

BOOK REVIEW

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Mistakes We Have Made: Implications for Social Justice Educators

Bre Evans-Santiago

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August 27, 2008. My first day as a classroom teacher. Planning to arrive early to make sure everything was just right, I instead pulled up to a set of locked gates. I waited a few minutes, desperately trying to ignore the gnawing pang in my stomach, before circling around the neighborhood just west of downtown Los Angeles. Coming back 15 minutes later to find the entrance open, I inched my way into what would become a lifelong career in education. Armed with a cherubic face, a well-worn tie, and emergency teacher instructions, I believed my impact would be limitless. The students arrived, and I wracked my brain for the tips and instructions I learned over the summer. “Be strict on the first day, especially in the ‘inner city’.” “Show rigor by giving a graded assignment day one.” “No student surveys until the third day.” Tough love was my motto, and I devised a complicated behavior system that called for students to be praised for compliant behavior and publicly penalized for dissenting conduct. Yet, a few weeks into my first year something was amiss. I wasn’t getting the “results” I expected. I could barely keep track of my own behavior system, the kids were unhappy, and student work started to slide. What was I doing wrong? Despite my best intentions to be a social justice educator, to help make radical change in the life of my students, I found myself an unsuccessful actor. Why wasn’t I the shining star at the center of so many (White) savior teacher films (Mawhinney, 2019)? Although I gradually learned a different approach, one demonstrated by models of *cariño*¹ and *educación*² (Villenas, 2002), the funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) and the

¹ Literally translated as “care,” it is a term to describe deep, intimate, and personal affection. See Valenzuela (1999) and Sosa-Provencio (2019) as examples of linking conceptualizations of *cariño* to critical, and life-giving, education.

² Villenas (2002) writes of Latinx parents’ desires to give *una buena educación*, one of *respeto* (respect) and *buen comportamiento* (good behavior), to their bicultural children. Villenas (2002) writes, “to be *al pendiente* (vigilant), to give *consejos* (teachings), and to enforce discipline in varying ways became crucial for providing *una buena educación* in a culturally alienated community” (p. 28).

epistemological brilliance of the community itself (Gonzales, 2015), I start this review just like the title, spirit, and format of the text, in the *Mistakes We Have Made*.

As such, Dr. Bre Evans-Santiago's (2020) edited volume takes as its starting point the narration of, and reflection on, self-identified missteps, mishaps, and missed moments that university education professors and teacher educators endured as classroom teachers. From the comically real, Evan-Santiago's wardrobe malfunction amidst broken air-conditioning (Chapter 13), to the decidedly honest, Percell's reunion with a dissatisfied student (Chapter 2), to the unintentionally disparaging, Schwerdtfeger's breach of gendered cultural norms (Chapter 4), to the rather heartbreaking, Beck's response to a custodian's violent killing of classroom baby mice (Chapter 8), the book highlights the instructive potential of vulnerability, the possibility in sharing experiences that demonstrate teaching for social justice is difficult, complex, and sometimes unsuccessful work. Nobody starts the job as an expert, but learning from the stumbles and slipups of those who have made educational justice their life's work communicates the humility necessary for learning and improvement. Thus, as a whole, the book successfully accomplishes Evans-Santiago's aim, to create a "space to allow other teachers to contribute their stories... [so that] social justice educators know that, first, it is okay to make mistakes, and second, do not make the same mistakes we have made" (p. xii). It is precisely the notion of creating space for meaningful conversation, reflection, growth, and the exchange of ideas from and with practitioners and faculty, veterans and beginners, and theory and practice where the text holds most promise. The book is not prescriptive, but a way to start dialogue, a path towards interrogating the assumptions we hold about teaching for social justice. To this end, the book functions as a wonderful text for a methods and/or multicultural education course in teacher education, as each chapter provides a jumping off point for classes to discuss, question, and reimagine the practices, ideologies, knowledges, structures, and in some cases previous instructions that precipitated the mistakes, and the interventions and recalibrations that followed. Such a use of the text would provide examples of specific concepts such as community engagement (Sawyer & Sawyer, Chapter 1), multicultural literature (Suleiman, Chapter 9), colleague collaboration (Hamann, Chapter 14), and language diversity (Sandles, Chapter 5) that could be expanded with supplemental readings, material, and resources to facilitate in-depth study. Thinking back to my opening vignette, such a text and approach would have forced me to confront my own savior mentality and more quickly see the community cultural wealth of the families (Yosso, 2005) I worked alongside.

