

Why School? Reclaiming Education for All of Us

Michael Rose
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Reviewed by Clair Johnson

During my time as a teacher in a high-needs urban school district, I was confronted by the human experience, with all its powerful highs and lows, to a degree I had never known before. The teaching journey is exhilarating, sometimes horrifying, and always life-changing. So when I picked up *Why School?* by Michael Rose, I felt reassured that he was writing about education from a teacher's perspective, very clearly conveying the delicate chemistry that begins in the classroom, bubbles its way out of the building, and enters into some very heated politics. In the midst of important discussions about the future of education, Rose's voice reminds us what it feels like to be moved by teachers because the book itself is a lesson in education. Like an inspirational teacher, Rose articulates what we feel to be true, and forces the reader to examine his or her own values.

Structured as a collection of essays, each piece is a very deliberate step through a process of critical thinking about why it is we go to school, return to school, and, as a nation and as individuals, value school. Rose begins by placing school in a personal light for the reader, using the first essays to reflect on the language we use when discussing education and the impact that educational experiences have on life outcomes. He then broadens this topic to the national consciousness, showing how American approaches to education can both broaden our horizons and impede our democratic progress. Through the middle of the book, Rose looks at how our national expectations are projected onto our students, and define the way they learn to value intelligence, people, and standards of learning. He then discusses the state of remediation for struggling students and others trying to enter the educational system. The book closes with a few powerful messages of hope and positivity, encouraging a responsible and constructive approach to educational change, rather than a purely critical approach.

The style of Rose's writing is clearly qualitative and contextual. Most essays in the collection introduce at least one personal story, linking each issue to a real-life manifestation. The narrow effects of broad educational policy are

seen in student experiences. The specific expression of a philosophical value is revealed in an educator's struggle. I valued the balance of idealism and pragmatism in Rose's style. He describes education with a hope for the best, but uses narratives to acknowledge the diversity of educational context and the sometimes unpredictable effects of large-scale values and policy. This is not a book for those who prefer to see education driven purely by quantitative ideals. Further, while many of Rose's educational values are broad and familiar, it is also important to note that all his writing is ultimately motivated by a strong support of democratic education. In one bite, he asserts that "democracy assumes the capacity of the common person to learn, to think independently, to decide thoughtfully" (p. 85). A reader who does not share this value may not enjoy this reading as thoroughly.

I have to admit that I agreed with many of Rose's points before I even knew he would make them. In my case, he was speaking to an audience that, for the most part, was already on the same page as he was. There were, however, a few moments when I felt a nagging skepticism about an ideal he promoted, or the slant of his writing. For example, multiple explicit references to opposing political views on education highlighted the divide between liberal and conservative politics. While I appreciated the candor and bravery of such discussion, I worried how Rose's approach might alienate more conservative readers. Yet, I think it is important to highlight these very moments of skepticism or uncertainty, as they are precisely the ones that make Rose's writing so strong. By the end of such passages, if I had not been convinced by his argument, I was at least processing the information in a new way. Moments of personal struggle stayed with me after I finished reading, and I found myself thinking about education in a more productive and fulfilling way. It was during those moments that I felt Rose acting as my teacher through the pages of his book.

Rose's book is certainly a promotion of public and democratic education. Yet, the ideals and debates running throughout the book are just as important for Catholic schools. Ultimately, it reorients our view of education to one seen from a perspective of social justice and empowerment. For Catholic institutions that highly value the agenda of equity and social integrity, *Why School?* provides a platform for constructive thought and debate about the development of educational goals and structures. Those involved in Catholic education might readily worry with Rose, "that the dominant vocabulary about schooling limits our shared respect for the extraordinary nature of thinking and learning, and lessens our sense of social obligation" (p. 29). Catholic educators, similar to public and other private educators, stand to be re-inspired by their careers as

Rose reminds them what it was that motivated them to enter the classroom as teachers: He reminds us of the very deep truth that, “teaching carries with it the obligation to understand the people in one’s charge, to teach subject matter and skills, but also to inquire, to nurture, to have a sense of who a student is” (p. 168). For any involved in the community of Catholic education, this book is a relevant read as a catalyst for general educational debate, and an insight into the forces that are driving public and private education.

Though *Why School?* is clearly a reflection on American educational policy and its implications for the future, its real purpose is broader than sending a message to policymakers. Using intimate examples of education in context, paired with philosophical argument, this book personalizes the debate on education, placing ownership on all citizens. As we read, we must ask ourselves, “What is the role of a particular subject area in cognitive development? Why do we study it? How does it fit into our philosophy of education?” (p. 106). It challenges the language we use to discuss education and reminds us that progress is not achieved when we value cynicism over idealism, profit over happiness, and achievement over empowerment. Whether or not his words ring true for all readers, they certainly echo after the covers close, so we are left facing our personal truths in the context of one of the most important social and political debates: education.

Clair Johnson is a former math teacher and current doctoral student of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation program at Boston College.