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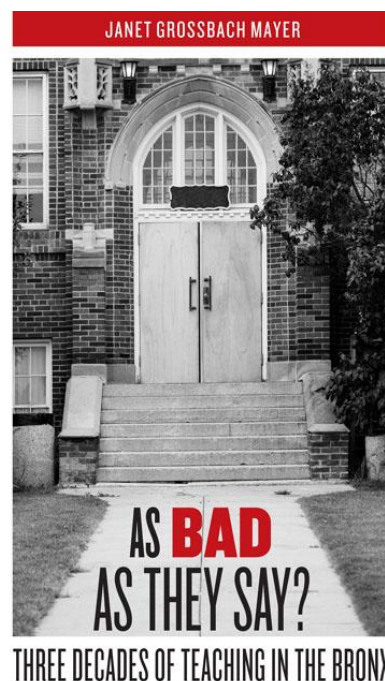
Mayer, Janet Grossbach. (2011) *As Bad as They Say? Three Decades of Teaching in the Bronx*. NY: Fordham University Press.

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

In her introduction, Janet Grossbach Mayer tells us about when a 1994 class was connected with students in South Africa as pen pals. She shared with them the recent changes in that nation, post-Apartheid, including the contents of a letter from the teacher there (the contents of which appear in the Appendix). She was preparing them for the exchange of letters, including the possibility that what they received might not be all that well written. She then writes:

There was great excitement in my class the day the first batch of letters arrived. I gave every student a letter, and each one read his or her letter aloud. To my astonishment, and to my students' astonishment, almost all the letters, legible and literate, by the way, asked the same question: Is the Bronx as bad as they say?" (p. 5)



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Books by teachers, both those still in the classroom as am I, and those somewhat “retired” as is the author of this volume, will inevitably share their experience of the classroom. After all, that is the focus of our professional lives. As interesting as that experience can be, by itself it is usually an insufficient basis for a book. Even when one teaches in a setting very different from that encountered by the average reader, it may not be enough to sustain more than a hundred pages of text. The potential reader will surely want to know why, besides the particular experiences of the authors, one should spend any time with their words. What is gained by reading this book that one might otherwise miss?

In the case of this slim volume by **Janet Grossbach Mayer**, one will encounter not only the life experiences of the author in her three decades (out of a total of four in education) in classrooms in the Bronx and of what she rightly considers some of the remarkable students who passed through her care, but also her reflections on the stark difference in the lives of the students she taught and the approach to education that has been embodied in our policy on education. At the end of the book, there is an appendix with the letter from which she derived her title, a bibliography for the course in multicultural literature that was a key part of her career as an English teacher, and an interest inventory to help her get to know her students. There are as well charts that clearly describe the reality that we face in addressing the needs of urban students such as hers, and which are key supports for the arguments she makes in her 14th (final) chapter, which has the title “Deception, Dismantling, and Demise of Public Education.” There are also notes from some of the interns with whom she has worked since retiring from her own classroom.



Often those in urban schools, both teachers and students, are blamed for their supposed lack of success on things like standardized tests. Too often the context from which those test scores come is ignored. They come from poverty, from students in old and decaying school buildings. More than two hundred schools in the Bronx were still heated by coal at the end of the 1990s. When the coal is delivered, coal dust rises up and students begin to choke, and as Mayer notes:

Although this delivery occurs only a few times a year, combine it with the roaches, the mice, and the overall poor air quality in the school and the Bronx, and you can readily see how terribly the physical environment affects students' education and their lives. (p. 45)

They lack the resources of schools in wealthier communities: libraries with books, computers, bathrooms with doors on the stalls and with toilet paper. Stop for one moment and consider merely the last of these, and attempt to grasp the clear message it gives to the students for whom these are the only facilities.

This book is published by Fordham University Press, from a university based in the Bronx. Mayer is herself a product of Bronx schools. The Foreword, written by Mark Naison, professor of African-American Studies at Fordham, succinctly recounts some of the horrors faced by those at one of the Bronx schools at which Mayer taught:

Elevators don't work. Windows don't open.
Classrooms are so filled with mice that teachers have to scream when they enter to scatter the vermin! Teachers' bathrooms are filthy and never have toilet paper, while student bathrooms are unusable. Crack vials fill the schoolyard, which has been turned into a teachers' parking lot; gunshots periodically ring out in the street outside the school.... Except for a three-year period when the school got a grant, there were no elective music or art classes, because most music and art teachers had been fired during the fiscal crisis of the mid-1970s. (p. xi)

Yet despite this, teachers like Mayer persist, build relationships with students, fight on their behalf, come up with creative lessons, and help some succeed despite the obstacles.

Naison argues that a book like Mayer's is essential if we are going to be honest about what we are confronting in urban education. He notes her outrage at the mandates imposed by No Child Left behind, because, as he writes:

...she knew that neither student learning nor great teaching can be easily quantified, as much of it involves emotional growth, life lessons, and the unleashing of creativity; she was suspicious because she believed that when test performance becomes the criterion upon which schools are evaluated and teacher salaries and tenure are determined, statistics can and will be manipulated. (pp. xii - xiii).

You will learn of Mayer's background. Perhaps in a book whose primary purpose is advocacy on behalf of the students she knew and their families and communities, that might seem unessential and the reader will be tempted to skip over it. I would argue it is of critical importance because it establishes Mayer's dedication to teaching, to working in a community that was far too easily ignored because of the nature of the student population. Her recounting of her personal experience and life also provides the context for why it was necessary for Al Shanker to organize teachers into a labor union willing to strike. Ultimately it was the only way to be able to advocate on behalf of the students, and to provide them with adults committed to them and their learning.

