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Whitmire, Richard (2011) *The Bee Eater: Michelle Rhee Takes On the Nation's Worst School District*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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In nearly every campaign, politicians from the federal to the local levels of government sound the call for increased accountability and reform in education. In response to this call, figures such as Michelle Rhee the former Chancellor of Washington D.C.'s public schools emerge. Throughout history they are met with stringent opposition. *The Bee Eater: Michelle Rhee Takes on the Nation's Worst School District* examines this phenomenon in a biographical account of the rise and fall of Michelle Rhee's career in educational administration. Rhee is the bee eater. A bee eater is someone who takes on conflict as bees can be aggressive if someone invades their territory. "To push D.C. toward becoming a world class city, Fenty needed his own change agent, someone who willing to step on toes daily, maybe even hourly, and turn a deaf ear to squeals.

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Adrian Fenty needed a bee eater” (p. 6). However, a person who thrives on a diet of bees receives very little sustenance and will eventually get stung. Michelle Rhee metaphorically did this when she entered school politics and confronted the teacher’s union in D.C. who fought back. The bee metaphor is interwoven throughout the book as Michelle takes on different conflicts in her life and breaks out into hives from anxiety (pp. 2, 25, 38).

Each chapter begins with a picture of a bee and describes the conflict that she faced at different points in her life. She also literally ate a bee in her classroom to demonstrate her fearlessness to her students (p. 3). The book ends with her show down with the President of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, who was portrayed as a Queen Bee. The battleground which set the stage for public perception of Rhee was the media. The book was written by Richard Whitmire, a journalist, as a chance to set the record straight for Rhee who had been vilified by media (pp. 180-186, 202-226).

The biographic details of the book will generate appeal among the general public. The book also reads like a novel. It has a plot, various subplots, villains, and a heroine. However, Rhee’s reactions to the events and her teaching and leadership philosophies are missing. Still, the rise and fall of Michelle Rhee’s career as the Chancellor of D.C.’s public schools will be of interest to graduate students interested in school reform, education administration, and school politics especially chapter 4 which is a description of the conditions of D.C. public schools prior to Rhee’s arrival which sets the stage for a discussion of the need for her reforms. Chapter 8 is also notable as it is the contextual information for individual schools and how the various reform efforts play out for different schools. Members or aspiring members of boards of education and superintendents will find it worthwhile to have a place holder on page 245 to make it easier to flip back and forth from the text to the footnotes. There is definitely a subtext manifesting itself within the footnotes.

Be forewarned: The book does not take an objective stance. Whitmore makes several attempts to add balance by adding the point of view of various principals and teachers but then ultimately takes Rhee’s side. For example, the perspective of a principal who worked at a

school in dire need of repair and resources but his ability to enact change was limited by budget cuts. He was fired after one year. The author defended Rhee's decision, "Who's right here? Based on my observations, Rhee" (pp.153-154). In another example, arguments made by fired teachers are quoted and then shot down point for point (pp.155-156). In answer to Rhee's critics in the media and the teachers' union, he wrote:

Ironically, the obvious story arising from the tale of the two Anacostia middle schools was ignored by both the Post and the union critics: was firing most of the pre-Rhee teachers a requirement for making dramatic progress? It's hard to draw any other conclusion. It appears that broad and last student gains were possible in D.C. schools only if two-thirds of the teachers who were there when Rhee arrived got pushed out and replaced by far better teachers." (p. 156)

The book definitely favors Rhee by justifying her decisions and providing counterarguments to her opposition. There is no instance in the book where Rhee is undeniably wrong. Even her mistakes are justifiable missteps (pp. 217-226). After all, it is her biography. Several themes emerged from the book: Rhee acting as a lone wolf; Rhee's lack of political savvy; and the racial politics which plagued Rhee's reforms. All of which contributed to Rhee's failure to rally popular support for her reforms.

