

2018

Review of "Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us"

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Recommended Citation

Breck, Susan (2018) "Review of "Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us"," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 71 : No. 1 , Article 6.
Available at: http://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol71/iss1/6

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Review of Mike Rose, *Why School?: Reclaiming Education for All of Us*. New York: New Press, 2009.

In his book *Why school? Reclaiming education for all of us*, Mike Rose, invites us to reconsider public education in terms of what it could be for our children and to examine what some of our present policies have done to limit those possibilities for all of us. Rose draws on his forty years of experience as an educator from kindergarten to adult literacy, as well as his present position as a faculty member of the UCLA Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, to inform this thoughtful discussion.

In his appeal for “big-hearted social policy and an embrace of ideal of democratic education,” Rose suggests we have “lost our way” (p ix) and our present educational system consists of economic determinism driven by test scores. Rose argues for an educational system that allows for real opportunity for all of our children to thrive. While acknowledging that everyone is the sum total of their experiences; family, neighborhoods, ethnicity, and economic status, Rose believes public education ought to be that place where our children can find the way to their future through classroom experiences that show they are valued and will help them to grow.

In this short (169 pages) book, Rose asks a series of questions pertinent to the very nature of how we view education and how we define what it means to be intelligent. Rose’s chapters provide compelling discussions about the things with which most public school teachers are already concerned while providing a myriad of examples drawn from his years in schools which dramatically flesh out his arguments. Topics addressed include; how the way we talk about standards has limited and constricted access for many students, how business can be a powerful ally on one hand while not really looking at its own role in how it’s practices impact the public good, and of course, how No Child Left Behind has affected all our classrooms.

For example, while acknowledging accountability is a necessary goal, Rose, like many others, decries the ways in which the implementation of NCLB seems to have put a strangle hold on our curriculum, turning it from exploration and excitement into one of deadly dull test preparation. Although he did not provide a suggested alternative, his intention seems to be to open and encourage dialogue rather than suggest summary alternatives.

One chapter that particularly interested me was “Reflections on Intelligence in the Workplace and the Schoolhouse” (p 73). Rose addresses how Americans view intelligence in a binary way in which some work requires intelligence while other types of “common” or “blue color” work does not. In fact, Rose purports, the idea that “brain work” and “hand work” are separate things is counter intuitive. He provides compelling examples of how even though we have begun, through the work of

scholars like Howard Gardner and Robert Sternberg [who have] helped us broaden our understanding of intelligence with concepts such as multiple intelligences and practical intelligence, we tend to undervalue of miss

entirely, the many displays of what the mind does every day, all the time, right under our noses. (p. 73)

Rose suggests that public education needs to embrace a different way of thinking about intelligence and accept that what was once called vocational education compels critical thinking and problem solving among students in much the same way a more traditional academic curricula would. By broadening our way of thinking about intelligence and education, we become more inclusive about providing opportunities for our children to succeed. Interestingly, on the day I read this particular chapter, CNN reported that the sector of the job market least affected by the economy was in the area of skilled trades, so the idea of a broaden curriculum make sense both educationally and possible economically as well.

Overall, while depicting the current state of public education as one of lost hope, Rose seems to believe that, as an institution, it has the potential to be the place where opportunities are available for all children. He also suggests that public education could and should contribute to the common good in ways originally intended by Jefferson, by creating an informed citizenry capable of public dialogue.

Frankly, I admit to being conflicted about my reaction to this book. First, the realist in me has listened to the ways in which others have described our schools as savagely inequitable and knows that I have been in those very schools where we do, at times, seem to have lost our way. Also, I watch as people who have little real understanding of classrooms make policy decisions about those classrooms which I believe are counter productive to the well-being of students and I am doubtful that public education will ever be the place Rose so obviously believes it can be.

Then, I am the optimist who hears, and is heartened, by the examples provided by Rose where great things are happening in everyday classrooms or an individual student's life is somehow touched by a teacher who sets that student on the road to enlightenment and success. Those scenarios, so passionately depicted by Rose, make me want to believe, given the opportunity, public education can be the great equalizer which opens doors for all students, while contributing to the common good of our country.

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