaching experience, and the demands and constraints that such an experience entails, with her new-found supposed freedom of her own elementary classroom. The hard factors of reality have dented her shiny views somewhat, but she still

hopes and strives for a classroom in which she and her pupils may collaboratively and collectively learn:

Now. . . I have learned that these ideas were naïve and not rooted in an understanding of a 32-student, urban classroom reality. However, I have not abandoned the commitment to a more participatory and cooperative classroom. . . . I am learning that teaching students to take responsibility for their voices and actions is a process. (pp. 59-60)

Beyer closes his lengthy *Introduction* by asking readers to come on a journey of discovery and, to a certain extent as the solutions are unclear or unknown, to join his participants in their classroom as they grapple with some serious pedagogical and humanitarian issues. Beyer asks, and this invitation might well be applicable as a clarion call for the entire Series, "I invite you to join them in dialogue, struggle, and action" (p. 21).

Renate Schulz provides a most intimate view of two teachers via her narrative inquiry that is aptly entitled: *Interpreting Teacher Practice – Two Continuing Stories*. She sets an overriding tone for her effort when she notes that "teaching is a uniquely personal and intuitive activity that requires us to focus on its qualitative nature if we are to increase our understanding of it" (p. 1). In some detail, and drawing heavily upon the stories of her pair of participants, this two-year odyssey details the complex and real professional world of two secondary school English teachers. Somewhat in a contrasting fashion to Beyer's participants, both of Schulz's co-participants are what might be termed 'seasoned' professionals who have many years of successful teaching behind them. Additionally, they are far more secure in their knowledge base, their classroom mannerisms, and anticipated academic outcomes.

To me, the centrally intriguing position of Schulz's work is not that she documented via story, narrative, and interview two teachers over a long time frame. This would have been an interesting and worthwhile investigation in and of itself; however, what really sets this particular effort apart and makes it a thoroughly fascinating personal and professional drama are the reactions of one of the teacher co-participants. This particular teacher, contrary to what had been anticipated or expected, reacted negatively to what he read about himself and perhaps discovered attributes that he found out of sync with his carefully crafted self-image. In any case, essentially, Renata's book may be divided into three separate but interrelated sections, namely, (1) a set of descriptive "bookends", an opening and a closing if you will, which bracket the narrative descriptions and following discussion, and place them within

a philosophical framework; (2) descriptions, narratives, and stories of the two teachers; and finally, (3) an investigation into what Schulz terms “the pain of visibility”.

It is this “pain of visibility” that provides a dose of dissonance to this study and, in a sense, signals an alarm bell that all educational researchers should heed. Notwithstanding the best of intentions, the constant feedback, and the numerous meetings, I think that we can all identify with co-participant Raymond’s plaintive musings when he succinctly penned: “It’s true, but that’s not how I want to see myself” (p. 69).

By means of this ethical dilemma, Schulz is now able to take us on her own journey as she struggles with what she terms her “moral hypochondria” (p. 81). If this were a nonfiction account, then some final, positive or satisfying resolution would be provided; however, this is reality and there are rarely such neat and convenient ties and bows on these packages. Schulz provides a more meaningful and professional form of closure when she notes:

The narrative line of this story does not lead to closure, to a problem resolved. Rather, it leads to a situation revealed, an open-ended instance that invites questioning and further dialogue on confirming ways in which we can learn through teachers’ stories. It is a text to be continued. . . . (p. 141)

John Sierra, a classroom teacher, presents the reader with a practical and realistic conundrum when he describes how he and Daniel Meier, the author of *Learning In Small Moments*, came to job-share or co-teach for a year. Many educators, I am sure, have toyed with the notion of team or collaborative teaching and some of us in teacher education facilities have perhaps envisioned some kind of temporary or part-time arrangement that would permit an opportunity to experience, once again, those special and almost indescribable sights, sounds, and tastes of an elementary classroom. However, how many actually forge ahead and deliberately spend a year in a split teaching situation? John perhaps summed up the hidden thoughts of many when he noted:

When Daniel and I decided to work together, we had little idea how quickly our differences would surface and how our personal and professional friendship would grow from these differences. We were different in education, teaching experiences, religious and family background, and social class. (p. xiii)

Daniel Meier has provided a marvelous insight into how two professionals worked and struggled together over a year as co-teaching colleagues with the same group of grade one children in an urban public

school. In many ways, this is also a tale of how resilient kids are and how children can quickly and genuinely adopt and adapt to different caring adults. Through many vignettes and first-hand accounts, Meier recounts the triumphs and the tragedies of this roller coaster year as seen primarily through the eyes of the two teachers as they interacted with the children as well as themselves.

While one may laugh at Foo Foo's animal antics, or marvel at the insight exhibited through individual student art work, or even appreciate the gentle and subtle competition between two professional educators as they vie for affection and acceptance from their pupils by way of carefully crafted personal class activities; however, it is to me the realistic and all too oft repeated story of Robert that strikes that heart-felt cord. For many long months and through several school suspensions, repeated conferences, and animated professional discussions, John and Daniel struggled to find ways to help Robert. At the same time, they attempted to make sense out of the maze of administrative, legal, social, and personal agendas that at times appeared to conflict and actually negate aid for this young pupil. Although engaged in a worthy and, some might say, noble battle, the teachers were largely unsuccessful in meeting Robert's intellectual, academic, and behavioral needs. Robert, however, did demonstrate that innate ability exhibited by many children to place events perspectively within their unfolding landscapes.

In a testament to the resiliency of children, the power of the peer world, and the attractions of our classroom, Robert never gave up on finding a place and home in our classroom community. Like all our students, Robert just wanted to have a friend. (p. 118)

Meier has indeed produced a reflective chronicle of the daily grind that is the primary classroom, but this is not a story of failures, faults, and defeat; rather, it is an uplifting account that explores the everyday dreams of adult and child as they intimately work together in that special place called school.

The Practitioner Inquiry Series, as these initial first volumes indicate, has met the high standards that were illuminated by the general editors. This Series will indeed unite and validate new groups of concerned classroom practitioners, and will most certainly give voice to those who have a desire to see the complexities of the teaching-learning paradigm explored by practicing practitioners in a more intimate and personal narrative manner.

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