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Reviews

Professional Materials

Reflective Teaching: Becoming an Inquiring Educator. Written by James G. Henderson. Macmillan, 866 Third Avenue, New York NY 10022. ISBN: 0-02-3535-11-3. 182 pp. 1992.

Reviewed by Paul Farber
Western Michigan University

The following review is one that might, at first glance, seem out of place in a journal addressing issues of theory and practice of literacy. However, if we are to understand the dilemmas related to literacy instruction today, then we need to address the issues related to the role of the practitioner within the institution of education. This book, as well as the following review, encourages us as educators to examine that role more thoughtfully. — Kathryn Kinnucan-Welsch, Reviews Editor.

This book is written for people contemplating a career in teaching, and those who work with them. It is a book avowedly opposed to approaches to such matters that share a presumption that what future teachers need is to learn some particular set of skills, techniques, or methods. It presumes instead, that what is needed most of all is to learn how to begin thinking in and about school practices. This is not a new idea of course, but in recent years we have witnessed a flowering of terminology for talking about it. Henderson, with the help of a glossary, leads readers through a thicket of terms, and assists prospective educators to enter the emerging discourse of education. Teachers are to be reflective of course, which for Henderson involves some mix of an ethic of caring

(including confirmation and dialogue), a constructivist approach to learning, and artistic problem solving. Such notions, along with an array of related terms, are embedded in chapters exploring how one might become a student of one's own teaching; inquire into educational problem solving, curriculum leadership, classroom community leadership, and forms of collaborative inquiry; reflect on student learning problems; and inquire into teaching professionalism.

The text provides clear evidence that the educationist armory is well stocked to carry on the war against mindlessness in schooling. How does Henderson set about using such notions? Most of the terminology of the text is introduced by way of brief, surprisingly didactic passages. The work is not structured to advance reflection on the language itself. Rather, the central interest of the book centers on livelier material interspersed throughout the chapters involving lengthy passages devoted to particular persons, viewpoints, and cases. This includes depictions of two actual teachers reflecting on what they do and why. There are also characterizations of four viewpoints written so as to represent distinct approaches to teaching. These viewpoints are offered in simulated first-person accounts in several chapters (on classroom problem solving, curriculum, and classroom community leadership). Several cases are also presented which describe teachers in realistic and uncomfortable or challenging situations calling for reflection and action. Finally, in a number of places, the comments and reflections of preservice teachers are presented as these bear on topics in question. These devices all provide numerous opportunities for discussion and commentary. It is in the prospects for such critical discussion that I can most easily imagine this text fulfilling its stated goals; a book that encourages future teachers to celebrate the possibilities of fresh questions and serious inquiry is welcome indeed.

But a pair of related problems diminish my enthusiasm. First, as I have already suggested, this is a text which is thick with special terminology. By way of design, the specialized vocabulary of educational discourse presumably is offered to facilitate thoughtful attention to the particular cases, approaches

and perspectives, while being in turn clarified in the process. I am not convinced that this is likely to occur for most readers. The problem as I see it is that Henderson takes a remarkably casual stance with regard to the presence of conflicts and complexities in educational thought and practice. To take one example, the text embraces both an ethic of care and principles of justice without ever acknowledging the tensions, uncertainties, and practical trade-offs these different orientations involve in practice. In defense of the text, one might at this point note that it is after all a book calling for inquiry: have I not simply underscored one of the kinds of inquiry the book encourages and spurs? Perhaps, but a second, deeper problem raises doubts about the likelihood of such inquiry resulting from use of the text.

This problem centers on a current running through this text embracing a genre of romanticizing individualism. The central notion of "constructivist learning" is taken to mean the process of individual sense-making, what things mean for individuals given their particular background and purposes. Early and often the text embraces the desirability of this pervasive orientation: How can one find one's way in teaching, so that one's best self can emerge in practice? Readers are encouraged to reflect on personal anecdotes, role models, and purposes; they are regularly queried as to what meaning particular notions have for them personally, and how they feel about aspects of the work of teachers; and in relation to their professional growth, each is urged to become the "master of your own fate" (p. 158). Now these are not bad things. But as a refrain they contribute to the sense that it does not matter very much how the terminology fits together, or what the overarching aims of the practice of teaching are. What matters is sincerely trying to make sense of it for oneself: if you are sincere, it seems, you can scarcely be wrong.

The language of the text reenters here of course. An ethic of caring, for example, or notions of professionalism seem to speak to larger purposes and values. They suggest why it matters how people learn to inquire about the overarching social, political and structural features of education. But the text veers away from such questions — or better, it is permissive

insofar as readers may be inclined to avoid or downplay difficult questions as to the larger purposes and struggles of practice. The world of practice serves as a backdrop as Henderson takes us into exploration of self and leaves us there. How else could he suggest that one might emerge a master of one's own fate as a teacher, except by pretending that the world outside one's immediate experience is not, in the end, one's concern.

In the end what is lost is one vital spur to inquiry in teaching. This involves the understanding that, beyond one's own struggle to make sense of things, the soul of the practice of teaching itself is in question: How can we reconcile our fundamental differences concerning the meaning of what we do and the norms that we would have define membership in the community of teachers? For the most part, Henderson's text shies away from this kind of question. What makes such a question uncomfortable, and vital, is the presumption it contains that teachers ought to take some responsibility for, and strive to articulate and embody the norms of, a practice that supersedes the interests of individual practitioners. If reflective inquiry is to contribute to progress in practice it must in the end move beyond a preoccupation with self, and revitalize the shared meanings of the institutions and traditions we inhabit.



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