Sketches in Democracy: Notes From an Urban Classroom

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Sketches in Democracy is an interesting text that tells the story of the first year in the life of a new urban high school from the perspective of the author who decides to join a team to create a democratic community of learners within a welter of socioeconomic and political issues. The author has carefully articulated a book that helps others understand democracy within a context of an urban classroom. The text is written to tell a story of real life experiences of urban students who face challenging issues daily while trying to learn how to function in a society full of demands and the importance of teachers understanding the teaching environment within an urban setting.

The book describes one year in the lives of its students and their teacher in an ongoing struggle to connect meaningfully and purposefully. The text describes details that are specific to a setting within the classroom experience, yet the themes of teaching and learning are germane to an urban context within a classroom setting. The themes for the text were taken from a journal written during the author’s sabbatical year from the university. The journal provided a pathway to exploring themes in teaching, teacher preparation, and democratic practice. The book is relevant to pre-service teachers, teachers, teacher educators, plus it could be used to teach university courses that focus on democratic leadership or the
development of democratic practices within classroom settings. The main focus of the book is to share experiences as a teacher in an urban school with special emphasis on educating future teachers.

The author argues that knowing subject content is not enough for teachers in urban classroom settings. They must understand an urban community, know who the students are and appreciate the cultural and social context they bring to the classroom. DeLorenzo consistently stresses the need to truly understand how students think and how they learn – creating a roadmap of understanding on how to teach them effectively so they can learn the subject they are studying, plus know how to transfer knowledge to everyday living. DeLorenzo describes what it means to teach in an urban community and what it requires teachers to know. She says, “Teachers enter a dynamic system with its hierarchical power structure and political dimensions each year and sooner or later they come to the realization that school is not just a collection of students, but rather a community within a community.” The urban community has its own rhythm and lifeblood that pours into the schools on the heels of its students and for her students and her personally, it took many weeks before the rhythm blended for both of them.

It is this lifeblood that empowered and synergized her as a teacher to explore everyday teaching through democratic lens with respect to teaching, learning, and teacher education. According to Ayers, he states, “as teachers we must fight for the central place of education in building our futures and in developing a robust democracy. Education and democracy are linked: A strong democracy requires thoughtful, reception and resistance, participation and empowerment, will push toward a more vital and inclusive democracy.” In other words, teaching in an urban community requires a special type of knowing. Therefore, teachers need to understand the difference between a hierarchical power structure and a setting that empowers them to participate in decision making and implementing a curriculum that is appropriate for the students they teach.

This book is an excellent text for beginning teachers to read as they start thinking about what it means to be a professional educator. All teacher preparation programs should strongly encourage this book for reading and conversation amongst teacher candidates, especially if they will be teaching in urban school settings. Chapter 12, Lessons Learned - describes in detail how to create a democracy in practice classroom, plus she points out the complexity of creating
open conversations to which all students have access. The author describes how
difficult it is to build a democratic school with qualities of good teaching, excellent
teachers that understand democratic practices, and school leaders who uphold
democratic principles to support the teachers. In a democratic classroom setting,
environments are trusting, caring, engaging, and supportive of communal decision
making with actions of shared governance that involve students and teachers. She
promotes thinking about “why we do what we do” as it applies to good teaching,
especially today when the emphasis is better test scores verses the development
of youth as thoughtful participants in a democratic society. Her positive attitude
permeates throughout the text stressing that situations may be difficult, but no
matter what, successes are possible and student’s lives can be changed.

The book covers some of the most difficult topics to discuss, such as racism,
unintended racism, and institutional racism that often are topics avoided in
the preparation of teachers for urban settings. In Chapter 9, White Teachers,
Urban Schools – it provides a clear message on the importance of new teachers
understanding these issues along with the appropriate instructional teaching
strategies to change conditions that impact the lives of students in urban settings.
She says instruction and conversation should provide opportunities for teachers
themselves to address their own prejudices and biases. She encourages educators
of future teachers to promote discussions about race in order to help future
teachers understand critical issues of race, ethnicity, discrimination, and matters of
inequity in urban settings. Hopefully, the conversations could help students gain
a better understanding of what they can do to become more understanding and
sensitive to the needs of urban students. She stresses the need for all teachers to
develop a critical consciousness about race and actively seek to eliminate racism in
curriculum, school policies, and student/faculty conversations. It is a powerful idea
that she articulates to college educators about the need to teach teacher candidates
to become “social healers” and creators of positive change. I found the chapter
interesting with much depth and thought about the issues that keep us from
providing a quality education for all students.

In summary, I highly recommend this book to educators who are currently
preparing future teachers for urban settings. Reading and discussing this text within
a classroom setting may help them craft a philosophy of teaching that is practical
for the urban school. Also, the story is told in such a skillful manner that it could
be insightful to practicing teachers and school leaders already working in urban school settings. The book has the potential to serve as an educational resource for those individuals interested in learning more about creating a democratic learning environment, especially in an urban classroom setting.