

Book Review Ayers, William. (2001). To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher (2nd Ed). New York: Teachers College, Columbia. Pp. 151. ISBN 0-8077-3985-5.

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PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

The book under review was written by Ayers, William (2001) and is entitled “To Teach: The journey of a teacher” (2nd Ed). The first edition of this book was published in 1993 and won an award for distinguished written work. When writing this book William Ayers was a Professor of Education at the University of Illinois, Chicago, United States of America (USA). He has taught students at various levels in elementary schools and colleges. His writings are inspired largely by his experiences with young children as a teacher and father to his three sons.

INTRODUCTION

I know that becoming an outstanding teacher is an heroic quest: Like Odysseus one must navigate turbulent and troubled waters, overcome a seemingly endless sea of obstacles, and face danger and challenges (often alone) on the way toward an uncertain reward. Teaching is not for the faint-hearted; courage and imagination are needed to move from myth to reality (Ayers, 2001; p. 10).

The above quote, in particular, sets the tone for this article as it sums up a teacher's assumptions, beliefs, experiences and practices as viewed by the author of the book under review. The book, *To Teach: The journey of a teacher* is an intriguing and invaluable piece of work that is based on the experiences of a committed and gifted teacher. It is a narrative of a teacher's odyssey into the moral and ethical process of teaching. The purpose of the book is primarily to take both novice teachers, teachers-to-be, as well as experienced teachers into the journey of teaching in order to understand the challenges and complexities that make teaching a special job. As the title of the book states; “*To teach: the journey of a teacher,*” focuses on teaching and how to teach with a purpose. It challenges teachers to embark on a personal journey in their teaching in order to develop their own teaching philosophy, vision and mission with a view of thoughtfully paving their own pathways.

The book narrates the complex realities of teaching in a practical and cohesive way and challenges all teachers to be part of that journey if indeed they want to bring change to the lives of the children they teach. The book is based on the “idea that love for our own and other people's children can be a robust, vivid, hopeful organizing center of our efforts- it invites teachers and teachers-to-be in particular to rethink the project of teaching from top to bottom, with love at its heart”(Ayers, 2001; xi). The author does not in any way hide the complex and excruciating nature of the teaching enterprise and how demanding and tedious it is, this is best explained by Ladson-Billings in her foreword in the book that “He refuses to sugar coat the work of a teacher but his work does not, by default, lead us to a place of hopelessness, powerlessness, or despair” (p. x). This article presents an analysis of the major themes

identified in the book, how the themes come together and the writer's personal thoughts about the book.

MAJOR THEMES IN THE BOOK

In reading the book, it is tempting for one to situate himself or herself within the context of the author's experiences in order to understand the author's beliefs, experiences and ideas about teaching. In reading the book, a number of themes emerge that categorically help to analyze the text. The ideas that come out clearly from the book revolve around four themes mainly: 1. The art and craft of teaching; 2. The role of the curriculum; 3. Developing a learning environment/ Teaching methodology; 4. Assessment strategies. These themes as outlined by the reviewers are discussed with reference to the book and the other undertakings that teachers endure in an effort to make teaching a reality and demystify the act of teaching.

The Art and Craft of Teaching

The author's narrative begins with explaining the nature of teaching and the challenges that teacher's need to face and overcome in order to achieve the basic: "a home...a heart...a brain...a nerve" (p.134). He argues that teaching is intellectual and ethical work and therefore, not everyone can become a teacher. Ayers (2001) sees teaching as:

Instructing, advising, counseling, organizing, assessing, guiding, goading, showing, managing, modeling, coaching, disciplining, prodding, preaching, persuading, proselytizing, listening, nursing and inspiring. Teachers must be experts and generalists, psychologists and cops, rabbis and priests, judges and gurus (p.4).

The above quotation clearly challenges conventional thought and the over-simplification of teaching which many believe that anybody can become a teacher. It further signifies how complex and demanding teaching is and the challenges teachers are faced with in the whole process teaching children. The author cautions teachers-to-be to know what they are getting into and encourages them not to despair. The idea of teaching being a complex task has been reiterated by Lortie (2002) who opines that even though teaching is complex, it requires a moral and ethical choice. The complexities in teaching are further augmented by Ladson-Billings (2001) who argues that teaching with a sociopolitical consciousness is not an easy task. Ayers further dispels some of the myths held about teaching and opines that teaching is not for the weak or faint hearted as many people think but rather that it requires intelligence, courage and imagination to move from myth to reality. He further encourages teachers to become good and outstanding teachers.

