

## BOOK REVIEW

# Improving the Odds: Developing Powerful Teaching Practices and a Culture of Learning in Urban High Schools

By Thomas Del Prete, Teachers College Press, 2010, 192 pp.

Review by Shannon H. Andrus, University of Pennsylvania

Thomas Del Prete's book *Improving the Odds: Developing Powerful Teaching Practice and a Culture of Learning in Urban High Schools* provides both an argument for rethinking urban school reform and examples of how it is being done. As chair of the Education Department at Clark University, Del Prete is well-positioned to understand, explore, and explain the ways that Clark partners with three nearby high schools in Worcester, MA, each of which is trying – with various degrees of success – to change the status quo for the students they serve. He uses the three schools as case studies for new possibilities in the face of the challenges that beleaguer most urban districts in this country.

Del Prete provides a history of the schools and the community in which they are located, painting a fairly typical picture of a diverse urban student population struggling with test scores, matriculation in postsecondary education, and other measures of success in public education. He then explores the concept of modern educational reform, arguing that it must be about changing “entrenched expectations, belief systems, and structures as much as teaching practice and the allocation of resources” (p. 7). He believes that educators need to change how they think of possibilities for students and for teaching and to challenge themselves to believe that success is possible for all students. He also addresses the many problems associated with using tests as a measurement of student and school success, and he argues that we need to think about the quality of teachers and teaching in new ways.

In the first chapter of the book, Del Prete provides an agenda for “reframing reform” that is organized around

five areas: institutional culture and practice, teaching quality, educational opportunity and quality, partnerships and networks, and community revitalization. The focus of the book is quality teaching, which he interprets as that which fits the context in which it occurs and is an integral part of a reform that addresses beliefs as much as strategies within a school. He acknowledges that his intention is not to explore all of the signifiers of constructive reform in detail. Instead, he uses examples from the three schools to paint a picture of meaningful reform at the school level, focusing in particular on teachers as they teach and collaborate with colleagues.

He next describes the three high schools highlighted in the book, including the history and current nature of their collaboration with the Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University. The University Park Campus School (UPCS) is closest to meeting the actions Del Prete outlines as necessary for real reform and seems to be having the greatest success. To stress the efficacy of UPCS, Del Prete begins the book by describing three recent graduates of UPCS, all of whom are finding success in college despite many educational and personal hurdles and all of whom attribute their unlikely success to their experience at UPCS. The other two schools are, to some extent, foils of UPCS, proving through their struggles why changes of the type Del Prete advocates are needed.

After the introduction and first framing chapters, the bulk of the book is organized by descriptions of different teachers' classrooms within the three high schools. Del Prete is the director of the Hiatt Center and knows the seven teachers in the book well, many of whom teach and work at the Center

in addition to teaching high school. Several are recent graduates of Clark's education program. He has chosen the seven because they embody the expectations and beliefs about teaching and learning that fit with his model of reframed reform. One of the actions that Del Prete stresses is the necessity for reform of this type to provide structures for supporting collaborative teacher learning. The three schools' partnership with Clark University allows for such a structure, in this case the “Rounds” program. Like medical rounds, teaching Rounds bring together professors, graduate students, and classroom teachers to observe and discuss practice. The classroom teacher who is hosting prepares a Round sheet with questions for the observers to consider while watching the lesson. The group discusses the plans for the class during a pre-Round session then watches the teacher and meets again afterwards to discuss the framing questions and other observations and thoughts that emerged. Del Prete's description of how Rounds work and examples of how teachers are able to collaborate and learn from each other is a particularly useful part of the book.

The seven chapters devoted to teachers each describe a lesson that was part of a Round. Del Prete was in the classroom each time participating in the Round and used the observations as data for the book. He contrasts the classes of new and experienced teachers, as well as lessons that went as planned and those in which the teacher or students struggled. These descriptions of the lessons – and the teachers' actions, intentions, and reflections upon them – are engaging. Though it is difficult to represent the nuance of the myriad actions and reactions that

occur within a class full of high school students, Del Prete does a good job of capturing the essence of what was occurring in each class and the teachers' interpretations and responses to it. Descriptions of actual teachers, students, and classrooms are always helpful in texts about education reform, and Del Prete uses the seven lessons he observed to show what reframed reform can really look like in the classroom, while also touching on the larger contextual factors that need to be in place to truly support such reform.

