

Commentary

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Teacher’s Work and Teaching Practice: Critical Review of the Film *Beyond the Blackboard*¹

Abstract

Film as a pedagogical tool is used in diverse contexts, perspectives, and objectives. All types of films possess interdisciplinary components and can be used for various educational purposes. This review focuses on an educational film titled *Beyond the Blackboard*, released in 2011, in the context of the United States. The film is a biographical drama adapted from a memoir *Nobody Don’t Love Nobody* published in 1994 by Stacey Bess. I selected this film for review as it sets an example of a teacher’s work, stages of teacher development, and a teacher’s reflection on her teaching. This critical review aims to analyse a teacher’s actions and her development using the concepts, namely “stages of teacher development” by Katz (1977) and “reflection-in-action” by Schön (1983). The review is relevant to the larger teacher community as it portrays how the protagonist, the teacher, learns to work with and teach transient children through her everyday understanding of children and context. The film review concludes by focusing on the teacher and the context of teaching, portraying the teacher as a person whose experiences are largely built on and rooted in her commitment to teaching and her sense of responsibility toward homeless children as a “teacher.”

Keywords: Teacher professional development, teaching practice, critical film review in teacher education

Introduction: Book to Film Adaptation

In 1994, Stacey Bess published a memoir *Nobody Don’t Love Nobody*. The book narrates a detailed experiential journey of Bess, a teacher teaching transient, homeless children in Salt

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Lake City, Northern Utah, in the United States. The book contains elaborative episodes and narrations of individual children's life, their families, everyday stories of Bess teaching and working with homeless children. *Beyond the Blackboard* is a ninety-five-minute film released in 2011. The book as well as the film has global significance because it is based on a true story and represents the challenges and learning of a teacher named Stacey Bess². While deciding to critically review this film, I acknowledge that this book is more in-depth and guides readers to understand multiple realities alongside minute details of the context, children, and the teacher's work. I have selected this film for critical review because I believe that even though many multimedia tools, films and teaching-learning resources are available in contemporary times, very few examples in the media depict how their professional growth could be seen. In my opinion, this film provides the real conditions and challenges of a teacher, their actions, expressions, situations, visuals, everyday interactions, and negotiations as a person. This film sets examples of teacher's work and practice in the broader teacher professional community.

In order to highlight the significance and use of stories and their real-life connections, I want to quote Brummett (1984) who argued that "Stories do not merely pose problems; they suggest ways and means to resolve the problems insofar as they follow discursively a pattern that people might follow in reality" (p. 164). This film opens space for dialogue in teacher education courses about multiple realities of context and children. In the selected film, the way Stacey Bess, the protagonist, develops herself as a teacher shows global and trans-contextual lessons that could be discussed in teacher education courses.

The film review embraces Figueroa's (2008) argument regarding audio-visual analysis, which involves observing a phenomenon by examining the behaviours and interactions of the actors. Also, Figueroa (2008) suggests that audio-visual texts should not be analysed using the typical sequence of coding, like open and axial coding, categorisation, and the generation of code categories. Instead, analysis should begin by viewing the picture as a whole, giving significance to the interconnections and interrelations between its different parts. I endorse the idea that the audio-visual text cannot be seen as a product in itself but looks at "individual

² Stacey Bess is an educator and author from Salt Lake City, Utah, the United States. She has worked with homeless children and their communities. She is a passionate educator who believes in the pedagogy of love, respect, and care.

actors, their behavior, interactions, and strategies” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p. 591). Therefore, for the selected film, I focused on reviewing the protagonist’s behaviour, interactions, methods and reflections while she works with the children. I aim to analyse the actions and development of the teacher, the protagonist, using the lens of the “stages of teacher development” proposed by Katz (1977) and Schön’s (1983) concept of “reflection-in-action” on teacher professional development.

