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Grant, S. G. and Gradwell, Jill M. (Eds.) (2010) *Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teachers*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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In *Teaching History with Big Ideas: Cases of Ambitious Teaching*, S.G. Grant and Jill Gradwell advocate for ambitious teachers who connect the social studies curriculum to the lives of students through using big ideas. They define a big idea as a “question or generalization that helps teachers decide what to teach and how by centering their teaching units in meaty, complex issues that are open to multiple perspectives and interpretations” (p. 3).

Grant and Gradwell’s book represents a form of research not found enough in academic circles. Rather than observing a class and then interviewing teachers and/or students, coloring everything through the lens of the researcher, they follow an alternative method, challenging ambitious teachers to tell their own stories of how they

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implemented big idea teaching and the struggles and triumphs that come with that. Through allowing teachers to reflect on their experiences, Grant and Gradwell hope to more deeply explore what occurs in classrooms: “By creating an opportunity whereby teachers could craft their own narratives of thought and action, we expected the ensuing cases to offer a much deeper understanding of pedagogy-in-practice than is typically represented in the extant literature” (p. 3). The experiences of different teachers give stronger examples and more nuanced explanations than a mere summary from the researchers would have.

However, this book is more than merely examples of teacher reflection. Grant and Gradwell, in their beginning and ending chapters, analyze teachers’ reflections to explain them through the lens of ambitious teaching. They use the following criteria to categorize what ambitious teachers have: “knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of learners, and knowledge of context” (p. 9). Though these are the basic criteria for ambitious teaching, they offer more detail for how ambitious teachers use these three types of knowledge:

Ambitious teachers deeply understand their subject matter and they actively seek ways to connect that subject matter with the lived experiences of their students. They often do so, however, while facing contextual factors (e.g., state curricula, state tests, unsupportive administrators and colleagues) that may push them in different directions (p. 2).

More researchers are beginning to investigate the impact of ambitious teaching. However, Grant and Gradwell do so through looking for real-world examples of internal and external factors that present obstacles to using this type of pedagogy in schools.

The eight teachers who contributed chapters to the book were invited to participate in the research after completing courses taught by either Grant or Gradwell. Because of this, they had a common framework for ambitious teaching, which helped connect all the narratives. Each of the teachers kept reflective journals throughout the planning, implementation, and assessment phases of teaching. These journals included teachers’ thoughts as

well as student comments and reactions. Because the teachers kept these journals, they were able to go back and use these to write their final reflection about what happened in their classrooms. While the narratives might seem subjective, they are powerful examples of the challenges that teachers face every day while trying to implement ambitious teaching. These stories are the teachers' perceptions and are offered to help other educators in similar situations.

The teachers all taught in New York State, but were in a wide variety of circumstances (i.e. rural, suburban, or urban; middle or high school, and so on). Each teacher has a chapter to tell his/her story. Michael Meyer, a third year suburban high school teacher writes about his unit on Africa. Megan Sampson, in her second semester teaching at an urban school, worked with a small group of struggling students to prepare them for a state exam they had not passed previously. Joseph Karb and Andrew Beiter reflect on their eighth grade unit about genocide. Tricia Davis left suburbia for an urban charter high school, where she wanted to improve her students' writing. Sarah Foels focuses on the differences in teaching social studies to inclusion and honors students at a suburban middle school. Julie Doyle infuses big ideas with technology at her rural high school. Finally, Mary Beth Bruce allows her suburban Advanced Placement students to create their own big ideas. All of these teachers' attempts to implement ambitious teaching have valuable information and advice for other teachers, but two stood out from among the rest for focusing on either student voices or assessment.

Meyer is one of the few to specifically address how to incorporate student voices into the curriculum. The pressure on his high school students was not merely to pass the regents exam, but to reach mastery level; therefore, traditionally, some topics were not examined in as much detail as others in the curriculum. Since few questions on the test concerned Africa, most of the teachers in his building ignored it completely or taught very little about it. Yet, he wanted students to understand and explain more about Africa than what it would take to answer one or two multiple-choice questions correctly, so he began a unit by asking the class, "Why don't we know anything about Africa?" Since Meyer wrote this chapter after teaching the unit three times, he addressed the many

ways that he reflected on and made changes to it since the first year. After the first year he found that the students were basically repeating what they thought he wanted them to answer and did not report their own ideas. Meyer, thus, feared his students did not have a voice in his African unit—much as Grant and Gradwell believe that teachers' voices have been removed from academic writing. Because most of the test questions about Africa were about the former empires, he required students to create presentations over these during the second half of the unit. He ended with the question, "Which was the greatest empire and why?" (p. 33). However, to make sure that students were not impeded by his opinions, he did not give them the criteria to define this, but had them create a definition. Meyer ended his chapter with a section on what he learned from doing this unit and how a teacher does not need to plan an important unit like this quickly, but how through reflection teachers should be adding to their units to make them better each year.