In addition to providing examples of actual classroom teachers, part of Del Prete's purpose in showcasing and analyzing the classes is to highlight the differences between the three schools, choosing three teachers from UPCS and two each from the other two high schools for that purpose. However, while reading about each of the teachers it is easy to lose track of which teacher belongs with which school, especially since many of the teachers collaborate across schools through their connection with Clark. At times, he mentions ways the high schools other than UPCS have made choices that do not support real reform, but he does not lay out a clear comparison of what the schools are or are not doing in order to be effective. Instead, the reader is left with a sense that there are differences between the schools, but without more than a few concrete examples scattered throughout the text to illustrate those differences.

The general sense of the schools that Del Prete provides is both a strength and a weakness of the book. Teachers and teacher educators will likely be excited and inspired by the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of the teachers showcased in the book. There is much to admire and to replicate. The practice of Rounds has clear benefits for improving teacher practice and collaboration. The attitudes of all involved towards continuous learning through collaboration and reflection is particularly inspiring. Where the book falls short, however, is in providing enough of a behind-the-scenes look at how this reform really functions within a school. Del Prete does not address many questions that may arise in the

minds of readers about how to do this. For instance, while there are clearly a great number of students who are benefiting from the reform practices of UPCS, there is no in depth explanation of how the school grapples with ongoing difficulties such as student mobility or literacy remediation. And though Del Prete begins and ends the book with vignettes about the academic lives and successes of three UPCS students, student voices and experiences are absent from the bulk of the book. The inclusion of their experiences and further exploration into the ways that the schools affected them would add an important additional dimension to the book. There is also almost no discussion or inclusion of administrators, whose viewpoints on the realities of instituting change would have been helpful. While Del Prete might argue that this is a book about teaching and teachers, including the perspectives of others involved would have provided an additional way to understand how this type of reform can really happen.

These omissions can be overlooked, however, because the book is not intended to be a step-by-step manual, nor does it claim to have solved every problem in urban schools. In fact, two of the three schools are struggling to implement many of the actions of reform that Del Prete advocates, but that does not stop committed and connected teachers from doing inspiring work. Yet, there is one area that Del Prete does not acknowledge enough and that truly limits the applicability of these examples to other struggling schools: the unique and crucial relationship the schools, especially UPCS, have with Clark University. The relationship appears to be the key factor making the reform, and subsequent success of students, possible. Clark students intern at the schools and often later take jobs as teachers there. Clark professors and students appear to be in constant collaboration with teachers and the time and energy for conducting Rounds are clearly available due to the connection with a university. The high school students are even required to either take or audit a course on Clark's campus during their senior year, which is pos-

sible due to the metaphorical and actual proximity of the schools. While the success of UPCS and the progress of the other two schools are compelling arguments for the importance and potential of school/university partnerships, it would not be possible for every urban school in the country to form such a partnership. Given that reality, the book would have been well served by more of an acknowledgment of that limitation and more concrete advice on how to begin to embrace this type of reform in the absence of such a connection.

Overall, *Improving the Odds* provides a well-written and appealing glimpse into classrooms that represent an alternative understanding of what reform could mean for today's struggling urban schools. The theories and habits of mind that Del Prete advocates are a welcome respite from a focus on test scores and narrow understandings of teacher quality. Even more importantly, Del Prete shows this reform in action and makes it clear how it can have a real effect on students' lives. And while most teachers and schools may not be able to immediately create this type of reform, this book will provide ways to name the types of changes that schools do need to make and perhaps the motivation to start working in at least small ways towards them.

**Shannon Andrus** is currently an advanced doctoral student at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. She is also a senior research associate at the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives. She is currently researching teachers' experiences in single-sex urban public schools and is also interested in teacher education and issues related to gender and education more broadly. Prior to studying at GSE, Shannon was a high school English teacher.

## REFERENCES

- Del Prete, T. (2010). *Improving the odds: Developing powerful teaching practice and a culture of learning in urban high schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.