Mayer is rightly proud of what her students accomplish despite the obstacles. Much of the book contains the detailed stories of students, and how the shared experience she describes helps us understand how much of what are doing is failing our young people. She hammers this point home in her penultimate chapter, titled "Bridging the Gap." I quote the first paragraph of that chapter:

There are many other Bronx students that I could tell you about. Would you believe that a young man, our valedictorian some years ago, admitted to a few of his teachers, near graduation day, that he had been homeless for the last year of high school and had been living on the New York City subway, keeping warm and sleeping on the train? (p. 102)

In the two pages of this brief chapter Mayer tells us about four additional students: a female student up for a basketball scholarship whose family was evicted the night before a basketball competition that might make a

difference and who spent that night sleeping on a couch on the sidewalk—she did get the scholarship; a student whose dream was to become an astronaut for whom she clipped relevant articles even for the three years after she was no longer Mayer’s student, who gave Mayer a plaque that read “Teachers Make Dreams Happen”; a very large student who did not show up for the first three days whom Mayer did not challenge when he did, who later asked why she hadn’t and acknowledged that if she had he might have turned around never to return—she told him she didn’t believe students came to school to fail; and her brilliant young man who took on every challenge and had the kind of academic success we would like to see for all of our students, of whom she writes:

We’re going to hear from him—he’s a younger Barack Obama—but even if we don’t, you now have met some of my ordinary but spectacular students who, in their own way, have made the world a better place—and will continue to do so.

Are Bronx students really “as bad as they say?”
(p. 103)

It might have been tempting for Mayer to end the book here, but fortunately she did not. We have also that final chapter in which she explains...

In all good conscience, I cannot conclude my book without commenting on and detailing what I believe are ill-conceived, deceptive, fraudulent practices in education today that, although ostensibly attempting to solve educational problems, are, in actuality, impeding, hindering, distorting and even thwarting the very goals we seek to accomplish, namely, a sound education for every student. (p. 107)

What then ensues is an intense and thorough analysis of education reform, with an especial focus on New York under the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. It should surprise no one that Mayer is not a fan, either of mayoral control in general (she points to the NAEP data where out of 11 big city school systems participating the top two were not under mayoral control and the bottom two were, including

Chicago under now Secretary of Education Arne Duncan were) or of the specifics of the administration she saw close up. An example of the latter is the massive move to “small schools” which she saw up close as a “mentor” to teachers in ten of the 13 small schools opened in the Bronx in one year. She is characteristically blunt:

In 2002, thirteen small schools were opened in the Bronx alone—a staggering number first of all, because there was no scientific evidence that smaller schools could do a better job; second, there was no successful model to copy; and third, rushing into opening thirteen new schools in the Bronx, without careful planning and reorganization, was doomed to failure. (p. 116)

She is equally critical of those making education policy at a national level, and makes good use of data that demonstrates the claims made for certain proposals were not supportable. For me, however, her criticisms of New York carry special force given her long commitment to the students of New York first as a classroom teacher and even after “retirement” as a mentor to other teachers. She describes the tendency of Bloomberg and Klein to have many highly paid non-educators making education policy as “like running a hospital without doctors.” (p. 122) She is at her most blunt in addressing the current propensity of some “reformers” to want to evaluate teachers on the basis of their students’ test results.

. . . Even if the evaluation of teachers were based on the NAEP results, the gold standard tests, this method of evaluation would still be all wrong. If we were to judge dentists by the number of patients they treat who have healthy teeth, then the dentists in richer areas would always be judged superior, and the dentists in poorer areas, whose patients have poorer nutrition and poorer health care, including fewer dental visits, would always be judged inferior.

As in dentistry, so in education. Do all dentists get the same caliber of patients? Do all teachers get the same caliber of students? If President Obama is going to evaluate teachers by test scores, then every class should be statistically

the same in terms of ability, behavior, language proficiency, parental support, family income, attendance, school environment, and health conditions. We know that low scores correlate with low income and that there are gross inequities in the quality of America's schools. Would it be fair to judge principals by the conditions beyond their control? (p. 126)

This is a powerful book, precisely because it is rooted in the long classroom experience of a teacher who worked beyond the boundaries of just her classroom or even her school. She had the additional perspective of a husband who became an administrator in New York City schools. She was a union activist. First and foremost she is committed to the students who were in her care and in the care of other teachers who wanted to make a difference, but often found themselves stymied by policies and people with different agendas. She finds lots of blame to go around, but she refuses to blame the students or to give up on them.

I found this a useful book, and as I was reading it I found myself periodically emailing friends with passages that struck me. Those who are committed to good teaching because they are committed to students should read this book. Our experiences will not necessarily match those of Mayer, but we will learn from her insight, and perhaps find that we too have something to say, and voices to add to the public discourse.

So there is no doubt of Mayer's intent; perhaps it is best that I end as she does, with her final paragraph. It expresses clearly her belief in the students she encountered, and why in part she wrote this book:

P.S. If you want to fix the blame for the sorry state of our educational affairs, you can blame our politicians, ourselves for not being vigilant, local government, our state government, even our federal government. Whomever you blame, do not blame Bronx students because, despite the obstacles we have put in their way, these amazing young people are definitely not *as bad as they say*. (p. 132)

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. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views About the Potential Impact of the Bush Administration's Education Proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was recently named 2010 Washington Post Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.



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