



Book title: The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Teachers- The Michaela Way

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The review

1. What is your overall impression of the book?

This book isn't really a singular piece of research/ writing, more so, a collection of essays and short pieces of writings, written by the teachers at the Michaela free school in London. Each essay is well written and accessible and as such, this enables the book to cover a wide range of topics, from the futility of marking to teacher training the Michaela way.

Michaela is, what can only be described, as a revolutionary school, and potentially one of the most exciting things happening in British education today. Touted in the media as "Britain's strictest school", it has made headlines from the silent corridors, to lunchtime exclusions for students whose parents won't pay for school lunch.

Whilst these policies certainly make for interesting headlines, they do not tell both sides of the Michaela story, a feat attempted in this book. Whilst this book can sometimes come across as very one-sided (naturally so, bearing in mind who has written it), the ideas contained within its pages are well explained and show quite a lot of common sense.

2. Who do you think would benefit most from reading the book? What will they learn?

I would encourage every teacher to read this book, whether new to the profession or far more experienced- even if you do not agree with the philosophies employed at the school- the way the ideas are presented will certainly challenge preconceived notions.

I think that Senior management in schools could take on board the ideas behind preventing teacher burnout through reduced marking, and the ideas presented in the chapter “No nonsense, no burnout”

3. What did you think about the quality of the writing? Please consider the tone, structure and ideas. Does it suit the audience?

As mentioned above, this book is a collection of essays and short pieces of writing, therefore there is no overarching narrative, other than the passion shown for Michaela, by its staff. As such, one would think that this could detract from the ease of its reading. However, I found the topics on hand and the passion shown by the staff to be so engaging, I read it in one sitting!

The book opens with a passionate eulogy for the school by its headmistress Katherine Birbalsingh, who gained “infamy”, when, as a deputy head at a state comprehensive she gave a speech at a conservative party conference, outlining all of the issues that she felt existed in the state education system today. Following the fallout from this Birbalsingh went away and formed the concept and the plan that eventually became Michaela free school.

Therefore, it is understandable that Birbalsingh would show passion and fanaticism for her creation, however for this same zeal and fanaticism to be shown in all of the chapters, including those on homework, teacher training and what they are afraid of kept the book engaging.

4. Please discuss the research used to underpin the ideas. What evidence does the author use? Is it robust and up-to-date?

As solely teachers at Michaela are the writers of the book, the experiences are first hand ones. This gives the advantage of it being purely primary accounts, along with the justification and rationale behind some of their more extreme policies.

However, this can lead to the book being very preachy and dogmatic in places. Not only does the book imply throughout that everyone else is wrong, in places it outright states it. Therefore the bias must be taken into account whilst reading it.

5. What did you learn from reading the book? What ideas/approaches/practice will you change or adopt as a result of reading this book?

Reading this book has enable me to get an insight into a different style of school and way of doing things.

The biggest thing that I have taken away from reading this book is an introduction to the concept of didactic teaching, which makes a lot of sense to me. The notion that the teacher knows more than a student should not be a revolutionary one. Meaning that instead of having the students discover key ideas by themselves, the teacher should instead instruct them on it. This makes sense, after all, it took a genius like Newton to discover the laws of motion, how can little Johnny discover it by himself, no matter how carefully crafted the tasks are.

This combined with Michaela's approach to drilling specific skills has changed the approach that I have taken to my lessons. Keeping the format the same from lesson to lesson, with instruction, followed by focussed practice so that students get used the expectations and routines and make progress.

This leads into my second major takeaway from the book, and that is the importance of consistently enforcing whole school policy. When a school introduces and consistently applies a policy- be it homework, no talking in the corridor or improving the standards of uniform- it takes a whole school approach, with all members of staff engaging to make a difference. Short term this has meant that I have stuck more closely to the school policy, which has helped with pupil relationships, as they know what to expect with me. Longer term, this is something to bear in mind if I ever move into SLT.

Finally, the book has underlined the importance of useful homework for students- ensuring that it is consistently applied and is useful for students allows for it to aid in the progression of students, in addition to providing an effective revision strategy.

6. Could you share a quote from the book that particularly resonated with you?

The injustice of state education should be a national outrage; it should be the civil rights issue of our generation. Why can't every kid achieve what private school kids achieve?

What are we afraid of? Jo Facer