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# Teaching the Personal and the Political: Essays on Hope and Justice, by William Ayers

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has had on the issues of equality.

Fifty years later, civil rights activists are still trying to equalize schools; they are unsung heroes, understanding that minority children ultimately pay the price for decisions that are politically based. In *Silent Covenants*, Bell highlights key factors that have created a foundation for much needed change. Today, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) has influenced local, state, and federal programs that focus on creating stability in an unstable educational system.

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## TEACHING THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL: ESSAYS ON HOPE AND JUSTICE

WILLIAM AYERS  
 TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS, 2004  
 \$19.95, 176 pages

*Reviewed by Mary Westervelt*

In modern American culture, teachers, administrators, and academics know the buzzwords common to the field of education. The terms research-based instruction, data-driven, and standardized tests illustrate distinct phrases familiar to people involved in education. These key words are partly a result of the accountability measures the federal government placed on the public school systems in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This law was instituted to hold educators accountable for student learning and to reward the districts successful in implementing positive change. However, in many cases the pressure to improve test scores leads teachers to teach to the stan-

standardized exams instead of showing their students a compassionate desire for the love of learning. In *Teaching the Personal and the Political: Essays on Hope and Justice*, Ayers (2004) stresses the need for teaching love, compassion, and justice within our school systems. Through the compilation of essays and personal teaching experience, Ayers reveals the current state of schools, paying particular attention to the poor districts within the inner cities. Also within the text, the author addresses ways to teach and learn from children, and how teachers can better prepare for their vocation of teaching. Finally, Ayers closes with a discussion on the craft of teaching and the ways in which teachers can empower their students.

The book is divided into four sections: (a) "Contemporary Conditions of Schooling and Teaching"; (b) "Teaching in Today's Schools"; (c) "Teacher Professionalism and Teacher Education"; and (d) "Teaching." According to Ayers, teaching is an "ethical enterprise" known as "a commitment to enlightenment and liberation" (2004, p. viii). The various sections provide examples of how teachers changed the school culture and cultivated a just way of learning in the midst of structural challenges.

Section 1 analyzes the contemporary conditions of schools in the United States. The inequalities students face in school systems is addressed by summarizing texts such as *Among Schoolchildren* (Kidder, 1989), *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1991), *Schools That Work: America's Most Innovative Public Education Programs* (Wood, 1992), and *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Gatto, 1992). Educators must work proactively toward changing the injustices in a school system. Section 1 attempts to reveal the injustices that set some schools apart from others, and to provide insight into the effective programs established to combat these injustices. In order to illustrate these points, the author draws upon other published works and occasionally adds some insight from personal experience.

In section 2, effective teaching is discussed with a commentary on another published work, *Star Teachers of Children in Poverty* (Haberman, 1995). Haberman argues that good teachers see the unique qualities in individual students and encourage them to succeed based on their interests. The overview of *Sometimes a Shining Moment* (Wigginton, 1985) shows how a teacher in Appalachia has created an innovative and visionary approach to teaching students which transcends the confines of the classroom and emphasizes the dignity of all students. Ayers also provides stories from other sources and then comments from personal experience. Although this section heightens the importance of teaching outside of social constructs, it would be more effective if personal research and findings through classroom observation were included. This section incorporates a few stories

from experience but mostly relies on other research projects proven to be successful.

Ayers communicates the positives and negatives inside a classroom and discusses the preparation teachers need to change systems already in place, stating, “Teacher education is entirely implicated in the successes and failures of teachers and schools. Teacher education often perpetuates problems, but it might also become a site of resistance and resurrection” (2004, p. 82). This quotation summarizes section 3 which discusses the traits of professionalism that teachers should practice in order to become influential leaders in the classroom. Providing learning through concrete experience and authentic discovery, and creating a meaningful learning environment for students are important attributes of a teaching professional. Through stories, Ayers emphasizes that teachers need to experience these styles of learning in order to incorporate these methods into their own teaching. Ayers lists various ways teachers can become more in-tune with teaching their students. These techniques include autobiography, inquiry, reflection, critique, and understanding community living.

Section 4 focuses on the various roles teachers play. The author compares teaching to an act of hope where love and compassion rest at the heart. It is possible to conceive teaching as an ancient art, a craft, or even a talent.

If a person is thoughtful, caring, and committed, mistakes will be made, but they will not be disastrous; on the other hand, if a person lacks commitment, compassion, or thought, outstanding technique or style will never really compensate. Teaching is primarily a matter of love. The rest is ornamentation. (Ayers, 2004, p. 122)

Admittedly, teachers must commit to caring for their students, but simply loving students does not make a teacher successful in education. Proper training and an awareness for effective instructional techniques remain important components as well.

Although the book offers helpful commentary on the benefits of viewing students as individuals and seeing the unique qualities each child has to offer, the book lacks original, empirical research. The ideas are relevant to education; however, some statements would have been more substantial if the author had written from a firsthand experience of observing and researching the effectiveness of schools. Instead, Ayers simply compiles other famous works that proved to be popular addresses on educational issues. Despite this criticism, the theme of teaching as an ethical enterprise surfaces consistently throughout the chapters. Ayers writes,

Teaching becomes ethical practice when it is guided by an unshakable commit-

ment to helping human beings reach the full measure of their humanity, and a willingness to reach toward a future fit for all – a place of peace and justice. (2004, p. 5)

Ayers should be applauded for presenting this ideal perception of teaching. This book causes educators and readers to raise many questions. What is our role as educators? Who are we as teachers? How do we instruct our children? These questions will remain with educators and trickle into individual classrooms to benefit all students. In effect,

The whole truth about a person cannot be known objectively; it is not the result of standardized tests nor statistical measures nor the sum total of his or her data. A person can begin to be known only in relationship to context, to ground, to experience, to intention. (Ayers, 2004, p. 127)

Ayers illuminates the idea that successfully teaching children transcends meeting data-driven standards. In our culture, the whole child needs to be assessed in all areas of multiple intelligence, taking into account family background. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) was enacted to encourage teachers to reach out to all children and correct injustices within school systems. Quantitative student assessment is an unfortunate measurement that simplifies the outcome of student learning expectations for this federal law. However, educators should strive to teach compassionately while simultaneously teaching for high academic achievement.

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