



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: david j. blacker / gustavo e. fischman / melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

April 26, 2013

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
the National Education Policy Center, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Follow *Education Review* on Facebook



and on Twitter: #EducReview

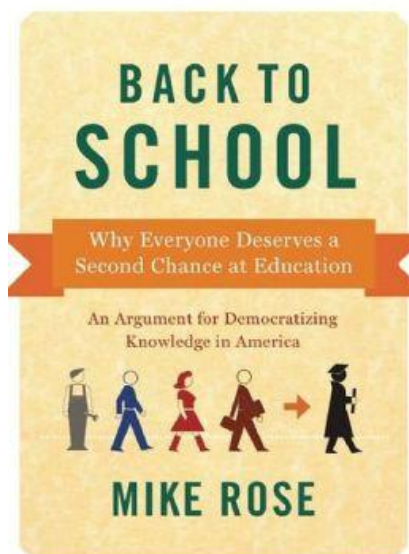
Rose, Mike. (2012) *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves A Second Chance at Education*. NY: The New Press.

Pp. xiii + 206 ISBN 978-1-59558-786-2

Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

In all our discussions about education policy, too often we do not consider what happens to those students who do not “make it” in K-12 but later in life are prepared to undertake responsibility for their education. After what is listed as the title of his latest book, Mike Rose has on the cover the following words, which are an apt description of this volume:

An Argument for Democratizing Knowledge in America



Citation: Bernstein, Kenneth J. (2013 April 26) Review of *Back to School: Why Everyone Deserves A Second Chance at Education* by Mike Rose. *Education Review*, 16. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1229.pdf>

He emphasizes this point in his one-page preface, titled “Second Chances”:

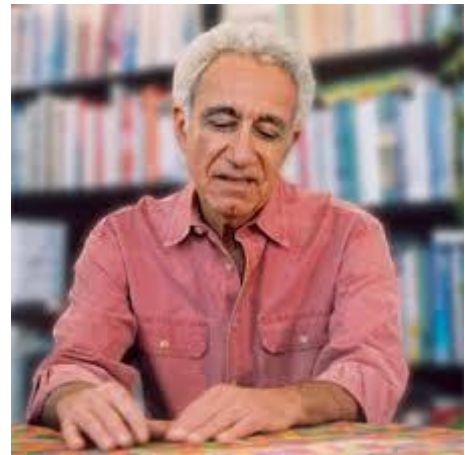
Back to School demonstrates what education can do, even though it was often earlier schooling that let people down. . . . When we are at our best as a society, our citizens are not trapped by their histories. Sadly this possibility is shrinking, partly because of a damaged and unstable economy but more so because of our political response to the economy. There are better ways to respond and to foster the growth of a wider sweep of our population. I hope *Back to School* points us in that direction (p. xiii).

Rose uses a combination of narratives of students he has encountered, his own experiences working with the populations he focuses on in the volume, and a substantial amount of what data is available about the functioning of those institutions which provide the greatest opportunity for second chances for those seeking educations, America’s community colleges.

The population at such institutions varies greatly. Rose points out that these institutions provide an opportunity for people to refocus their lives, thereby not adding costs to the criminal justice system and drawing fewer social services as they develop the skills to be more productive members of society. And at a time when we are worried about the costs of social initiatives of all kinds, Rose tells us about those who go through community colleges: “What society had to spend to get them to where they are now — and what it costs to provide their current education — will over time easily provide a significant return on taxpayers’ investment.” (p. 6)

That is what they can and should be doing, except as Rose tells:

The problem is that these second-chance institutions are not living up to their promise, and the current political climate poses threats to their improvement and, in some cases, to their continued existence. (p. 10)



Let me offer one more, key, paragraph from Rose's introduction to this powerful book.

I am championing second-chance programs because I believe that when well-executed they develop skills and build knowledge that can lead to employment but also provide a number of other personal, social, and civic benefits. There is an economic rationale for championing these programs — and these days the economic rationale is the only one that has a prayer of swaying policy makers - but school is about more than a paycheck. (p. 18)

Rose continues with six chapters and a conclusion:

1. Adult Education and the Landscape of Opportunity
 2. Who Should Go to College? Unpacking the College-for-All Versus Occupational Training Debate.
 3. Full Cognitive Throttle: When Education for Work Ignites the Mind
 4. Who We Are; Portraits from an Urban Community College
 5. Overcoming Bad Ideas: Towards Success with Remedial Education and Bridging the Academic-Vocational Divide
 6. Improving the People's College
- Conclusion: A Learning Survey

