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**McSpadden, Kay. (2007). *Notes from a Classroom: Reflections on Teaching*. Charlotte, NC: Stampley Enterprise.**

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In a moment when testing is the tyrant of education and teachers are mindless pawns stripped of autonomy, creativity, and cultural empathy, Kay McSpadden has bestowed upon us an insightful and hopeful look into a classroom where learning, living bonding and giving are the pillars of a solid education. In a moment when the American populous is fixated on illegal immigrants, the resegregation of public schools, and perpetuating a silent ignorance toward the social ills that plague schools, *Notes from a Classroom* provide a stimulating, yet covert, call to teachers, administrators and policy makers to wake from the lull of complacency and see the lives behind the stories in an effort to maximally educate all students. Through the vehicle of narratives, McSpadden carves a winding and determined road to compel readers to start the process of making personal connections to students, learning for the sake of living, and the art of teaching for empowerment. This work can serve veteran and new teachers, parents and community officials, business leaders and politicians as a catalyst to awaken the duplicitous and complacent consciousness of our community to a paradigm poised to move deeper into self reflection, critical awareness and what it means to genuinely teach in a diverse society.

Kay McSpadden, is a high school English teacher in South Carolina and a community columnist for the Charlotte Observer. Based on 30 years of teaching experience McSpadden pins a bimonthly column with an emphasis on teaching, learning and living. Drawn from her newspaper column, McSpadden cleverly compiled narratives to create *Notes from a Classroom* consisting of six chapters that speak to the art of teaching, lessons from home, youth, diversity, literature, and the examined life. Woven throughout each of these chapters is the thread of self reflection, critical awareness and diversity awareness.

Self reflection requires one to forge a comprehensive understanding of personal thoughts, beliefs and actions. I have found that the levels of understanding can span from shallow to deep depending on emotional maturity, experiences and the grappling with multiple epistemologies, progression on identity development, perseverance with internal conflict and commitment to act. While much of the self reflection in *Notes from a Classroom* rest just below surface level reflection the rich and engaging narratives provide a catalyst for its readers to go deeper toward root level issues. In the first story of the book, *Students as Teachers* self reflection is evident as McSpadden reveals that her “education and idealism were worthless in a classroom with children so damaged” (p. 4). Deeper reflection would require one to reflect on the phrase “children so damaged” while juxtaposing it with the phrase “my education and ideology were worthless.” A more in-depth reflection might reveal that teachers often use a deficit paradigm when describing children who do not measure up to the “norm” thus perceiving ‘these children’ in pity. In addition, the revelation that ideologies must change and education is not a stagnant concept might help teachers see that their ideals (if forged in deep reflection) are of great value to any student no matter what the academic, social, cultural,

physical or intellectual state. The aforementioned type of self reflection necessitate that teachers are in the practice of critically analyzing their thoughts, beliefs, and practices. Critical self reflection is a must if teachers are to teach students with intellectual, cultural and academic diversities.

Nonetheless, McSpadden provides wonderful insight on how to start the arduous process of reflecting about self and teaching. She imparts precious nuggets of information to help guide readers on a quest for a deeper understanding of self. In the first chapter *The Art of Teaching* two narratives, *Students as Teachers* and *Great Expectations* and the fourth chapter *Literature* two other narratives *Inspired Desperation* and *Lessons* provide the reader with nuggets to self reflection. In these narratives McSpadden admonishes us to reflect through remembering, learning from students, listening to self and others, and through empathy not pity.

Analyzing teaching and learning from a critical lens is important and necessary work for classroom teachers. Critical awareness in this sense is not the promotion of negative or contrary behavior rather it requires teachers to use critical thinking skills to sort out the social, cultural, intellectual and academic milieu of the classroom in an effort to best educate students. For me critical awareness is often the epiphanic moments when knowledge crashes into reality and I'm able to understand and perceive in new ways. *Notes from a Classroom* illustrates critical awareness for teachers in chapter 2 *Lessons from Home*, chapter 3 *Youth*, and chapter 6 *The Examined Life*. The narratives from the aforementioned chapters that supported moments of epiphanies or the awakening of critical awareness are *Intimations of Mortality*, *Savoring Cookies*, *Deserts*, and *Healthy Sceptics*. In *Intimations of Mortality*, McSpadden reveals to readers how home is connected to life and life is connected to teaching and learning. In this powerful narrative the reader travels with the author as her knowledge of the world crashes with the reality of a friend, teaching and death. The idea that we should stop "letting things slide" as if we have an eternity to live, teach or influence was a great moment of critical awareness for me as I read this story. McSpadden goes on to imply that unless teachers have moments of critical awareness they will not be able to teach, learn or live with "good humor and clear-eyed grace." Her optimal message is that critical awareness empowers teachers to be grateful and careful of their influence and to remember the importance of the connection to students and others. The *Healthy Sceptics* narrative focuses on people, communities and students that practice the art of critical thinking on every level. It is an eye opening piece of writing that is able to compel readers to take notice of their lack of critical awareness. McSpadden contends that critical awareness of self, others and the world provides a place where we see the faults in our environment and have examined our lives in order to act in the best possible way to move toward a solution.