The Story Unfolds

Stacey Bess always loved school and dreamt of becoming a teacher since childhood. She liked the smell of textbooks, writing her name at the top of the page, which made her feel like someone who matters. For her, school was a safe place amid family fights that disrupted her sleep and studies. She married young, juggled family and college to finish her degree, and eagerly sought a teaching job. At sixteen, she had quit education but decided to join a school as a teacher after an eight-year break. The recruiting officer at the school asked if she was ready to teach grades one through six. Bess agreed, and he told her to start teaching from the next day. He said the shelter home school comes under a new programme and is for homeless children. Bess has to reach school at 9 A.M. and report to the substitute teacher. Bess was happy and enthusiastic because she wanted to be a teacher. She prepared weekly lesson plans across subjects, kept notebooks, pencils, pens, paper, cassettes, and even prepared her outfit for her first day of the school. Her kids asked if she was nervous; she said no, she is confident and ready. Her husband gifted her a metal organiser for papers and pens and she happily expressed that this is truly a “teachery” item for her first day of school.

The next day, she navigated muddy roads to the shelter home after women questioned her age and credentials to teach children. Inside the shelter home, she saw a man who warned parents against using drugs or booze, while a baby cried in a corner. Shocked and confused, Bess called the District Education Office, describing the place as like a warehouse and that it is an emergency kind of condition. The substitute teacher showed her the classroom³, explained that there is no principal or counsellor. Bess must handle discipline and head counts. There were “shame names” on the blackboard to discipline children. The substitute teacher

³ In my opinion, the idea of the *classroom* is contextual. For instance, in the case of this film, the *classroom* is a room with minimal structural arrangements in comparison to a well-resourced formal school structure. Here, the term *classroom* is used for a space or a room where Bess teaches the children.

suggested that Bess do the same to discipline the children and if it got too bad, Bess could call the police. Bess asked about books. Then the substitute teacher said, “Just get lunch in their bellies and keep them off the streets.” Stuck there for two weeks herself, the substitute teacher called the place hell and the children like animals. She added that she is a teacher but what she is doing is not teaching but babysitting. Before leaving, the substitute teacher handed over the keys to Bess.

Bess erased the “shame names,” found the children next to the classroom. It was recess time and children were fighting and smoking. She introduced herself, and called them back to class. She shared her family photo album, talked about her summer holidays and family and asked about theirs. One child said she visited her dad in jail. In between the conversations, a loud train passing through the classroom shook everything, and a big rat jumped out, sparking panic in the classroom. Bess caught it with her husband’s “teacherly gift”- the metal paper and pen organiser. She threw the rat out without screaming, and the children were fascinated by Bess because she did not scream. This episode built Bess’s rapport with the children. At day’s end, a child left a “friend” tagged bracelet on her desk.

Bess returned home and was sad. She told her husband she did not want her kids to see her quit. The next day, she called the district officer for desks and books, and decided to give the children a test to know their age and level of knowledge. She requested children to sit properly, and thanked them for listening. One child could not focus on what Bess was saying and Bess got to know that the child was hungry so she shared a granola bar. A mother pulled a girl child for chores; Bess helped the mother understand the importance of schooling for children. The shelter nurse shared the health conditions of the community and explained to Bess the prevalence of flu, hepatitis, tuberculosis, and impolite behaviour everywhere. Bess started reflecting that she might teach through grade six, but she was not trained to teach every grade at the same time without desks, without books, and without support. She felt it was chaos, and what she had thought would be a normal teaching job, with normal children and a normal school, was not the reality.

The next day, she fixed a television for the children and thought of playing something for them. But the television was stolen when Bess was interacting with a parent; a child consoled her, saying that the thief did not care about children or school. Bess kept demanding supplies from the district officers, like desks, books, maps, science materials, but they refused, saying

that she did not have a principal or custodian. Also, without papers and records, by simply calling it a temporary emergency school for transients, they could not release funds or extend facilities. That day, she came back and confessed to her husband that she had always believed that children must feel safe and have a sense of belonging at school, but poverty disgusted and scared her; she realised she was not doing her best with these children.

