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Bigler, Phillip & Bishop, Stephanie. (Eds.) (2007) *Be a Teacher, You Can Make a Difference: By America's Finest Teachers*. St. Petersburg, FL: Vandamere Press

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

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Let me begin by quoting from the end of the Foreword of this interesting book.

Today's new teachers are facing numerous challenges and obstacles. Indeed, the attrition rate for novice teachers is appalling, but much of this attrition is caused by a sense of isolation or a perceived sense of inadequacy. It is our fondest hope that this book will serve as a source of inspiration and guidance and that it will help new educators become great teachers. We have created a website (www.great-teaching.com) to supplement the chapters in this book. It will serve as a resource where you will find additional materials that will assist you as you begin your career journey as a classroom teacher.

Our ultimate goal in writing *Be a Teacher* is to celebrate and elevate the teaching profession. It is important that our society recognize the great service that teachers perform, but it likewise important that teachers conduct themselves as true professionals and worthy role models for their students. We honestly believe that you can make a difference through teaching. (p. viii)

Both of the editors are Milken Award winners. Bigler may be the most honored teacher of recent years, having also won one of the now gone Disney American Teacher Awards and having served as the National Teacher of the Year in 1998. All of the teachers selected to participate in this book are themselves award winners, although it is important that the stories they share are not of unbridled or instantaneous success. Twelve teachers, including the two authors, offer their tales. There are also five appendices offering a variety of resources.

Appendix A contains a series of ten Top 10 Lists, such as "Suggestions for a Successful Opening of High School" and the one perhaps most relevant to one of the main concerns of this book, "Ten

Ways to Prevent First-Year Burnout.” Each list has a name and school affiliation of the author, although it is not clear how or why they were included in this volume.

Appendix B contains “Twenty-Five Inspirational Quotations about Teachers and Teaching” framing historical figures like John and Abigail Adams, Confucius, John Dewey, and Jefferson, to more contemporary figures like Roger Mudd, Rod Paige and Thomas Payzant. This is followed by a somewhat shorter Appendix C entitled “What is a Great Teacher? The Student Perspective.” The final two appendices are “Must See Movies for Teachers” which lists films intended to inspire, and “Important Resources for Teachers” which includes websites and software that teachers might find useful for preparation and in the classroom. Finally, there is a four-page “Selected Bibliographic Resources for Educators” that is listed separately, after the five appendices.

The individual offerings vary greatly in structure and in content. Given that great teachers are, despite some efforts to accumulate lists of characteristics and thereby attempt to clone them as was seen in the teacher effectiveness movement so visible in the 1980s, equally varied in what they bring to the classroom, this is actually a positive: it enable readers, perhaps aspiring or beginning teachers, to have a greater probability of encountering material that speaks to them and their condition. To give a sense of what one can draw from the book, I am going to look at parts of the offerings of four of the authors in a bit more detail.

We have material from Gus Teller, who as a “Virginia Teacher of Promise” began with his own classroom in 2005, as he explores what he gained from is student teaching:

The first thing I discovered when I actually became a practicing teacher is that I just couldn't teach. Fortunately during my student teaching experience I had been prepared to multi-task. All of these additional assignments hadn't been given to us by an evil, arbitrary advisor, but instead they were carefully designed to prepare us for the million different directions we would be pulled while teaching. Additionally by completing my student portfolio, article reviews, and the other aforementioned assignments, I add been forced to reflect and rethink my approach to teaching, which is important for all teachers to do on a regular basis. (p. 198)

The emphasis on reflection and thinking about one's teaching practice is usually an important part of teaching success. I was fortunate to train as a teacher in a program (at Johns Hopkins) which insisted upon reflective practice so that we would develop the habit of taking the time for it even when buried in the seemingly overwhelming tasks one encounters when one first gets one's own classroom.

Phil Bigler writes from the experience of looking back at a long period in the classroom. Like many of the authors in the book, does offer a list of key points he wants the reader to consider, each then expanded upon with explanation and illustration. He offers five “rules.” Although These are, in order Thou Shall Change; Thou Shall take Pride in Your Profession; Thou Shall Have Passion; Do What Is Best for Kids; and finally, Don't Seat the Small Stuff. One quote he offers for the 2nd rule, of taking pride, is quite cogent, and matches the experience I have had with adults who have visited my own classes, which during my 13 years have ranged from 7th through 12 grades.