Ayers (2001) asserts that good teaching requires most of all thoughtfulness, and a caring teacher committed to the lives of students. He argues that teaching is a matter of love; you cannot become a good teacher if you do not have interest and knowledge of another person. The idea of caring and love for students has been emphasized by Noddings (1994) when saying that:

If we were to explore seriously the ideas suggested by an ethic of caring for education, we might suggest changes in almost every aspect of school: The current hierarchical structure of management, the rigid mode of allocating time, the kind of relationships encouraged, the size of schools and classes, the goals of instruction, modes of evaluation, patterns of interaction, selection of content (p. 175).

This total shift of emphasis in the role of teaching with care and love at the center alluded to by Noddings is what Ayers is challenging teachers to do if indeed they want to bring change in the lives of their students, and this is a mammoth task. This is to say that good teaching is based on the act of love for students and the work teachers do. Gay (2000) supports the idea of caring that teachers who care about their students generate high levels of all kinds of success, have high expectations for performance and will settle for nothing less than high achievement, such teachers do not accept failure as an option. Culturally relevant teaching takes into account all the aspects of teaching alluded to in this paragraph, because it focuses on success and failure is indeed not an option. Even though care theories are emphasized by Ayers and the other authors, it has been criticized for ignoring colorblindness and the promotion of whiteness (Thompson, 1998).

Good teaching according to Ayers involves the knowledge of the students that teachers' teach. He contends that teachers need to have knowledge of their students, their culture and socialization processes. He further suggests how knowledge of students can be achieved that teachers' need to be observing students, asking parents about their children, asking children to talk about themselves and writing their own autobiographies, developing relationship with the community and interacting with parents in and out of school and self-awareness as a teacher. The importance of knowing students and their culture has been supported by various authors such as Noddings, 1994; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; 2001 who view knowledge of students' culture as the most important aspect of teaching and learning. Gay (2000) has argued that there is no way that the students' experiences and culture can be ignored because teaching is contextual and situational, hence a socio-cultural process. The role of the teacher as described by Ayers is congruent to Gay (2000) view that teachers using culturally relevant teaching should act as cultural organizers, cultural mediators and orchestrators of social contexts in order to facilitate high academic achievement.

The author's view of teaching contradicts what people perceive teaching to be. Teaching is perceived as a career for the weak, and that is why it is always associated with femininity. In my country, teaching is chosen as a last resort and is viewed as a job for the less successful. This view has also been observed by Lorte (2002) that some people decide to become teachers only after they have tried another line of work. This then makes them choose teaching because it is accessible and an easy choice.

The Role of the Curriculum

One of the themes that emerge from the book is that of the curriculum. The author's belief is that the curriculum should be based on individual students and not the behavioral objectives, the curriculum should be transformative, emancipatory and engaging for it to develop every child's potential. He believes that students should be engaged in examining the curriculum for their own good. The curriculum should be challenging, exploratory, interesting and focus on problems and issues in the school and community at large. He believed in a curriculum that is liberating, by engaging students on projects. He believed that students have a lot of knowledge that has not been explored and the curriculum should be based on the students' experiences. He was against the idea of controlling and containing students in classrooms because to him, "children are a great untapped resource in most schools" (p.97).

Ayers is a critic of curriculum guidelines and mandates and suggests that teachers should give these mandates to the students and discuss with them the language, implications, underlying assumptions and ask the students to figure out where to go. He is of the view that teachers should ignore some of these bureaucratic rules and develop relationships with their students

outside the classroom. This idea is also supported in Ladson-Billings (1994) where a teacher known as Harris decided to have free lunch with her students and spent time getting to know them without talking about school work and knew very well that she was violating the school regulations. This teacher had her students at heart and wanted to develop them academically and socially. Such teachers who are able to risk and challenge the status quo are not easy to find. The problem arises where teachers cannot take risks or are caught. It is a good idea to take risks but a paradox in itself. I have an issue with this idea; the question is at what level does the teacher discuss the mandates with students? If the school administrators find a teacher having meetings with students discussing the mandates what then happens to that teacher given that there is a time-table to be followed, the syllabus and examinations to be written at the end? Although I agree with the idea of transparency, dialogue and discussion, I find this quite difficult and problematic for teachers who are not radical in their approach and have not been coached in what Ladson-Billings (2001) refers to as reflecting on their own perspectives and those of their students.