Reflecting on her responsibilities and role toward the children and the school, she decided to paint and decorate the classroom. The parents understood that Bess was doing all this for their children, even though she was not getting any support or payment for working on Saturdays and Sundays. Slowly, children, parents, and the community joined and supported her. A community member joined to support Bess in drawing and painting and later started working with the children. Similarly, a mother joined the school and started playing music with the children. Bess helped a mother to read, and started homework hours for the children in the television room. Bess shifted her teaching method from what to teach to what children already knew or were experiencing. Her teaching included sessions in which children shared their stories and experiences from the previous week. In the stories, when words like “respectful,” “brave,” and “courageous” emerged from the children’s narratives, Bess explained the nature of these words to them: descriptive words, adjectives, verbs etc.

Taking the shelter home children’s gifts to the superintendent, Bess pleaded: “They have nothing but they have given me this, can we not do something for them?” Then he decided to become her principal/custodian, providing everything. Her husband joined her for summer sports with the homeless children; Bess housed Maria, a homeless child, when her dad left temporarily. Bess conducted an open house event and the children showcased and explained their models to proud parents. Bess shared with the children about her pregnancy and announced her leave, but she promised that she would support the children in getting a good teacher.

With her efforts, homeless or shelter home children later received permission to register in any school with the teacher’s recommendation letter. After a few months of giving birth, Bess joined the shelter home school again, which already had two teachers. So, the number of staff increased. The school continued with transient children, and everyday conditions like the train passing, things being displaced, and the sound of the train did not disturb the children or

the teachers. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was passed in the United States in 1987 to ensure the rights of homeless children to education. In 1988, a new school was built for homeless children in Salt Lake City. Bess continued teaching and was awarded the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service by an Individual Thirty-Five Years or Under.

Conceptual Ideas on Teaching Practice and Teacher Development

The review of the selected film is informed by Katz's (1977) ideas on the "stages of teacher development" and Schön's (1983) concept of "reflection-in-action." These two conceptual ideas are incorporated because the film illustrates the stages of teacher development along with the process of reflecting on and reshaping the teacher's actions and work. Katz, in 1977, focused on the significance of the developmental needs of teachers for their professional growth. Though Katz mentioned four stages of teacher development ("survival," "consolidation," "renewal," and "maturity") long back, these stages remain significant in teacher professional development because they apply not only to the teaching practice of experienced teachers but also to how entry-level or novice teachers experience, reflect on, and reshape their teaching based on informed and interpreted experiences.

Schön (1983) reflected that the teacher's professional knowledge develops within the action, a process he refers to as "reflection-in-action." Schön highlighted the learning of teaching through the interaction between a teacher and their experiences. Schön added that teachers can consciously reflect on what they are doing, and reshape their practice based on their experiences. Munby and Russell (1989) emphasised the significance of Schön's epistemology of practice, describing it as "a new level of discourse about professional practice" (p. 75). Hence, the critical review of the film is done by using the frameworks of the "teacher developmental stages" of Katz (1977) and Schön's (1983) position of "reflection-in-action," as the selected film illustrates the way experience shapes the development of the teacher, or protagonist of the film, Stacey Bess.

Reflections on Stacey Bess's Work and Teaching Practice

On her first day of teaching, Stacey Bess went to the school with her understanding of schools, children, and classrooms based on her past experiences. But reaching the shelter home school made her realise that the situation was different in the context she had entered. By removing "shame names" from the blackboard as her first step towards valuing each

child, the film reveals that she is moving beyond her own prejudices related to children and the teaching context. That night, Bess reflected deeply on poverty and sensed that she was not doing her best for the homeless children. She decided she will do whatever is possible in the given teaching-learning context. She had assumed that she would be teaching in a normal school and classroom with normal children, but her motivation and commitment to teaching compelled her to deconstruct her biases and reshape her teaching in response to the context- “where she was located” and “who the children were.” Her interactions and experiences with children, mothers, and other members, like the shelter nurse and the caretaker, also made her reflect more on her approach to working with children. From the very first day, she valued and listened to children and people at the shelter home. Whenever she asked children to do something, she added “Thank you” with respect and love. Respect, warmth, sensitivity, flexibility, and patience (Essa, 2007) were present in each of her acts in and around teaching. Bess always reflected on her responsibilities while maintaining optimum detachment, along with rationality and impartiality- the required characteristic of a teacher that differentiates teaching from mothering (Katz & Katz, 2009). For instance, in her classroom, children often came without eating food, and she did not overlook this and provided food when needed.