Tricia Davis focused on how to assess big ideas teaching in an authentic, meaningful way. She, unlike Meyer, did not concentrate on one unit. Also, different from the other teachers in the book, she had the opportunity to teach her students for more than one year, and this changed how she implemented her big ideas. Before moving to a brand-new charter school in Buffalo, Davis had taught at a suburban high school where, because of the focus on the test, she had assessed her units through writing assignments similar to those on the Regent's exam. This resulted in students frequently only doing enough to pass. At the new school, she wanted to teach her students how to be better writers through more creative prompts. She took writing assignments from previous exams and changed them into creative ones, where students had to address the same factual information, but also include emotional connections. In this way, students were more engaged with the writing, instead of just writing enough to pass. In the second year of teaching these same students, she tried to show them how her creative prompts were connected to the original prompts, and this became a larger problem than she anticipated as students were confused by the process. They did not always see the connections between the test writing and the creating writing that they had completed in class. By the end of two years, though, she felt her students' writing had improved from merely

answering enough to pass to be more engaged with the writing process.

Teacher-narrator chapters make up the bulk of the book, but in the last two chapters, the editors connect previous chapters in more detail. In the second to last chapter, they focus on similarities among seven stories in the book. This is mostly a summary of what has already been stated, but seen through the lens of their definition of ambitious teaching. The final chapter, though, offers more explanations, and more “directions” for teachers to implement this method by using specific examples to illustrate general ideas that all teachers can work toward such as “Finding Ways to Increase Subject Matter Knowledge,” through university classes or memberships in historical societies (p. 198). They also explore how teachers need “The Courage to be Ambitious,” which Grant and Gradwell hope this book will help (pp. 203-204).

Teaching History with Big Ideas has a clear place in the field: to be used in pre-service methods classes or for in-service teachers who need to be convinced that ambitious teaching can take place in the educational world created by high-stakes testing. The multiplicity of the teachers’ experiences allow for almost any secondary social studies teacher to find a situation with which to connect. In a methods class, the teachers’ experiences can raise many topics pre- or in-service teachers can discuss. These include, but are not limited to, role of testing, reflection, use of simulation, use of writing, and assessment. It provides examples for how to implement big ideas that students can use when they enter (or return to) the classroom. Some of the teacher-narrators spoke of their hesitancy to implement these practices, and this can help methods students who are struggling with similar doubts.

An important future step would be to create a similar work for elementary or lower middle school teachers. The lowest grade explored by the teacher-narrators was eighth. Elementary teachers would benefit from a similar study, because the factors affecting those teachers are different. In elementary school, teachers teach more than one subject, and are often encouraged to spend the majority of their time on Language Arts or math. Investigating how teachers create big ideas which span different disciplines,

or how they deal with time constraints would benefit elementary methods students in much the same way this book does for secondary.

Research such as this would benefit even more from including student voices. While the research methods allow for teachers' voices to overshadow the researchers, in some ways it removes student voices and experiences further from the findings. The teachers reported that more student knowledge and more student engagement took place, but this is seen through their own perspectives, via their journals: It does not involve students voices. Both Meyer and Davis, for example, explained what their students thought, but their focus is still clearly on themselves. While traditional research can also leave out students' voices by interviewing only teachers it at least opens more possibilities for including students than are found here, by providing the opportunity to share thoughts and opinions during classroom observations and student interviews.

The purpose of this book was to offer a more practical guide to how to implement powerful teaching. Grant and Gradwell are successful in this regard, through allowing teachers who have triumphed and struggled (and sometimes both) to tell their stories and offer advice. Overall, this is a powerful, new look at how to meld the theory of ambitious teaching with the practice of most secondary teachers. It can and should be used in pre-service methods classes to give students a guide for implementation and as a stepping stone for discussion about a variety of classroom situations.

About the Reviewer

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