Rhee as a Lone Wolf

New leaders gain the acceptance of their followers by inspiring cooperation and by expressing how their ideas are for the benefit of those involved. Rhee was not one of the good ole' boys; was from a culturally different background; and was from a different state. All of these characteristics made her an outsider (Guggenheim, Kimball, and Chilcott, 2010). Parents would tell Rhee, "You don't understand us or our kids or our schools.... I don't care where you come from; you don't understand how important this school is" (pp. 98-99). She never appealed to them as a concerned parent who also had children attending the D.C. public schools. She failed to rally the parents and involve her supporters (Gilbert, 2011). In fact, she told her private funders, "I am not

going to pretend to solicit your advice so you'll feel involved, because that's just fake" (p. 179). She chose to act alone. She was an outside force imposing change upon the local community. Local members of the community did not perceive that there was a problem with the schools and she did not do enough to convince them that change was necessary and that they needed to do their part in the reform efforts (pp. 4, 59).

Rhee's Lack of Political Savvy

In the documentary, *Waiting for Superman*, which was frequently mentioned in the book, Geoffrey Canada made the statement, "No one is coming with enough power to save us," (Guggenheim, Kimball & Chilcott, 2010). Michelle Rhee was given enough political power to save the schools (p. 83). However, she did not know how to wield it to promote her school reforms without causing conflict. Although she consciously avoided opposition in the beginning of her career, she threw caution to the wind as she gained power in D.C. For example, when she became the President of the New Teacher Project, TNTP, she named the program after the local school district in which it was located so that the district would look favorably on the teachers that were hired from the program and get credit in the press for having a successful teacher recruitment program. She explained that in doing this, "I avoided becoming a lightning rod like Wendy and TFA [Teach for America] were at the time" (p. 47). She was aware of the importance of perception and the need for cooperation.

However, upon arriving in D.C., she was unable to effectively control public perception. This was partly because she took sole responsibility for the school closings and teacher firings in the media but did not adequately advertise the school improvements. She was also photographed looking stone-faced while she stood alone accepting the blame for school closings, which made her look uncaring (pp. 94-95, 218). The credit for her successes was given to her predecessor due to her failure to publicly announce what she had accomplished and her current plans fearing that she would have to face protests (pp. 103, 184). She also did not effectively share information with stakeholders and could not control what information was leaked. The media was used as a tool but not effectively

when Rhee was announced in the newspapers as the chancellor of the D.C. public schools before any of the city councilmen were told, which caught people off guard (p. 80). The school closure list was also printed before principals and council members were aware of Rhee's plans (p. 98).

Council members were also expected to answer questions and smooth things over with members of the community without having been given adequate information themselves. One council member whose ward had the most school closings "started taking the heat, despite the fact that he wasn't consulted on the plan. When he tried to calm the unruly crowd questioning Rhee....he drew boos" which later resulted in a conflict between him and Rhee (p. 99). Although Rhee states that she had community engagement meetings to discuss the schooling closings, parents claimed that they were not given any information (p. 103).

Regarding the teacher firings, Whitmire wrote that parents "had no way of knowing which teachers were placing their children two years behind similar children in other cities. Nobody had ever told them that....Worse, in this one-news-source-town these mothers had reason to believe that teacher firings were random rather than based on ineffectiveness" (p.129). Rhee did not explain her plans and the criteria that she was using to close schools and fire teachers. As a result of these political missteps, the public did not support her. The stakeholders perceived her as causing harm to their communities (p. 193).

Racial Politics

Racial politics are mentioned in the book but the background information for the references was not clearly stated in the Preface under the subtitle Race Factor or chapter 4 which described D.C. Both blame Marion Barry, the former mayor of D.C. as setting the ground work for racial politics and corruption in the government. Marion Barry was perceived as a fallen hero to African American people. He is credited as rising from an impoverished background to becoming civil rights leader; gaining success with budget reforms as the mayor; and is thought of as someone who stood up for the poor people of D.C. It was due to his political successes and loyalty inspired by

his past that he was re-elected as mayor in spite of his personal failures which were blamed on federal government set ups (Marchense, Segan, & Henderson, 1998). More information regarding the actual racial demographics of the D. C. schools, wards, and neighborhoods would have clarified why race was a major issue especially for people not from the D.C. area.

In fact, there are only two quotes by Rhee about race in the book. The first was when she was looking for a teaching job. She stated, "I never got called into interviews. It was a little disconcerting. I think part of it was probably that people were hesitant to hire a Korean person in an African American community. They thought this was not going to be the best match. The white girls didn't seem to have any problems finding jobs" (p. 26). Here she noted that white people were favored over her. Whitmire explains the incident as an African American versus Korean issue. What Rhee opts not to point out is that being Korean may have held particular weight in inner-city Baltimore, where Koreans ran the tiny corner stores and relations with African Americans were fractious, as the store owners often accused their customers of being threatening, thieves or both. It was not promising chemistry (p. 26). That may be true but the history of black and white relations in the United States was not favorable either. The explanation does not address why a white person would have better chemistry in predominately African American community over a Korean, another person of color.