Rose is a natural story-teller, and prefers to take us on a journey that combines the facts of the educational landscape as he encounters with the stories of the people he encounters. He invites into the world of those seeking a second chance for a meaningful education, including the barriers they encounter. This includes the experience of preparing for and taking qualifying exams, especially for those with GEDs instead of regular diplomas. Rose tells us about Maria, who runs the adult education program in her district, and is trying to help the very diverse group of students succeed. Rose writes of her and another woman, Sandra: "They are trying to provide in a few months the academic know-how that students successful in American schools gain over years" (p. 42).

This is occurring in a context where only about 10% of GED holders ever earn a college degree. Rose reminds us how achievement of credentials, important in our society, has changed from a century ago where only about 7% had a high school diploma “while today the postbaccalaureate credential or degree is expected in many fields” (p. 44).

As he continues to tell us about Maria and her students, Rose tries to place what he is describing in the proper context. Are such programs failing if students leave before completion, or might it be as he suggests is “that people will leave once they develop sufficient skill for a job” (p. 53). Thus measuring such programs by graduation rates probably understates their effectiveness and can lead to incorrect policy decisions, such as on the continuation of funding for a program with a relatively low completion rate that is nevertheless meeting the needs of its students.

Rose has in a number of his works challenged the assumptions made about physical work, noting that society tends to undervalue the rich intellectual content of some that work. In this book he notes that one of his previous books, *The Mind at Work*, has unfortunately been misused to justify arguing against college for all. He notes that book was a study of the cognitive demands of physical work. From the richness of tasks in things as diverse as hair styling and carpentry, he has come to the conclusion that such work

... involves the development of a knowledge base, the application of concept and abstraction, problem solving and trouble shooting, aesthetic consideration and reflection. Hand and brain are cognitively connected.

From these findings I raise questions about our standard definitions of intelligence, the social class bias in those definitions, and their negative effects on education, the organization of work, and our nation’s political and social dynamics (p. 59).

In examining the programs offered as part of vocational education he finds that historically they do not “adequately honor the rich intellectual content of work” (p. 61).

Further, many programs do not take into consideration that students are exploring, may drop in and then out for a variety of non-academic reasons including financial and child care. Since many students have been in vocational settings because they were not thriving in regular academic settings, when they come to a second-chance opportunity Rose questions whether the institutions are properly set up to meet their needs. For him this raises the basic question of the purpose of education. He notes the tension between goals of cultivating individual growth and liberal culture versus those of preparing students for occupation and practical life, and suggests that tension restricts a necessary conversation of “How can we enhance the liberal studies possibilities in a vocational curriculum and enliven and broaden the academic course of study through engagement with the world beyond the classroom?” (p.63)

Here your reviewer wants to offer an observation from personal experience. I attended a prestigious liberal arts college with a Quaker orientation three of my four periods of attendance as an undergraduate. I dropped out there twice, then once from a private urban university, before returning for a final time at age 25 to finish up, beginning that final stint as a resident upperclassman on a hallway full of 16 to 18 year old freshmen whom I was supposed to advise. In between my first two stints, I had spent some time in the military, and in my experience upon returning found the college was not prepared for the different experience I brought back with me. That was still true, albeit to a lesser degree, for my final time. I remember attempting to explain to the head of counseling why she was not prepared for some students. When she refused to believe me, I described to her a set of symptoms, not my own, that she might encounter. When she somewhat wandered about trying to describe how to help the student, I pointed out I was describing someone with post-traumatic stress disorder quite possibly as a result of combat experiences. That at least widened that discussion in a way I think Rose is trying to widen the discussion on the kinds of student who may be coming to institutions not only with different experiences, but with different problems that can complicate their educational experience.

Rose offers a number of pertinent insights about the students who are his concern in this book. He notes one

learns to do any complex practice well by doing it in some formal or informal setting over time while gaining support and feedback from others. Clearly that is true in the apprenticeship setting. He argues it is equally true for the formal setting of school. Thus, when a non-traditional student decides to embark on expanding her education, the institution needs to be prepared to provide training in things like "... how to use their mind in certain systematic and strategic ways, how to monitor what they're learning and assess it, and just the tricks of the trade for functioning effectively in this place called school" (p. 91).

That means that sometimes what we might perceive and classify as a lack of engagement or focus could be better understood as resulting from the less-than-optimal previous educational experience.