Indeed, to captivate, motivate, and inspire young people is hard and creative work, and, in truth, few people can do this on a daily basis. I have personally seen \$400 per hour K Street Lawyers, who are comfortable debating the most intricate and obscure point of law before their peers, quiver in fear in front of a group of 16-year-old students. As Roger Mudd observed in a commentary for the PBS documentary, *Learning in America*: “From sunup to sundown, the

school teachers you have seen tonight work harder than you do – no matter what you do. No calling in our society is more demanding than teaching. No calling in our society is more selfless than teaching. No calling in our society is more central to the vitality of a democracy than teaching. (pp. 82-3)

This passage reminds the teacher both of the seriousness of the task before her, as well as provides a context for the pride one should feel in accomplishing it, even if our remuneration as educators never approaches the \$400 per hour that a K Street lawyer receives!

Bigler, as honored as teacher as he has been, performs an important service by describing his own initial failure as a teacher:

Rather than try to develop my own personal style of teaching, I instead mimicked my own teachers from high school. I stood rigidly anchored to my podium and lectured every day for 45 minutes to the students, sometimes with the assistance of a handwritten transparency displayed on an overhead projector. Periodically, I would break this monotony by showing a 35-mm film from the county's centralized media repository. One schedule every Friday, I would administer a 25-question, easy-to-grade- multiple choice quiz on the material I had covered. I was content competent, but I was merely conveying information rather than actually teaching. My classes were uninspired and boring; they had become an endurance trial for everybody involved. Fortunately, I quickly realized that something had better change and soon. (p. 72)

Hearing words like these from one who is universally recognized for the inspiring quality of his teaching served as an important challenge in several ways. In context it reminds the reader of the need to develop one's own style. And what should never be forgotten, many who become great teachers do not start that way – they may struggle, they may feel frustrated, but if one will examine what one is doing, one can go from being the rigid and ineffective teacher which is Bigler's description of his own beginnings as a teacher to a man who tech his students how to march and wheel as did Civil War soldiers on the actual hallowed ground referred to by Lincoln in his Gettysburg Address.

To help us understand the impact teaching has on lives, Wade Whitehead entitled his chapter "A Legacy of Excellence, My Great Teacher" and tells us about his experience in Miss Sandy Chapman's kindergarten class. Himself the child of two master teachers, he uses what he has drawn from his experience in Chapman's class as the basis for a reflection on great teachers. His list of qualities of great teachers includes that they Believe That Every Child Has Talents, Intelligence, and Gifts to Offer; Find Something Likeable in Every Child; Listen to Their Students as Often as They Speak; Make the Student (Not the Teacher and Not the Standards the Center of the Classroom; Know that It Takes a "Fleet" (which he derives from a poem by two brothers who are friends of his, which he offers in its entirety); and Realize That One Size Fits Few. Whitehead describes some of what he does, and why, usually relating it back from the lesson he learned from Miss Chapman (with whom he appears in a picture from 2006 on. 38). I find the final three paragraphs of his offering a cogent summary of the importance and impact of great teachers:

Great teachers create a customized school experience for every one of their learners. They differentiate instruction. They alter schedules. They provide personalized enrichment and remediation. Most importantly, they look at each child as a unique individual with gifts, curiosities, abilities, and potential. They see the development of those strengths as their duty, and they apply themselves exclusively towards it.

The tradition of great teaching has been around as long as teaching itself. Great teachers, like Miss Chapman, will continue to shape the boundaries of the profession and will always push the envelope of achievement. Some have received credit for their efforts, but most have worked for years without any recognition whatsoever. All have been part of a legacy of excellence that manifests itself in a dynamic mix of imagination, discovery, and sharing.

Why do I teach? I have the opportunity to add to the rich legacy built by my parents and the great teachers before me. I have the potential to create, out of the elements around me, that which did not exist before. By acknowledging the great teachers of our time, I hope to ultimately impact the lives of thousands of learners and, possibly, make my own unique contribution to the paradigm of teaching and learning. This is the least I can do, because this is what great teachers, like Miss Chapman, did for me. (pp. 37-9)

The longest offering is by Frank Winstead, and is entitled “Wayside Teaching: In a Place Called School.” He began his own teaching career in the 1960s, and after an opening epigraph describes an incident where he was contacted in 2005 by a student he had taught in 1965 – and whom he immediately recalled – and derives the title of his offering from a piece that appeared in May, 1987 *Middle School Journal*. Entitled simply “Wayside Teaching,” it was authored by John H. Lounsbury, from whom Winstead derived the epigraph with which he opens his chapter:

One rarely becomes a ‘significant other’ on the basis of actions when formally instructing. It is in relationship developed in wayside teaching that one is most likely to influence the lives of others.