The second incident is hearsay. In the quote Rhee is recalling the words of a councilmen whose spokesperson denies that he said it. The quote reads, "I notice you aren't closing schools in Ward 3 because you like white people" (pp. 103, 250). There was neither a direct quote nor a response from the councilmen. Throughout the book Rhee does not address race. It would not be a good idea for her to become involved in a race debate. She would find herself in a no-win situation. As a victim enduring epithets, she would appear to be a weak leader if she complained. If she said something to defend herself against the attacks, she would appear aggressive even racist. One quote taken out of context would send her career spinning in a downward spiral even faster.

Nevertheless those around Rhee make statements regarding race and recall incidents involving Rhee. Her former roommate recalls that school children called Rhee, “Chinese” and “a chink” (p. 29). Both terms were inaccurate as Rhee was Korean. In another quote a national school reformer told Rhee, “The racial politics are going to be insane. You are going to be slaughtered” (p. 78) which was a warning Rhee. Finally the dean of students at school in which Rhee’s reforms were succeeding stated, “When something is not working, you don’t look at color anymore....She’s the lady who came to town [and succeeded], has kids in the schools, and that’s what it’s about.” (pp. 148-149). These were fairly innocuous remarks upon which Whitmire interweaves discussions regarding race throughout the book.

Whitmire himself also engages in discussions about race and stands up for Rhee against her critics claims that she was a racist but it is not until chapter 9 that the reader is made aware that the racial angle was instigated by the local newspapers (pp. 84, 148, 176, and 184-185). The racial dispute was centered on the closing of schools in predominately African American neighborhoods and the firing of African American teachers (p. 189). This dispute only makes sense when the racial composition is known. Washington D.C. has 128 schools but only 5 schools have 70%-up to 90% white students enrolled (Washington Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, 2010, Appendix A-2 chart). The majority of the D.C. public schools are either predominately African American students who made up 76.2% of the total public school student population or Hispanic/Latino American who comprised 13% of the total public school population in D.C. and the balance were Asian American and White students (Washington Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, 2010, DCPS Enrollment by Race SY 2009-2010, p. 15). These students also live in racially segregated neighborhoods (Washington Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, 2010, A-6). Therefore, Rhee was interacting with mainly African American schools within the African American community.

The book plays up the black and white turmoil but the perspective of the second largest majority, the parents of Latino/Hispanic students, is not mentioned in the book.

Montgomery County and Fairfax had the largest white enrollment at 35.1% and 50.6% respectively (Washington Lawyer's Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, 2010, p. 19). It would seem more likely that the racial dispute would have focused on Black versus Latino/Hispanic school closings since the presence of white students in D.C. public schools was minimal. However, out of the 4,400 teachers in the D.C. public schools employed during the 2007-2008 school year when Rhee was the chancellor of the D.C. public schools, 26% were white and 65% were African American (U.S. Department of Education, Schools and Staffing Survey, Table 2. Percentage Distribution of Public School Teachers, by race/ethnicity and state: 2007-2008). Therefore, there was a higher likelihood that an African American teacher would be fired over a white teacher because they were the majority (p. 259). Logically the black versus white race issue would surface more when teacher firings were discussed (p. 189). Without supporting statistics and the necessary contextual information, Whitmire's discussion of racial issues seemed like speculation to an outsider. To the parents of students in the D.C. public schools, it looked like a race war had been declared against African American teachers.

The *Bee Eater* added another dimension to films such as *Waiting for Superman* which present a "teachers versus students" approach to school reform. In the book, the reactions of the parents to school reforms were given. It appeared as though they would rather work within the system re-training teachers instead of replacing them, and fixing buildings rather than closing schools. As the desire for accountability and educational excellence continues, more figures like Michelle Rhee will undoubtedly emerge to change conventional notions of school administration and its relationship to academic achievement. Hopefully, they will have learned two lessons from *The Bee Eater*: avoid unnecessary conflict and win public support for their reforms.

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