



An Empty Seat in Class: Teaching and Learning After the Death of a Student

Ayers, Rick
Teachers College Press, 2015

Book Review

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An Empty Seat in Class emerges in the midst of the increasing deaths of young black and brown men and women around the country, and it seems rather prescient as the debate about responses to this violence emerges and takes center stage. While Ayers addresses the larger context of death and particularly the deaths of marginalized students in oppressed communities, this book is a shared meditation on grief and the role of the secondary school teacher in processing, responding to, and teaching alongside death and grief. It is shared because Ayers not only reflects on his personal stories and experiences in the classroom, but he invites a broad selection of teachers involved in secondary education to reflect on their experiences of and responses to the loss of a student.

The book is framed around the recent death of one of Ayers's students and his community and school's response to this loss. Ayers is clear that it is not a how-to book and rather than focus on prescriptions or even overt psychological or pedagogical advice he turns to the practice and ritual of writing and reflecting. Ayers reminds that "our salvation lies more in literature and stories than psychological and political analysis"(6) and provides us with stories, engaging literature, and reflections as the reader proceeds through the tragic life cycle of a community's, specifically a teacher's, response to the death of student.

The first half of the book outlines the complexity of dealing with urban violence and identifies the multiple issues faced by teachers, specifically those from vastly different socio-economic and political contexts than their students. Ayers does not shy away from the myriad ways that students and teachers respond to the "mystery" of death. He and his contributors look at the emergence of "murder economies" (23), individual and institution missteps, white privilege, and the simplistic and problematic assignation of blame and innocence that often permeates

responses to death in urban communities and classrooms. While the first half of the book explicitly examines death and dying in urban, marginalized communities, the last section looks at mass school shootings and mortality in its many forms. By the end of the text, Ayers is clear that death is a specter that no one can escape and that all teachers and schools need to critically reflect on it together. Ayers emphasizes that “There are so many other ways that the terrible finger of fate points at our students. And for each of these tragedies, there is a classroom; there is a teacher” (88).

I am deeply sympathetic to Ayer’s project, and the book makes a convincing argument for this type of intervention and its format. His work succeeds as a “meditation with and for teachers” (7) during these tragic times. However, the text also suggests that there is a better way to deal with death in our school communities, and I think more explicit engagement with successful models of intervention and more context about Ayers’s school and community would strengthen the book and would add nuance and depth to its focus on and argument for the inclusion of narrative and literature in our responses to death. Overall, Ayers’s multi-layered analysis that includes reflection, memorial, research, and deep attention to literature on death and grief will be an invaluable resource for teachers and will hopefully spur additional research on the practical and pedagogical issues that arise as a result of a student’s death.

https://wabash.center/resources/book_reviews/an-empty-seat-in-class-teaching-and-learning-after-the-death-of-a-student/