



Ings, W. (2017). *Disobedient teaching: Surviving and creating change in education*. Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press.

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This book could be described as a small tribute to all those teachers and students that have made the difference in traditional education systems, which are more dedicated to passing tests than to valuing learning as a complex and integrate process. To explain the key ideas that define *Disobedient Teaching*, author Welby Ings evokes personal experiences as a student with challenging teachers, that is, to those educators he has known over the years who have performed beyond the demands of the system. Starting with a discussion of what “disobey” means, the author points out that “disobedient teaching is rooted in the belief that you can influence things right now, from where you are [... and] challenges our educational preoccupation with marking, reporting and accounting” (p. 14). In this manner, disobedience lies in transforming the system from the inside, not only by acting in a different way but by creating new patterns to educate people comprehensively. So, the author argues, it is possible to revolutionize



education from within its own structure, and this revolutionary behavior is also partially conceivable due to our capacity for disobedience. According to the author, “if the whole system can’t be removed, infect what you can with positive initiatives” (p. 70). In this way, changes can be designed and established to alter the system and improve it, like a seed that is planted to bloom in more inclusive educational processes.

In *Disobedient Teaching*, the author explores three fundamental and associated ideas: 1) teachers and students have enough power and competencies to change the status quo; 2) questioning systems and structures is the basis of learning; and 3) the traditional operation of the education system has limited students’ and educators’ potential. The author develops these ideas into six parts, where he explains how these points relate and how they can help to create a fairer educational system. In each part, different cases present evidence for how making little changes can transform established structures. The author’s methodology clarifies these fundamental ideas and provides a guiding thread to solve the questions that emerge throughout the book. Indeed, apart from being one example to underpin his arguments, each case could serve as an exercise to help the reader to discover his or her own creative potential, or in other words, his or her capacity to disobey. Each chapter enables reflection on how, from our experiences and skills, it is possible to change the educational system when we sense that it is not working properly.

The Power to Change Things

Inasmuch as the book is focused on teaching, Ings highlights: “no teacher is powerless” (p. 22), and this is the crux of his proposal. In his view, educators have the ability and responsibility to recognize those strategies and actions that are not effective, and create or choose those that make a better professional practice. At this point, the author conceptualizes disobedience as an “instinct.”

In this way, a natural human’s need fosters the capacity to change and improve teaching, to search for alternatives and ways to alter the system and, gradually, to create a new one. In chapter 3, he illustrates this idea by describing a teacher admired by his colleagues for his ability to survive the system’s rules and to value the complexity of learning at the same time. In this example, the teacher was able to make different decisions to achieve learning quality while taking into account the diverse factors involved in education. Thus, his efforts did not focus solely on fulfilling school’s demands, but also accomplished other purposes linked to his students’ learning, particularly their difficulties and the best strategies to help them.

Nevertheless, for the author, a person’s capacity to make changes, or to disobey, requires other essential elements: risk, passion, authenticity, and trust. Disobedience is also an act of rebellion against the things we disagree with. In this manner, disobedience is a call for change; and qualities like risk, passion, authenticity, and trust make this transformation possible.

Questioning as the Basis of Learning

Like the idea of disobedience as a natural human response, the author points out that “to challenge” is also an essential part of being a human; in this way, “it is the nature of education that we should question” (p. 22). Therefore, critically thinking about education is necessary to identify the main problems that are interfering with learning achievement and to improve teaching quality. To do so, the author suggests that we must not assume that the results of education are a demonstration of learning, but we must be aware that learning is a process based on individual experiences. In consequence, to question education implies that we must do more than mark and report results; we must recognize the relevance of the students’ backgrounds and environments, their self-evaluations, and their multiple insights.

