

BOOK REVIEWS

A.R. NEILSEN (Editor). *Daily Meaning – Counternarratives of teachers' work*. Mill Bay, BC: Bendall Books Educational Publishers (1999). 200 pp. C\$ 22.00 (ISBN 0-9696985-5-0).

As I read the ten counternarratives in *Daily Meaning*, I in turn laughed, cried, despaired, questioned myself, felt affirmed, and wondered if I should be hopeful. When I first started reading, I had no idea that I would have such a range of responses. Each piece is emotionally charged and attempts to make visible the “real” work of teachers in today’s schools.

In the introduction, Neilsen, the editor, explains that “counternarratives offer perspectives on taken-for-granted understandings of how some aspects of the world work” while attempting to challenge “the construction and maintenance of the dominant cultural narratives that shape – normalize – our everyday beliefs and practices.”

In each story, the authors try to make sense of their work in classrooms and schools that are in a world that has changed dramatically since they were children going to school themselves. The fact that the authors are teachers is very important as little of what has been written on classrooms and schools has been by teachers.

Daily Meaning engaged me as a reader because each contributor told his/her story so differently:

Jeff Doran in *Rough Cuts* tells an almost too real account of some of his high school classes and helps us understand that schools can be lonely places because of a lack of time for meaningful interaction.

Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen in *Awakening in a Dark Wood* weave their teaching/learning stories around the myth of Beowulf and describe the many aspects of “swamp life.”

Marlene Milne in *Bending the Willows* describes what it was like for her to embark on a teaching career in the 1960s and contrasts this with what it is like to teach today by providing brief profiles of teachers from the 1990s.

Arlene Connell and Carol Johnston-Kline in *Front Lines* write a number of letters to each other over the period of eight months and explore the choices they and their schools have made as a result of numerous budget cuts.

Susan Church in *The Emotional Labour of School Leadership* tells us of her conversations with four women principals who explain and give examples of the importance of nurturing relationships in the work they do.

In *Looking Back on "Getting Out"* Gary Knowles shares excerpts from his personal journal going back as far as 1974 to explain why he decided to leave public school teaching. He intermeshes this with a description of the many demands placed on teachers.

In *Hide-and-Seek: Stories from the Lives of Six Lesbian Teachers* Sonya Singer uses the voices of these teachers to help the reader understand the secret existence lesbians often have in still very homophobic schools and communities.

In *Outtakes*, Geraldine Hennigar tells four stories that highlight the many decisions and actions teachers must take that remain invisible to most outside schools.

In *From Here to Uncertainty: A Preoccupation with Code*, Mike Corbett tells us of his past and leads us to understand why his "passion comes out of confronting the norm and perhaps undoing the work that many schools define as their principal business."

In the last piece, entitled *Reclaiming our Children: Teachers as Elders*, Jacqueline Barkley critically describes pop culture as "resulting largely from top-down political and economic forces which construct our needs and desires for us, so that we can only be consumers, not creators; observers, not actors." After telling us of the shallow world in which we live, she writes to give us hope by suggesting at least partial solutions. Barkley explains the importance of having parents, teachers and principals reclaim their role as elders and gives very concrete examples of how this can be done.

After reading this book, I reread the comments from other reviewers and was struck by the fact that I agreed with almost every word of praise. As I read, one question lingered in my mind: Who should read this book? Although I agree with Ardra Coles' review in which she suggests that politicians, journalists, parents, educational administrators and educators would benefit from reading this book, I remain unsure about when it would be most beneficial for a teacher to read these stories. As a teacher educator who works with teachers at different career stages, I worried about the

impact of these pieces on pre-service and novice teachers. In sharing this concern with a colleague, she suggested that these stories might be an excellent starting point for a dialogue on the culture of teaching and an exploration of proactive strategies for teachers interested in effecting “real” changes in the way they do their work as well as working toward classroom, school and system level change.

I agree that we must bring these powerful stories to those who make and influence decisions about education so they have a sense of what teaching today is really all about. The authors of *Daily Meaning* together provide a rich description of their fears and frustrations, their exhaustion and disheartenment and their insights and dreams.

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L. WEIS & M. FINE. *Speed Bumps: A student-friendly guide to qualitative research*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University (2000). 144 pp. US\$16.95 (ISBN 0-8077-3966-9).

Those of us who drive are familiar with speed bumps, awkward convexities placed thoughtfully on the road in order to make us slow down, either because we need to move cautiously through the area, or to alert us when we tend to veer off the road. Within the context of qualitative research, Weis and Fine refer to speed bumps as moments of reflection on the methodological and ethical concerns that make researchers slow down in order to realize more fully both objective and subject in their research. Specifically dedicated to students, this book could be seen as a collage of different voices uncovering researchers' personal concerns, dilemmas and situations that tend to be excluded from formal, published reports. What makes this book even more student-friendly is that it compiles graduate students' own stories, in which they confront their individual speed bumps in the process of doing qualitative work.

Drawing upon their most recent ethnographic study, *Unknown City: The lives of poor working class young adults*, that addresses the lives of young adults in the poor communities of Jersey City and Buffalo, Weis and Fine advocate the role of qualitative research in promoting social justice in culturally diverse America. By focusing on the issues of crime, poverty and violence within different demographic groups, Weis and Fine argue that development of social policies must include the voices of marginalized people.

The book's main section consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, Weis and Fine introduce and contextualize their research. *Unknown City* involves