Winstead uses the example of student seeking him out 40 years after being in his classroom to explore the concept of wayside teaching, of the relationships that matter. He remembered David because of his wicked wit among other things. And when his wife told him that David had tracked him down on the internet to tell Winstead he had been his favorite teacher, Winstead acknowledges that a tear came down his cheek. Before exploring further, he tells the tale of man who wrote a letter to express gratitude to a teacher from 3 years before, the author being a distinguished doctor, who received back a handwritten note that his was, for the retired teacher of 50 years to whom it was sent, the first letter of appreciation she had ever received. From this Winstead tells us that he was but 24 when he taught 14 year old David, but interestingly he had carried for more than a decade a photograph of David with another student to remind him that ‘every once in a while, we enjoy bright and shining moments with students that last a lifetime’ (p. 43). Winstead had an extensive and warm telephone conversation with his former student, after which he reflected upon it. He writes:

Since students forget about 80 percent of the material we teach them within a year, he was certainly not calling to express fond memories of studying the Punic wars, the Ottoman Empire, the French Revolution, or the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. David was calling to thank me for providing a classroom experience that featured humor, interaction, warmth, and academic rigor. Many of our students, if only in later years, remember teachers who demanded self-discipline, commitment, and quality workmanship. However, I have come to believe that the lasting influence of a teacher are outgrowths of the culture and caring made evident in meaningful relationships and personal experience. (p. 44)

As a young teacher, I did not have a name or term to identify the kind of teaching that helped me create a joyful but productive learning environment. However, even in my youth I had enough wisdom to understand that successful teaching was rooted in building relationships.

Related to this, read this one paragraph from the article from which Winstead derives his title:

Wayside teaching, however, is neither as casual nor as completely accidental as it may appear. Preparation of the heart as well as the Mind has to precede it. If teachers have credence with pupils, they will often seek opportunities to engage students in conversation, and vice versa (p. 47).

Winstead quotes 9 paragraphs of the Lounsbury piece, ending with the passage that appears in the epigraph. He then writes what may be the key parts of his 28 pages:

Teachers, hold on to this concept throughout your career. Do not allow the regulated conditions of teaching, as difficult as they may be, to cause you to abandon what so many students desperately need – a teacher who listens and provides a habitat for meaningful learning in the classroom. Furthermore, never minimize the importance of those opportunities that arise on the school campus for dialogue, as John Lounsbury says “between classes, when walking in the hallways, after school, and in dozens and dozens of one-on-one encounters, however brief. . . .” (p. 47).

There is much more, both in Winstead’s chapter, and in the offerings of other authors. It is clear that all the participants in the volume, from most to least experienced, care deeply about their profession of teaching and about the students who come into their care. The approaches vary, which provides a way for those of many different orientations and even in stage of teaching beyond that for which the volume is primarily intended to make a connection. As I look at my copy of the volume as I complete this review, I have 17 yellow stickies to help me quickly access passages that I thought particularly apt. And as I leaf through it I find dozens more where I have underlined and/or made marginal notes. I first read the book almost two months ago, then stepped away to let it sink into me, to see how it connected with my day to day live as a very overburdened classroom teacher now in his 13th year. Having come back to the book, I still find it relevant, and know that in my own beginning having access to a book like this might have helped me maintain my own spirits when I, as did Bigler, struggled to find my footing in my first year. I was fortunate in having other teachers to support me, and a principal who was very understanding and encouraged me to find my own style. All teachers should be so fortunate. Even absent such a situation, a book like this can serve as a useful resource - perhaps taking time each weekend to read another chapter and reflect on how it connects with one’s own teaching practice.

I would not describe this as a mandatory read. It is a very positive contribution to the literature. No, it is NOT research based, although some of the authors do refer to specific research. It is more than anecdotal, even as it often relies upon the personal anecdote – and that reliance is actually one of the strengths of the volume, as it provides a more meaningful connection with the lessons each author offers. And because it provides a variety of perspectives, the reader should realize that s/he cannot simply emulate another person, but needs to reflect upon what makes sense in one’s own situation and practice. If it does that, if it provides encouragement to those confronted with the sometimes overwhelming nature of life in the classroom for any teacher, especially the novice, it will have served a useful purpose.

The book will also be valuable for those not in the classroom. For those working on educational policy, they should know and understand more of the reality of the lives of teachers, in order to better understand why some approaches will and others will not have a positive effect upon

learning. And for parents? Well, perhaps in seeing the variety of approaches offered but the common commitment to students and the professions, you will realize the importance of providing a supportive environment in which such good teaching can take place.

Let me end near where I began, by quoting from the end of the preface:

It is important that our society recognize the great service that teachers perform, but it is likewise essential that teachers conduct themselves as true professionals and worthy role models for their students. We honestly believe that you can make difference through teaching.

The book provides the words of a number of such role models, not only for students, but for those of us who also need to be role models for our own students. It is well worth the purchase price and the time spent in engaging with what the teachers therein offer us.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (July, 2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views about the potential impact of the Bush administration's education proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies.

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