Creating a Learning Environment/ Teaching Methodology

Ayers believes that it is the teacher's responsibility to create a classroom that is exploratory and experimental. Such a classroom should encourage respect, curiosity, critical and reflective habits of the mind, the teacher must create a challenging classroom atmosphere with all varied resources and activities for students to engage in. Students in his classroom were engaged in a range of activities from painting, drawing, reading, hypothesizing, predicting, observing, speculations and discussions, all these were meant to cater for the diverse interests of students. Ayers emphasizes this by saying that; "In all of this, the goal was to make the classroom environment a learning laboratory, an active workshop for discovery."(p.57) It is in this laboratory that students' learn to experiment with various objects of inquiry and reach certain conclusions, recognize that learning is not only based on textbooks or fixed but rather an adventure that can be exciting. He argues that the whole idea is to create an environment where every student is visible, feels recognized known and understood and the classroom is turned into a community of learners. Ayers conception of a classroom environment reinforces the ideals of education for democracy, where the classroom is turned into a microcosm of democracy in which students practice and live a democratic life. The child is at the center of the learning process and teaching revolves around the needs, aspirations and fears of the learner. This challenges the current norm in schools where classrooms are characterized by silence and teachers' dominate as knowledge providers and disciplinarians (Mhlauli, 2010). This scenario is more than explained in Ladson-Billings (2001) that the role of the teacher is that of a leader or authority figure, knowledgeable, and talks while students listen. Classrooms are turned into areas of competition rather than a community of learners. The challenge still goes back to teacher education to restructure and reform their education systems and practices such that they meet the challenges of teaching in diverse classrooms in the 21st century.

Assessment Strategies

Ayers is critical about assessment strategies used in schools and sees them as deterrents to the achievement of good teaching in schools. He laments about the inadequacies in the examinations and test oriented curriculum in schools and the bureaucratic system of governance that the schools have adopted. Ladson-Billings (2001) augments this assertion that more often than not teachers are not expected to take a critical stance towards the curriculum but are expected to accept the curriculum or standards as they are to ensure that students perform well on district or state mandated tests. Ayers advocates for authentic assessment strategies that look at various aspects of the students' capabilities rather than standardized

tests which are myopic in nature. The argument is that standardized tests do not in any way help the students to interact with the curriculum and develop critical consciousness towards the curriculum. They tend to drill students towards examinations which do not help students of color develop to their potential.

I tend to agree with the author that the curriculum that is examinations oriented retards instead of developing students. These types of examinations are also used in my country and what has been discovered is that students leave primary school level without being able to think critically, question or analyze issues because the education system has not prepared them to do so (Mhlauli, 2013). This type of assessment is disempowering, therefore, Ayers's idea of reforming assessment strategies at classroom level is crucial. The problem arises as to whether we have teachers who have been prepared to deal with such intricate issues as authentic assessment in the classroom, teachers who can move beyond stipulated curriculum expectations and develop strategies that are culturally relevant for their students. Teacher education, particularly in Botswana, need to reform if classroom teaching and assessment are to be improved, an issue which has been under scrutiny and debate over decades with the advent of sky rocketing poor results/ performance in schools today .

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK

The themes in this book are so intertwined that it is difficult to separate each one of them from the other. In trying to discuss the designed themes separately, it becomes even more difficult to isolate individual issues, and this is what makes this book interesting because it is not compartmentalized. It tackles issues in a holistic and cohesive manner. This makes it easier to read the book because its parts are related to one another therefore, making the story to flow naturally. These themes also provide a rich narrative of a teacher's life to the extent that at times one finds herself walking the road of the narrator and making it so full of life. The book is suitable for teachers of today and provides thorough guidance that they need in order to cope with the changing needs of students in a diverse classroom. The author is calling for a paradigm shift towards teaching.

