

TO TEACH: THE JOURNEY OF A TEACHER (3RD ED.)
By William Ayers (New York: Teacher College Press, 2009)
A Book Review

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Why do we want to be teachers? It is a question that is commonly asked by a lot of people. William Ayers tries to look back on his motivation for being a teacher and attempts to answer the question. The challenges of being a teacher are revisited by looking at the misconceptions in teaching as well as providing the sensible arguments to explain the misunderstanding. *To Teach: The Journey of A Teacher* also challenges the teachers' beliefs in viewing their students and in teaching practices in their classrooms. In addition, teachers are encouraged to be more proactive to embrace the policies rather than passively accept the mandated curriculum and other regulations enacted by the policy makers, administrators etc. This book presents a large number of classroom practices that are conducted in unconventional ways.

THE NATURE OF BEING A GOOD TEACHER AND TEACHING

The noble motivations of being a teacher such as "[making] a difference, [improving] things, [participating] in a profoundly human and social experience, [changing] the world" (pp.1-2) may disappear after being a teacher for a certain period of time. The facts of being a teacher who has to face with the unchangeable policies, seemingly insensible regulations and overwhelming bureaucracy have worn the noble motivations out. Sometimes a teacher cannot do anything with those factors that she decides to simply do what she is told.

The first chapter of the book looks at the challenges of becoming a teacher and the complexity in being a teacher is addressed. These are especially important for pre-service teachers or those who want to be teachers. Ayers points out that it is important to hold on to the idealism of being a teacher from the beginning because it will keep their teaching on track. In addition, this chapter discusses the misconceptions of being a good teacher and teaching. One misconception addressed in this book is that "teachers learn to teach in colleges of education" (p.24). Ayers argues that good teachers do not always come from academic background and that "teaching is an eminently practical activity, best learned in the exercise of it and in the thoughtful, disciplined,

and sustained reflection that must accompany that" (p.24). Although this sounds true, colleges of education provide their students with knowledge of teaching and understanding the children. Most importantly, the colleges give their students opportunity to practice teaching so that they can be better teachers in the future (Karamustafaoglu, 2009). As a matter of fact, Pinar (2004) suggests that teachers should attend the university in a regular basis to improve their competence. Therefore, it is important for teachers to pursue a degree in education so they know how to support their practices with scholarly opinions.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Every student is unique and therefore has to be seen individually. Each phase of their physical, mental and learning development should be appreciated and treated differently by looking at their ways of learning. According to the book, "observing children purposefully and carefully" (p. 47) is one way to understand the student growth. This can be a powerful tool for teachers to enhance their teaching. So, the students' present states become the focus of the teaching learning because they are seen as active agents with capabilities (Schiro, 2008). In addition, teachers need to maintain their relationship with the students. Becoming friends with the students is believed to have positive impacts on the students' learning and personal lives (Crutcher, 2007).

To help the students take advantage of their learning, an ideal learning environment should be created. Conventional teaching methods such as lecturing needs to be replaced by giving more freedom to the students to learn how they want to. Teachers are the facilitators who assist the students to learn. Students would be given more opportunities to learn and to decide how they are going to learn. "[The] classroom, then, never looks like a mini lecture hall, with an imposing teacher's desk in front and rows of students facing forward" (p.68). In short, teachers should be able to understand the classroom management to help the students learn at their best.

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The book seems to indicate that conventional teaching method will not work and will not inspire the students to learn. However, Palmer (2007) in his book *Courage to Teach* asserts that teaching technique does not matter if teachers have the identity and integrity. Being themselves is the best way for teachers to teach as long as they have the integrity within. It is the teachers' identity and integrity that make the students want to learn their own way. Also, Palmer (2007) mentions that "as [teachers] learn who [they] are, [they] can learn techniques that reveal rather than conceal the personhood from which good teaching comes" (p. 25). Therefore, a teacher does not need to force herself to do something that she does not enjoy as long as she keeps learning how to teach and focus on the students' learning.

Furthermore, Ayers suggests that curriculum, which is usually mandated from the top policy makers, should be addressed as the guideline to create the learning environment. One way suggested by the book is to let the students know what the curriculum expects from them. He explains that

their intelligence, creativity, and irreverent inventiveness can be brought to bear in solving a real challenge, and the result can be terrific. An added advantage is that this allows students access to the larger framework in which their schooling occurs. (p. 114)

The line implies that teachers and students can talk about how they are going to achieve the expected outcomes in the ways that they like. Students may come up with unexpected answers for the challenges stated in the curriculum.

In addition to these points, standardized assessment is considered to be less objective in evaluating the students because it does not reflect the students' learning. Ayers asserts that portfolio is a more authentic tool to assess all aspects of student achievement. Beside that, "[a]uthentic assessment should be continuous, and it must account for and accommodate a broad range of dynamic interests and abilities" (p. 130). By using the portfolio, a teacher can be more objective in assessing the student's accomplishment.

These issues of classroom practices are discussed in four chapters of William Ayers'. These are the parts where the books provides a large number of examples of how to help the students construct their knowledge through manipulating the classroom, to give the students experience of their learning.

LONG LIFE LEARNING, LONG LIFE TEACHING

In the last two chapters of the book, William Ayers points out that students should be seen as a whole, including their growth and development, existing experiences, interests, social economic background and their problems. Teachers need to consistently see these to improve their teaching because "it is practiced in dynamic situations that are never twice the same" (p. 136). The complexity of teaching and being a teacher will be discovered and solved in the every day practices as reflection and continuous learning takes place.

CONCLUSION

William Ayers asserts that teachers need to keep their idealism in teaching and keep revisiting their motivations for becoming teachers. He also suggests that teachers should be proactive in implementing the curriculum in their classroom rather than be passive agents taking the mandates from the policy makers, administrators, principals or coordinators. Practicing different teaching methods is highly recommended to fulfill the student needs, which should always be in the spotlights in every academic discussion. Although the writer sounds quite skeptical about the current educational processes, *To Teach: The Journey of A Teacher* is a powerful book to help teachers continuously reflect on the way they teach.

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