Thus, the act of questioning requires us to analyze how the system is responding to the needs of students and teachers, in order to foster the potential for both through learning. A critical issue identified by the author is that an educational system focuses on outcomes not on processes. In the light of this focus, teachers have the ability to understand the entire education process, yet their performance evaluation is centered on the results. This volume emphasized that the act of questioning education actually promotes learning from experience, which goes well beyond a test or testing. Questioning the educational system brings us closer to other teaching and learning strategies, rejecting the idea that altering the system implies harm. For the author it is important to keep in mind that “learning is not safe, because thinking is not safe” (p. 86). Thus, questioning can lead us to other meanings and processes in education, which can be more inclusive and effective.

The experiences described in the book highlight the process of questioning as a basis for disobedience, encouraging educators to take risks. One case study in this book explains this point clearly. The example involved a teacher who carried out an unplanned and unusual activity outside of the school to help eliminate prejudice among the students in the class. This activity presented a challenge, because as everything usually took place inside the school, the students were accustomed to traditional classroom dynamics. Yet, the teacher assumed the risk and removed everyone from his or her comfort zones. The results were unexpected, as well as the participants’ reactions, but the teacher’s capacity to question and analyze helped him to effectively handle them. As a consequence of his disobedience, his innovative action led him to search more effective strategies to solve this specific problem beyond institutional rules.

The Limits of Educational Systems

The author underlines that the problem is not that the teachers need to write

plans and establish measurable results, but that their daily tasks are solely focused on these activities. According to the author, when the teachers’ performance is primarily dedicated towards planning and checking results to fulfill standards, the structure of the system gets oriented to accomplish these outcomes rather than to achieve a comprehensive education.

While the focus on results affects the entire educational system, the seed of disobedience can also improve the system. On one hand, the obsession with results limits the creativity and intelligence of teachers and students. On the other, the possibility of change requires the educational agents to take risks and do different things, so that “the outcomes of such are not uniformly predictable, but lives change as a consequence” (p. 98). Thus, disobedient teaching emerges from the awareness that education has major repercussions on people’s lives and teaching should not be oriented only toward the attainment of certain indicators imposed by others.

To conclude, the author emphasizes six points that synthesize the most relevant elements that different educational agents — principals, policy makers and teachers— need to consider to generate the transformation of educational system. First, it is necessary to trust in teachers and give them the room and support to teach creatively and passionately. Next, the author reminds us that “learning is a process, not a product, and it is vulnerable” (p. 188). Consequently, learning is not predictable and cannot be framed by standards. The third point emphasizes that teachers must have confidence in themselves in order to be disobedient, to take care of others, and to perform with passion. Fourth, we must trust that people can change structures without permission and regardless of the mistakes that may occur. Fifth, this work is not an individual effort, but it is collaborative, requiring that you “[...] put your energy into growing and empowering others [...]” (p. 189) to change and improve the system, as well as to influence

others in a positive way. Finally, the author invites readers to be brave and tenacious, and to disobey.

Even though this book drew upon the analysis of an education system in New Zealand, the principles and suggestions are applicable to situations in other education systems in other countries. In this sense, the principal strength of this book is that it allows educators to visualize alternatives and to innovate and make changes in their own practices. Thus, this volume calls for transformation from within, without educators needing to wait for an external intervention. It is an invitation for educators to act from inside the system and their own professional practice. In this sense, *Disobedient Teaching* may motivate and inspire classroom teachers, but also has the potential to influence policy makers and other educators. This inspiring book offers a human perspective about change is that possible.

While the theme of disobedient teaching is instructive and relevant, the perspective presented by author limits this transformational process to professionals involved with school systems: “we are empowered to do this because we are educated, thinking professionals, capable of designing something better” (p. 70). If the transformation of the system depends on professional people who have the competencies to promote changes, it excludes the potential of other educational agents such as families or communities to lead changes. A more community perspective would reveal that people belong to networks in which individuals take care of each other, share meanings, and cooperate with and influence others (Stone, 2012). Thus, I would add this: not only can a group of educated people promote the change, but everyone has the power to transform some aspect of the education system.

References

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About the Reviewer

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