

“My father was a boxer” (p.ix)

Rafe Esquith equates teaching with boxing saying that “all teachers get knocked down...the best ones always get up to answer the bell” (p.x). Like a great boxer, Esquith’s fierce battling on behalf of his students is a source of inspiration for both the children in his class and for teachers reading his book. Unfortunately his abrasive personality makes it difficult for him to work effectively with other teaching and administrative colleagues, diminishing the potential impact of his educational message. These issues will be discussed below while assessing the most and least attractive features of Esquith’s model of schooling.

Inspiration

Perhaps the most attractive feature is Esquith’s capacity to inspire students to want to learn and to continue to want to learn after they have graduated from his fifth grade class. Esquith realizes the importance of this when he states that teachers “are there to inspire (children) to reach a higher level.” (p.43). A former student, Kevin, states that it was Esquith’s “kindness and absolute certainty that he was special that had saved him” (p.26). Similar testimonials from former students throughout the book and in various interviews are a tribute to his incredible dedication as a teacher and his ability to inspire children to learn.

His book is similarly moving for teachers. He is a champion for the value and importance of teaching and challenges teachers to improve and to “do the things we do with a sense of excellence” (p.45). He asks them to work harder and to appreciate that their calling is important. Ultimately he asks teachers to understand that “When all is said and done a good teacher helps the student improve the quality of his life” (p.149). His message is clear and provides an inspirational reminder to teachers that they are shepherding a precious flock.

Teamwork

Unfortunately, Esquith has developed a deeply antagonistic relationship with many of his colleagues at his school and in his district. He states that he expected “obstacles to be placed in my way by an apathetic community, an out-of-control bureaucracy, impoverished families and mediocre colleagues” (p.77). It is un-likely that his ‘mediocre colleagues’, after reading his assessment of them, would be particularly open to or appreciative of his inspirational ideas on teaching excellence. He may be inspirational for teachers, but perhaps only at a safe distance.

Ultimately, Esquith is an amazing teacher with incredible will-power and a clear vision to improve the lives of the children he works with. His students and former students love him and his impact on their lives is readily apparent. Unfortunately, the animosity he appears to generate from colleagues does not provide him with the ability to create a real ‘team’ at his school. As a result, while the thirty children in his class may be inspired to achieve greatness, the remaining

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nine hundred children at Hobart Boulevard Elementary School are left un-impacted by his presence. He is alone in the ring, and that's a shame.