Mistakes We Have Made consists of fourteen individual and distinct chapters organized into three broad themes, 1) inclusive classrooms, 2) curriculum implementation, and 3) professionalism. Each theme counts between three and five chapters. As stated previously, each chapter begins with a vignette from an author's time as a classroom teacher, followed by both how the described experience resonates with the author today and how it offers an opportunity for social justice teachers to think and do differently. The narratives are grounded in varying degrees of academic literature and most chapters include lists of resources for classroom teachers. Across the chapters, the tone favors readability, reflection, and dialogue rather than dense language and verbosity. The close of each chapter includes two-four reflection questions and activities to further make space for conversation, discussion, and application.

Of the fourteen chapters there are some exceptional contributions that should be noted. Adam Sawyer and Mirna Troncoso Sawyer open the book acknowledging the necessity to shed their "unexamined dominant scripts and practices to see [their] work and community with new eyes" (p. 17). The chapter authors admit their initial rigidity on things like parent conferences and meetings and their rather narrow definition of cultural practices stymied their ability to build

authentic relationships with Latinx families and prevented a more expansive asset-based approach. Most striking about the chapter is how they model the critical reflexivity that teachers must constantly (re)engage to interrogate their praxis. In Chapter Five, David Sandles shares his early attempts to “standardize” the language of his Black students, detailing how even he, as a Black teacher, represented a “linguistically imperialist” mindset (p. 64). Even though such attempts make him “shudder” today, his personal reflections, grounded in an exemplary discussion of African American Language (see also Boutte, 2008, 2016), demonstrate how all educators can inadvertently reproduce, but can also intentionally disrupt, the (language) spaces/systems that buttress Whiteness in schools. Sandles’ chapter also adds personal narrative to recent research that outlines how an emphasis on preparing socially-just white teachers for “diverse” classrooms often neglects the need for future teachers of color to examine their own bias and deficit perspectives (Cherry-McDaniel, 2019; House-Niamke & Sato, 2019; Monreal, 2020; Smith-Kondo & Bracho, 2019). Finally, Shelton & Alacrón (Chapter 11) outline a lesson in which a Black student turns away from and responds negatively to what the teacher thought was a socially-just lesson about the three branches of government and the violence brought upon The Civil Rights Movement. They write, “I (Shelton) had grappled with including images depicting racialized violence...but my Whiteness had prevented me from anticipating the way a young African American male student would react to seeing violence perpetrated on another Black male” (pp. 167-168). The chapter authors go on to discuss how they made their mistake right by validating the student’s feelings, proactively communicating with the child’s mother (see also Suleiman, Chapter 12 on communication), reevaluating social justice curriculum as more than representation, and focusing the need to build a safe and welcoming, yet critical, classroom environment. Hence, Shelton & Alacrón point to the messiness in implementing a critical praxis and remind future teachers that socially just teaching is much more than the intention to do so.

Mistakes We Have Made represents a novel and practical contribution to the larger body of literature on social justice and teacher education/preparation by opening a space of reflection and dialogue centering the vulnerability and growth of teacher educators themselves. In acknowledging, and then collecting a series of introspective appraisals about, the missteps of experienced educators Evans-Santiago “provides a platform to reexamine and revise one’s own thinking” (p. xii). Although the text’s focus on readability and narrative largely leaves aside deeper attention to the theoretical underpinnings of social justice education (see Monreal, 2018) and the larger structural causes of inequality and marginalization (Anyon, 2014; Au, Bigelow, & Karp, 2007), it provides a unique entry point to start such conversations and can be complemented by additional readings of the kind if used as a class driving text. In sum, this book represents an opportunity to have authentic conversations about the complexity of social justice teaching and the need to constantly reflect on, and be honest about, how our praxis might work better for the students and communities we work with. No doubt, my young teaching self would have benefited from not only reading this book, but also authentic discussion with other teachers who share the knowledge learned from their own mistakes.

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