In reading the text, I feel that the book is suitable for its audience, that is, teachers and teachers to-be. What is interesting about this book is that it is applicable to different settings for teacher preparation regardless of the geographical locations or cultural backgrounds. It basically explores some of the intricacies involved in teaching that are difficult to handle such as moving beyond the stated objectives in the syllabus to include other aspects of the students' lives , experiences and cultural backgrounds. This, inclusion of the socio-political aspects of the students' life is interesting in that it indirectly challenges the status quo at the same time empowering students to be able to cope with adverse challenges in their lives as well as equipping them with survival skills.

In reading the book, I think the author achieved his goal, because this book is used in a number of institutions for teacher preparation and at the same time it is suitable for practicing teachers who would like to improve their teaching and update their teaching skills. The book does not provide factual information that is based on theories alone but rather provides teachers with anecdotes that they can relate to and provide practical solutions to dealing with classroom issues and teaching in general. The language in the book is not technical, it is simple and understandable throughout the text, this, therefore, makes the text accessible to people of different abilities. The most interesting thing is that the author does not provide a recipe for good teaching but rather encourages teachers to look at their mission, assess and reflect on their own perspectives and what they are going to do to change the lives of their students. The

title of the book: "To teach" is also inviting because as a teacher, once you see such a title you will be tempted to see what it entails therefore, allowing you the opportunity to check its contents. I believe this book is a must for both novice and experienced teachers.

Throughout the book, I did not come across issues of discipline and other forms of student's behavior. One wonders if the author's experiences did not include misconduct and misbehavior in the schools he taught in. It would have been interesting to see how the teacher dealt with such issues of behavior. Although the book narrates the complex nature of teaching, it does not address the issue of teacher apathy and negligence of duty. The whole problem in the book revolves around solutions on structural deficits such as reforms on how teaching should be done, helping students achieve academically and reforming the curriculum. All these are not the panacea of human development and the teaching act, and for all these things to happen, teacher education and recruitment should be the starting point because the onus lies with the teachers' ability to work diligently. If these teachers are not prepared to deal with these sociopolitical issues in schools, all these writings and books will remain 'school anthems.'

I feel that the author expects too much from teachers and writes as though all teachers are the same, will have the same interest and determination. It is interesting to find a teacher of his caliber who has accepted teaching as a "moral and ethical" issue which is not always the case. Most teachers see teaching as work like any other work. The issue is how then do we make such teachers see teaching through the eyes of Ayers? Schools at the same time have been bombarded with all sorts of reform, and teachers are experiencing some kind of "burnout." How then does the system motivate those teachers to be able to carry on with this tedious and excruciating job? One wonders if this is not the right time to reconsider the status of teachers from doing miscellaneous duties and specify their responsibilities such that they can be regarded as professionals and specialists rather than generalists and be held accountable.

The other idea that is usually neglected that has also been raised by Noddings (1994) is that the role of the school was not to cure all social ills but to teach values of the society in an effort to develop an ideal citizen. It has now turned out that the society creates inequalities and then instead of correcting those inequalities, they are shifted to the school and teachers to correct them. My conviction is that teachers may be unable to do their job well primarily because they no longer know what they are supposed to do in schools. There is so much to do, and so much at stake!

CONCLUSION

One of the most captivating and interesting sentences or paragraph to me in this book is the one that says that;

To make life in teaching is largely to find your own way, to follow this or that thread, to work until your fingers ache, your mind feels as if it will unravel, and your eyes give out, and to make mistakes and then rework large pieces. It is sometimes tedious, and demanding, confusing and uncertain, and yet it is often creative and dazzling: Surprising splashes of color can suddenly appear at the center; unexpected patterns can emerge and lend the whole affair a sense of grace and purpose and possibility (p.1).

This above stanza is interesting to me because it captures the whole notion about teaching, its problems and hopes. This paragraph to me sums up all that ideal teaching is about and what

teachers and teachers -to-be should know from the very beginning. To me this is the apex of the narrative of this teacher's odyssey and captures the title of the book very well. Teaching is a complex and excruciating job and needs to be revisited in order for it to achieve what it is intended to do.

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