Much of the rest of the book is devoted to going through the issues that inherently flow from what Rose has identified. These include reducing learning to atomistic skills as is typical of many remedial programs, which tends to treat the students as if they were of lesser intelligence rather than addressing them as adults with inadequate prior preparation. This is redolent of class and bias, something applicable not merely among the disciplines and courses of studies at many institutions, but in how we view the different types of higher educational institutions. That leads to the issue so often seen in education, that those who most need support are deprived of a richer education, and what education we do provide them is often resource-starved. As a former K-12 teacher I note these remarks by Rose could as equally be applied to our national educational policy and its impact upon students heavily populated by students from less well-off backgrounds, whether they are in inner cities, rural areas, or on Native American reservations. The products of such setting come out of school less well prepared, then we further narrow their opportunities for development in the educational programs that are later available to them.

Rose is arguing for a different approach, one made more difficult in our current time of austerity in public spending of any kind. He asks "In the midst of a powerful anti-welfare state, austerity climate, will we have the political courage to stand against the rationing of educational opportunity?" (p. 141)

That question is critical for the vision Rose wishes us to have, which he offers immediately after that paragraph:

The democratic philosophy I envision would affirm the ability of the common person. It would guide us to see in basic-skills instruction the rich possibility for developing literacy and numeracy and for realizing the promise of a second-chance society. It would honor multiple kinds of knowledge and advance the humanistic, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of an occupational education. (p. 141)

For that to happen we will, as Rose points out, have to expand our philosophy of education beyond its economic utility. Unless we include the civic and the moral dimensions, unless we are willing to recognize the needs of those who come to education at any point in their lives, but especially as adults, lacking the background of those from greater economic resources, we will continue to perpetuate a pattern that has existed too long, that deprives too many people of real opportunity, and thereby denies all of us the unrealized abilities of the kind of students about whom Rose writes.

Rose devotes a full chapter to reimagining the people's college. In that chapter and in his conclusion he reminds us that in a sense he is not arguing for something totally unknown - after all, unions used to run rich educational programs for their members, we had public libraries and experimental colleges for working people. To this list I would add the rich tradition of the settlement house movement. Rose of course mentions the strongest example of all, the one perhaps as significant as any in building post- World War II America into a middle class society: the GI Bill. Somehow our discussions of economic reform at all levels seem to focus on a strictly economic view of education. As Rose writes at the end of Chapter 6, "I have been privy to numerous policy discussions over the past few years and have yet to hear much of anything that addresses the humanity of the people in the classroom" (p. 182).

There is one paragraph in the Conclusion that I must quote in its entirety, because it lays out clearly the moral frame

through which Rose views and addresses the issues covered in this book.

Let us begin with first principles. While acknowledging the importance of the economic motive for schooling, our philosophy of education — our guiding rationale for creating schools — has to include the intellectual, social, civic, moral, and aesthetic motives as well. If these further motives are not articulated, they fade from public policy, from institutional mission, from curriculum development. Without this richer philosophy, those seeking a second chance will likely receive a bare-bones, strictly functional education, one that does not honor the many reasons they return to school and, for that matter, one not suitable for a democratic society. (pp. 187-188)

Mike Rose has an inclusive vision. It is rooted in that notion of a democratic society, one where all are valued, where all willing to take on the responsibilities should be given an opportunity. That is especially important for the students who as adults return to school, to gain that second chance at a life richer not only in economic opportunities but in the other aspects of learning and of live. Rose places this all in the context of individuals about whom he tells us, about whom as we read we should come to care, as does he.

This book lays out a serious issue that our society should be addressing. Rose provides us with the background, illustrates with examples of individuals, and then poses the broader questions we need to address. Having done so, he leaves us with a challenge, expressed clearly in his final paragraph, which is how I will also end this review of what I think is a very important book for those considering how we shape our educational policy:

The students on this campus carry more than their fair share of hardship and sorrow, and the odds of success are stacked against them. But hope and sense of the future are here in equal measure. Will we give these students a vital second chance - and through them realize the second time around a broadscale societal commitment to the general diffusion of knowledge? (p. 192)

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*. He was recently named 2010 Washington Post Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.



Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the
Education Review.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the
College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware
The National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>, and the
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University



Editors

David J. Blacker

blacker@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

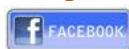
Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Follow *Education Review* on



Facebook and on Twitter:



#EducReview