A Review of We Don’t Need Another Hero: Struggle, Hope, and Possibility in the Age of High-Stakes Schooling

Nicholas Daniel Hartlep, Illinois State University
Book Review:

A Review of *We Don’t Need Another Hero: Struggle, Hope, and Possibility in the Age of High-Stakes Schooling* by Gregory Michie

New York: Teachers College Press, 2012
160 pp., $22.95, ISBN 0807753505

Reviewed By Nicholas D. Hartlep

As a former elementary school teacher and now an assistant professor of educational foundations at Illinois State University, much of what Michie presents in his book *We Don’t Need Another Hero: Struggle, Hope, and Possibility in the Age of High-Stakes Schooling* resonates with me. Not just because at one time his colleagues were my colleagues—Michie was a professor at Illinois State—but also because I have interviewed him about the foundation and philosophy of his teaching practices for my own research agenda (see Hartlep, 2012). This institutional connection and personal interaction influenced me to finish reading *We Don’t Need Another Hero* with a sense of peace and purpose, something entirely different than when I read *See You When We Get There: Teaching for Change in Urban Schools* (Michie, 2005), which left me feeling visceral.

In *We Don’t Need Another Hero* I felt as though
Book Review

Michie’s outlook on education and consequently his own teaching philosophy had grown from when he wrote Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students (Michie, 1999). In Holler If You Hear Me Michie (1999) came off as humbly unsure of his teaching and learning philosophy, especially not claiming to know precisely what “teaching for change” (Hartlep, 2012, p. 17) meant for himself or for his students. Michie’s insecurity in knowing what is best for students was self-evident in We Don’t Need Another Hero. However, this time Michie (2012) was much more confident in his presentation of the idea that uncertainty is normal, and that it is completely healthy for teachers to embrace this uncertainty.

There were many topics that Michie (2012) wrote about in We Don’t Need Another Hero that I found to be edifying as a teacher educator. For one, as someone who is intimately aware of critical theory, I found myself reading the book without my typical “critical self.” In other words, Michie (2012) wrote deftly, passionately, evenly, and in such a way that I hung on his every word. What he wrote was true, whether I wanted to agree with it or not. Moreover, he wrote about White privilege and its implications and intersections with teachers in ways that I could not as a person of color who is a transracial adoptee. However, his discussion may assuredly assist White undergraduate students who are training to become teachers. Overall, the book shared hope, something many books on urban education do not since they are overly critical. The book left me feeling hopeful for change and encouraged me as a reader.

I was also encouraged that Michie (2012) shared his own reflection analysis of teaching films that did not portray the teacher as “the knower of all,” but rather as a student in his/her own right. Specifically, the “teacher-student contradiction” that Freire (2013) identified is something that Michie’s (2012) book explains for readers quite effectively. I wanted to continue reading We Don’t Need Another Hero for several reasons, two being the following: The book’s short chapters were easy to read and digest in small spurts, and Michie’s cogent writing made his thoughts easy to follow and understand. I wanted to hear the voices of the students, and I could. I wanted to learn from the students’ experiences, and I did.

The formats of Michie’s previous books (see Michie, 1999, 2005) followed chapter outlines. We Don’t Need Another Hero was noticeably different. There were three parts, each showcasing chapters that centered on a theme related to that particular part of the book. For instance, Part I of the book—“Teaching”—could readily be used by teacher educators. The six chapters in this section successfully share why culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students do not need a “white knight” (Ayala-Alcantar, 2006) to save them. According to Michie (2012), what White teachers need is a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical realities of “apartheid schooling” (see Kozol, 2005). These teachers also need to humanize the process of teaching and learning in what the book title identifies as an “Age of High-Stakes Schooling.” In particular, the chapter “Seeing, Hearing, and Talking Race: Lessons for White Teachers from Teachers of Color” is particularly praiseworthy and could be used as a reading in foundations of education courses.
This recommendation reflects my experience in teaching social foundations of education classes where white undergraduate students have a difficult time making sense of their whiteness and teaching things they do not know and/or have not experienced (Howard, 2006).

Part II of the book—“Youth on the Margins”—shares the perilous realities that many underserved and under-resourced students face, especially in terms of police brutality, homicide, and “zero-tolerance” school policies that blame the victim and exculpate the oppressive systems that maintain societal and scholastic status quo. In this part of the book Michie (2012) shares stories of teachers who returned to their communities to serve others. The stories that Michie documents are powerful counterstories to those promoting the notion that successful students (who are from urban spaces) should be transplanted to suburban spaces (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Part III—“The Bigger Picture”—serves to bring the book full circle. In order to understand the realities that city school students and teachers face, we as a society, according to Michie (2012), need to better understand the “bigger” picture. The “bigger” picture refers to understanding what in fact causes inequitable schooling in the United States and what serves to downplay the changes and reforms that could ameliorate such oppressive conditions. A macro- or institutional level understanding is important to understanding the foundations of education, and Part III of Michie’s (2012) book demonstrates this reality.

My overall appraisal of the book is affirmative. The book is not overly academic, making it accessible and attractive to teacher education students. Readers of all types will enjoy the author’s high quality and personalized writing style. In my interview with Michie in 2012, he was quoted as saying, “I wouldn’t look back at my own teaching or my student teachers’ work and say, ‘That’s social justice, that’s not social justice.’ I think the more that it’s grounded in student’s own concerns, questions, or issues, the more it’s moving toward…being…social justice” (Michie cited in Hartlep, 2012, p. 12).

I believe that one of the biggest contributions that We Don’t Need Another Hero makes to the literature of “teaching for change” is that it draws attention to the humility and humanity necessary in doing social justice work. The teacher does not always teach and the student does not always learn. There is a contradiction between the teacher and the student, and students of color certainly do not need a savior to rescue them. I commend Michie, a White teacher educator, for writing convincingly of this fact.

References


Michie, G. (2012). We don't need another hero: Struggle, hope, and possibility in the age of high-stakes schooling. New York: Teachers College Press.