
Kimberly A. Mahovsky

University of Northern Colorado, kimberly.mahovsky@unco.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: https://digscholarship.unco.edu/jeri/vol7/iss1/6
**Book Review:** *It’s Not about Grit: Trauma, Inequity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching.*


Kimberly A. Mahovsky
University of Northern Colorado

In his book, *It’s Not about Grit: Trauma, Inequity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching*, Steven Goodman, the founding director of the Education Video Center (EVC) and an award-winning social justice advocate, shares his compassion for teacher pedagogy and ethics which, according to Michelle Fine, “probes how we as educators respond to the nagging whispers that rumble in our own souls, asking if children living in so much trauma can find the space and desire to learn” (p. xi). This book is a call to educators to incorporate transformative pedagogy that is embedded with social justice into their practices. This call is presented through the stories of both students and the communities in which they live. Each chapter catalyzes educators to see the world through their students’ eyes, fostering compassion and a critical understanding of their pedagogy.

According to Goodman, there are five crucial components of transformative pedagogy which include: students feeling supported by their peers, a close student-teacher relationship, learning with a purpose, requiring student voices to be heard in the creation of authentic work for actual audiences, and viewing their social justice films created through the EVC as devices for discourse and transformation in schools and communities in which they reside.

The core of the book contains students’ stories of personal experiences of being marginalized and misrepresented in their communities, which ultimately affected their educational achievement. Each chapter highlights a student’s account focusing on living conditions and relentless problems living within four New York City boroughs. These issues include: (a) health and housing, (b) police and juvenile justice, (c) immigration, (d) gender and identity, and (e) foster care and child welfare.

Goodman begins each chapter by giving the reader background about the issues and includes pertinent research while outlining how to practice transformative and culturally sustaining pedagogy, which “means bringing an understanding of the whole student into the classroom including both their school and out-of-school community experiences, and the systemic interconnections between housing, health, and education that shape them” (p.14). Goodman does a remarkable job describing each student’s appearance, classroom demeanor, and their motivation towards creating their video documentary. The web address for each clip is included, so educators can both view the clips and use
them in their classroom to “scaffold student discussion, reflection, inquiry, and action” (p. 143). After a description of each video clip, which includes a transcript, Goodman reminds teachers of their responsibility to build a strong sense of community within their schools by creating a culture “of belonging through storytelling, listening, and empathy with students and teachers” (p. 53). Overarching themes in each chapter are compassion and the use of transformative teaching to make a difference in students’ lives. Goodman encapsulates these ideas in the assertion that by “knowing the oppressive systems arrayed against our students and their communities, we remain committed as their advocates, keeping one eye on their personal and intellectual growth and the other on the fight for a more just world for them to grow up in” (p. 141).

Goodman encourages teachers to have the aptitude to attend to, learn from, and have concern for students, all fundamental components which make transformative teaching so powerful. He synthesizes his ideas into support for teachers by offering a video clip guide which includes general practices and principles to consider before viewing. Also included are Common Core Standards which can be integrated into curriculum, criteria for creating a safer place to express thoughts, ground rules for viewing each clip, previewing prompts, focal points in clips, and post-viewing discussion questions. Additionally, he provides a writing activity, a class/homework assignment, and suggested related topics with guidelines for creating video documentaries.

**Critical Examination**

Goodman’s recurring theme of compassion urges educators in all levels of education to give their students a voice in the classroom. Although his focus is on high school students becoming empowered to make a change in their community, the message on each page is that transformative pedagogy is a change agent. He suggests it is the job of educators to empower students and provide them a context in which they are understood. By combining Lawrence-Lightfoot’s methodology of portraiture and Eisner’s process of educational criticism and connoisseurship, Goodman compels educators to embrace transformative pedagogy to empower students to be champions for their communities.

In an era of high-stakes testing and standardization, it is refreshing to be challenged to examine and understand students’ struggles outside of school and recognize the impact they have on their success in school. Goodman shines a light on how addressing controversial issues which are typically ignored in schools, affords a safe space for students to vent their frustrations which can eventually be used as a spring board for classroom projects. Concerns surrounding immigration and gentrification continue to be volatile issues which are rarely paired with educational struggles. Goodman provides a raw portrayal of systemic inequities in urban neighborhoods which cannot be explained away. Although inequities are daunting for children to face, these highlighted students have challenged the system and encourage others to do the same.

In summary, *It’s Not about Grit: Trauma, Inequity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching* is a startling portrayal of the trauma experienced by youth today, in and out of school. It is a tool that can be used in the classroom for high-school teachers as a means to create a
responsive classroom in which all students are accepted as members of a community of compassionate learners. Goodman challenges teachers to inform their teaching of all subjects by incorporating policy and statistical analysis, as well as newspaper articles published in their area. Most importantly, he encourages all teachers to find compassion for students by being perceptive to the issues which impact their abilities to excel in school.

Kimberly Mahovsky is an Assistant Professor in the School of Teacher Education in the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Northern Colorado. She can be reached at kimberly.mahovsky@unco.edu.