

BOOK REVIEW

Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers: the Michaela Way (2016).

Edited by Katharine Birbalsingh

Reviewed by Raphael Wilkins*

I used to say that we have had schools for 3000 years. Then I worked with a group of Iraqis who set me straight: ‘We were teaching literacy 7000 years ago!’, they insisted. The concept of ‘schoolroom’ has sat alongside ‘home’, ‘shop’, and ‘place of worship’ in every age, culture and environment. Opinions about what and how to teach the young have been just as diverse. Headteachers plough distinctive furrows: from Rugby to Summerhill; from Gordonstoun to Dartington. On the great graffiti wall of educational experiment, Birbalsingh does not need anyone’s permission to spray her tag.

This piece is a book review, not an evaluation of a school. An important distinction, when the book is a celebration of the unusual approach taken by one particular school: Michaela Community School, an 11–18 free school in Wembley. That is an established genre: schools produce books about themselves, sometimes to mark an anniversary. They are feel-good productions: one wouldn’t expect them to show any dirty linen. This particular book’s multiple authors (we are not told much about them) present an apologia for Michaela’s distinctive pedagogy. So it is positioned writing, of course, but not polemic. The justifications for the school’s approaches are densely argued, and many authorities cited, although the bibliography is missing.

The examples of its practice show that a lot of detailed planning, organisation and management is going on. The overall tone of the book is a mixture of exultant yet defiant, defensive yet confident of ultimate vindication. A book written under siege, a testimony to courageous struggle: the reader picks up pretty quickly that it hasn’t been plain sailing to bring this distinctive vision for a school to its current stage of development.

The book has four main parts: the first concerns pedagogy, the second pastoral care, the third staff development, and the fourth is feedback. The distinctive pedagogic features are a knowledge based curriculum delivered through drill and didactic teaching, with no marking of students’ work, in place of which are various forms of testing. The students are immersed in an impressive amount of serious literature.

* Raphael Wilkins was formerly President of the College of Teachers UK and one of the Pro Directors of the Institute of Education, University of London

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Pastorally the school applies 'no excuses' discipline, which it contrasts to the zero tolerance regimes of some US schools. The induction of Year 7 students (and new staff) takes the form of a seven day 'boot camp', supported by the whole staff while the rest of the students are on holiday, to provide a thorough immersion into school culture and routines. Discipline is reinforced by uniformity of staff expectations and behaviour. Family lunch arrangements teach manners and polite conversation.

Like many great educators of the past, and many good teachers worldwide today, 30% of the teachers at Michaela do not have QTS. The book explains the structures and processes which enable them to succeed.

The book gives the impression that Michaela was born from a perception that things were badly broken, and that something radically different was needed to fix them. So perhaps the right comparators are other responses to desperate need, like the schools run by The Citizens Foundation in Pakistan, or the village education system of the Peace Community set up in northern Colombia in 1997, which both in different ways helped learning to thrive in adverse circumstances. Like a yachtsperson facing head wind Birbalsingh has tacked hard to the right, but her school is far from sinking. A globally significant pioneer to be judged by outcomes, not orthodoxies.