Bess’s teaching is significantly shaped by her everyday experience within the context and her decisions about how to teach. Her engagement with children and decisions about teaching made me reflect on Schön’s (1983) stance on “reflection-in-action.” As Schön suggests, Bess constructs her knowledge based on everyday “spontaneous teaching,” judgments, and dilemmas to enhance her teaching within the specific context. For instance, in one episode, Bess initiated a conversation about children’s families and vacations, subsequently asking the children about their holidays. Upon hearing a story about a child who visited her father in jail, Bess reflected on her question and reshaped her understanding of the children and their context. In later episodes of teaching, she reframed her questions and initiated dialogue based on what was important to the children, such as what they did the previous week. Children’s narratives were used for teaching words, spellings, and parts of speech. In another episode, a child’s experience with a policeman was bad, while another child’s experience with a policeman was good; so, the ways in which children experienced these kinds of situations were given importance by Bess. These episodes show that Bess reflects on her teaching based on her knowledge of learners and everyday actions, and situates her teaching within the given context.

The film shows four stages of teacher development (Katz, 1977): stage one- “survival,” stage two- “consolidation,” stage three- “renewal,” and stage four- “maturity.” When Bess entered teaching, she was in the “survival” stage, contemplating the difficulties in teaching and doubting whether she could survive. Her anxieties arose from discrepancies between classroom realities and anticipated success. She consistently sought on-site support. Later, in the “consolidation” stage, she received on-site assistance from the community and higher officials. Bess was able to survive, and she was ready to solve individual children’s problems and started talking to parents about their situations and problems. In the “renewal” stage, driven by her own commitment, she began using new approaches, ideas, methods, and materials in teaching, with the support of community members such as artists and musicians. Gradually, everyone started liking her as they witnessed her unwavering commitment to the children. Bess as a teacher broadened her scope of learning and relearning in the given context.

While teaching homeless children, Bess reached a comfortable level of confidence and developed her teaching competence through experience which emerged from a nuanced understanding of the context and a love for teaching. Her passion and journey show that Bess has reached a potential fourth stage of “maturity,” as she returned to teaching in the shelter home even after giving birth. The journey of Bess reveals teachers’ everyday efforts and reflection on teaching, setting a true example for understanding teacher’s work, teacher development stages, and reflections on practice- particularly in relation to the needs of education for migrant and transient children.

Concluding Remarks

In my opinion, it is essential to understand teachers and their teaching within the teaching context. I draw on Fullan and Hargreaves (as cited in Pollard & Bourne, 2003), who believe in seeing the teacher as a “person” and add that the teacher must be seen as a “total teacher” in terms of their purposes, their identities as people and their work context (p. 67). Stacey Bess constructed her professional identity as a developing teacher through her changing beliefs, notions, and understanding of context and children. She continued to develop herself and started receiving appreciation and respect from children, families, the community, and authorities, not just as a teacher but as a person. She developed her identity as a teacher by

learning from her own experiences and seeing herself as accountable, optimistic, persevering, self-assured, loving, and caring for children.

This film encouraged me to reflect on the notions around the understanding of “who the teacher is,” “how the classroom looks like,” and “who the children are.” These aspects need to be explored much more in teacher education. Unpacking teaching- learning sites and the multiple center challenges teachers face supports the learning of teachers and researchers by providing various ways to conceptualise diverse teachers, practices, and experiences of teaching in different contexts. In the process of contextualising teaching practices, I believe that the commitment to learning from multiple practitioners, spaces and realities, as well as to challenging what we know and acknowledging biases, is of utmost importance. After acknowledging and challenging these biases, there is a possibility to relearn and reshape teaching practices.

Upon witnessing the commitment to and interest in teaching as shown by Bess in this film, I believe that assessments of teacher qualifications and competence which are based on qualifications, language proficiency, years of experience, and other socially determined parameters are not solely enough. Therefore, during the recruitment of teachers, it is also important to consider what teachers believe they can do or are willing to do and to provide them with an opportunity. A chance given to the “committed” teacher has the potential to positively impact the lives of many children.

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