

Book Review / Compte rendu

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Feeling Obligated: Teaching in Neoliberal Times by Anne M. Phelan & Melanie D. Janzen. University of Toronto Press, 2024, 127 pages, Paperback. ISBN 9781487550868

Feeling Obligated: Teaching in Neoliberal Times by Anne M. Phelan and Melanie D. Janzen profoundly explores teachers' ethical and emotional dilemmas in the neoliberal era. The book critiques how standardization, managerialism, and accountability undermine the autonomy of both teachers and students. Through meticulous analysis and vivid accounts from teachers, the authors advocate for refreshed discussions on teaching as a vocation based on ethics, empathy, and humanity.

Drawing upon narratives gathered from public school teachers in Manitoba and British Columbia between 2015 and 2018, Phelan and Janzen demonstrate how neoliberal policies transform teachers into technicians rather than relational practitioners (p.4). Their study exposes the human toll of these systemic demands while presenting a compelling case for reimagining education. Each chapter illuminates interconnected challenges shaping teachers' ethical and emotional experiences.

PRECARIOUS OTHERS

The authors begin by introducing the term “precarious Others” to describe how education systems marginalize teachers and students. Drawing on Judith Butler's framing theory, they argue that standardization reduces individuals to

fixed categories, stripping away their individuality (p.28). For example, Faye, a teacher profiled in the book, shares her frustration with institutional demands to measure student progress at the expense of addressing specific needs. She remarks, “The district wanted to know where kids are at, but we need to respond to what these kids need and to who they are” (p.33).

Faye's feelings illustrate teachers' ethical dilemmas as they balance institutional demands with their student commitment. It recalls a Chinese story I learned in childhood. When Emperor Hui of Jin (259–307 AD) discovered that his people were starving during a rice famine, he asked, “Why don't they eat meat porridge?” His question reflects that policymakers may make wrong judgments due to a lack of understanding of the actual situation. As the authors indicate, as with Emperor Hui's naivety, sometimes the system might be indifferent to individual needs and disregard teachers' and students' unique challenges. That is why we need to cultivate genuine empathy and responsiveness in education.

ALIENATION AND EXCLUSION

In chapter two, the authors delve into the teacher's obligation to respond to the vulnerable Other, emphasizing its role as an ethical commitment that transcends mere responsibility

(p.47). They argue that experts, relying on rigid frameworks and objective metrics, often reduce children to data points, overlooking their individuality and potential (p.49).

What resonated most with me is their concept of “ethical seeing,” whereby teachers imagine futures for their students beyond the constraints of current systems (p.53). This idea underscores the relational nature of teaching, where the unknown potential of each child requires our curiosity and openness. It serves as a reminder that education is not about predicting outcomes but nurturing possibilities, recognizing that the unpredictability of life shapes each child’s path.

SHAMED AND SHAMING

The authors analyse the impact of shame within educational contexts, highlighting how environments centred on achievement can unintentionally marginalize students. They argue that schools have long prioritized normalization over novelty, cultivating a culture where success is measured by adherence to standardized criteria (p.70). This emphasis on achievement can result in persistent feelings of inadequacy for some students, while those who perform exceptionally may cultivate an exaggerated sense of entitlement (p.59). Honouring students, they suggest, requires a radical shift in perspective, where education values uniqueness and fosters a sense of belonging over rigid metrics of success.

THE HUMAN COSTS AND THE CALL FOR VOCATION

The latter chapters delve into the psychological and emotional toll of teaching within neoliberal systems. Chapter four highlights how teachers’ acts of care are often dismissed as irrational or overly emotional but are shown to be vital sources of strength and sensitivity (p.87). Chapter five redefines teacher frustrations – not merely burnout but existential crises that arise from their deep commitment to students (p.91). The authors argue that balancing the system’s unrelenting demands with their obligations to their students causes teachers to live in a perpetual state of sacrifice. The most impressive metaphor here is that authors describe the “good teacher” as “only ever good enough” (p.101), which

emphasizes the ongoing tension between idealism and the realities of the profession.

The final chapter serves as a call for action, advocating revitalizing teaching as a vocation. The authors encourage educators and policymakers to view teaching as a relational and ethical endeavour rather than a purely functional task (p.118). These chapters collectively remind readers of the emotional labour teachers endure and inspire hope for a more humane educational future.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Feeling Obligated is a thought-provoking and essential read for educators, policymakers, and researchers interested in the ethical dimensions of teaching. The book’s greatest strength is its emphasis on humanizing the teaching profession, highlighting teachers’ work’s emotional and ethical dimensions. Teachers’ narratives offer a vivid picture of the systemic pressures that hinder their ability to build meaningful connections with their students. The discussion of obligation as an ethical commitment rather than a duty adds depth, pushing readers to rethink the purpose of education.

I highly recommend this book to educators, policymakers, and researchers, especially those addressing the dehumanizing effects of standardization. It offers not only a critique of the current system but also an invitation to envision a more empathetic and equitable approach to education. While some questions may remain unanswered, the book sparks an essential dialogue about the significance of obligation and humanity in teaching, a conversation that holds great relevance for the future of education.