Critical thinking as teachers may sound obvious but it is mostly a concept that is taught and not practiced by teachers. Hidden in plain sight McSpadden reveals to the readers what it takes to become critically aware in schools, home and society. She contends that teachers must cease trying to indoctrinate students, encourage skepticism, perceive with multiple perspectives, notice life and savor the good times.

The final thread that was woven throughout *Notes from a Classroom* is the concept of diversity. While diversity seems an acceptable word with an inflexible and common definition it is often a word with as many meanings as opinions and point of contention and discomfort in schools, business and social arenas. So, what is diversity? While the most palpable perceptions of diversity might include race, culture, gender and socioeconomic status, McSpadden introduces us to ability, intellectual, parental and social diversities that are just as important to school success.

In a narrative entitled *Tracy*, the author discloses how some may look at diversity as a bad word or worse as bad students. *Tracy* exposes the true power and positive impact of diversity in a story that romps through a high school English class full of diverse intellects, socioeconomics, and cultures. The narrative ends in a triumphant moment of learning where the students "are not part of the tribal clans of Us and Them, but fellow human beings enriching each other with grace and compassion and heroism, learning from each other lessons far more important than anything" that can be taught by a teacher (p. 174). In another story entitled *Letter from a Parent* a lesson on how respecting and accepting the ability, intellectual and cultural diversity of a student compelled the parent to appreciate the teacher. Teachers who are able to embrace diversity might look forward to parents, co workers, administrators and organizations that recognize their special talent, desire and gift to work with diverse populations. The ultimate comment for any teacher is to hear a parent say "as you have modeled kindness and acceptance of my child in your class, you have taught every child watching you to live a more compassionate life (p. 176)."

One of the most telling narratives in the chapter on *Diversity* is entitled *Outcast*. This narrative divulges that African American young men are educational Outcast. Their outcast status is based on the comparing of their test scores to that of white students. As the education community grapple with the concept of the ‘achievement gap’ and so does this narrative some have formed an alternative epistemology concerning the gap. While reading *Outcast* I employed both critical thinking and self reflection and realized immediately that the achievement gap is not an achievement gap at all. Rather, the ‘achievement gap’ is a racial construct designed to separate and cast racial groups in a hierarchal system based on a faulty notion of intellectual superiority and inferiority. To view test data on the basis of race is problematic and prejudicial. Unfortunately the education community, especially teachers and administrators have yet to develop the critical thinking skills to sort this reality out. In fact, education is so tied to this notion of achievement that it is hard to envision alternative ways to view student achievement and school success. As McSpadden explain that the ‘achievement gap’ is do partly to African American male students perception that school is a white activity, poverty and lack of school resources there is a budding critical awareness that the ‘achievement gap’ is deeply embedded in the societal threads of the United States. These threads are rooted and spun from the racialized reality that formed this country and continue to haunt microcosmic and macrocosmic environments in the United States. In a powerful statement McSpadden calls for a societal examination or critical self reflection on diversity as she states “what happens inside the schools as well as what happens in society as a whole has to be examined if we are going to make any real progress on closing the achievement gap. Not many students can overcome hurdles so high that leaving school seems like the only solution—nor should they have to (p. 194).”

Finally, *Snapshots* renders to the reader practical activities that support the development of positive relationships with diverse students and possible narrow the ‘achievement gap.’ She suggests that if teachers and administrators:

- Focus on creative, enthusiastic teaching which makes learning a positive experience
- Advise our students on opportunities available to them and encourage them to register for challenging courses
- Do better public relations with parents, community for academic support, public policies, voting and school bonds
- Take advantage of wide open spaces, outdoor sports, extended family including church, synagogue or mosque
- Take advantage of the benefits of large cities and rural communities (p. 180).

While the five points above are not panaceas to the challenges that plague schools practicing the concepts might provide a more culturally, academically and socially inclusive learning environment for all students.

Kay McSpadden has allowed readers to peer into her classroom and life to better understand what teaching, learning and living entails. While there are as many different perspectives and experiences of teaching as there are teachers, *Notes from a Classroom* provides readers with a wide-ranging compilation of narratives on classroom life. This book is an inspiration for teachers of all races, genders, abilities and ethnicities to share their experiences and reflections of classroom life.

### **About the Reviewer**

Stephen D. Hancock is a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University and The Ohio State University. He has worked as a classroom teacher in grades Pre-K through 3<sup>rd</sup> for 15 years. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Reading and Elementary Education at the University of North Carolina Charlotte. His research interests are diversity issues in schools, student/teacher relationships, and schooling and achievement. He is the Chair of The Committee on Scholars of Color in Education at AERA, and consults with schools and school district on how best to education African American students.

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