

# Teach on Purpose! Responsive Teaching for Student Success

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reviewed by [Carrie E. Rood](#) — February 20, 2017

**Title:** Teach on Purpose! Responsive Teaching for Student Success

**Author(s):** Leslie David Burns & Stergios G. Botzakis

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*Teach on Purpose! Responsive Teaching for Student Success*, written by Leslie David Burns and Stergios G. Botzakis, is an impassioned argument for the importance of using responsive teaching within today's and tomorrow's K–12 schools. The authors and their guest teacher-authors provide a straightforward rationale that explains why teaching purposefully and responsively is not just an option, but fundamental to teaching well. They collectively do this in a way that is relevant, practical, timely, and sometimes even humorous.

The book begins with a rationale explaining why responsive teaching is vital. It uses the common reality of efficiency models that have overwhelmingly dominated educational reform as a counterpoint to the true purpose of teaching. Burns and Botzakis affirm that,

[i]n the face of the ever-increasing pressure to meet standards, ensure students score at “proficient” levels on standardized tests, and supposedly prepare children for college and work, our profession has lost much of what made it important in the first place. In the national quest to make sure teaching is *effective*, we lost the capacity to make our teaching matter beyond school. (pp. 9–10, emphasis in original)

They further assert that the constantly increasing pressure on teachers and students to perform within such limited measures has led many educators to rely on teaching as *triage* (Greene, 2014). As a result, there is little purpose behind lessons beyond trying to make it through the prescribed content. Instead, the authors propose that when educators teach with a sense of intention, they will be able to increase student motivation, persistence, and achievement. The authors structure their argument for teaching on purpose within Dewey's constructivist framework. The book reflects on the well-established understanding that for education to be effective and successful for students, teachers must find ways to make content relatable to their learners' prior knowledge and experiences (Dewey, 1938). The authors contend that by teaching with intention, authenticity, and relevance, educators can engage all students while still meeting or even exceeding standards. This is accomplished through one core focus of the text. Specifically, this is the *what* and *how* of teaching on purpose. It can also be called using students' *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). The authors describe how using students' identities, interests, backgrounds, and experiences within the planning and designing of instruction are crucial. This type of teaching helps support, engage, and motivate students since it establishes relevance beyond the classroom and schooling. The authors continually remind the reader that teaching purposefully means using these funds of knowledge as “the foundation of instructional planning helps teachers identify, design, and frame explicit learning goals that are keys to increasing engaged learning. It also shows teachers' respect for students and their lives” (p. 43). Throughout the rest of the text, their focus remains on students as central to intentional teaching.

The volume continues with a number of chapters by Burns and Botzakis on various topics. These include research on motivation and engagement within classrooms (Chapter Three); practical considerations for capitalizing and integrating students' funds of knowledge (Chapter Four); designing lesson plans and units with purpose in mind (Chapter Six); integrating higher level thinking and applied questions to support purposeful teaching (e.g., *sincere questions*) (Chapter Eight); and employing varied forms of old and new media to maintain relevancy and engage students with purpose (Chapter Ten). Interspersed throughout these chapters are practical experiential unit plans and lessons that walk readers through purposeful teaching in action. Both former and current K–12 educators wrote these unit plans and lessons. Their examples provide various models of teaching with a purpose, both in content and application of this concept. Each example provides readers with a clear application of many of the underlying concepts that Burns and Botzakis believe are central to teaching. As a reader, I appreciate the teachers' genuine discussion of their process for making decisions and their rationale in practicing responsive teaching.

The authors take the time to reflect on the current landscape of education and its impacts on today's teachers. The complexity of teaching is illustrated by clear explanations and the profession is not romanticized. Further, the interspersing of personal anecdotes from their teaching within K–12 and higher education environments provides an honest, and sometimes humorous, reflection on their practice. This includes the constant evolution and hard work that it takes to teach with intention. Finally, the book is genuine, straightforward, and easy to read.

Despite these positive elements, I have a few critiques of this volume. There are two areas that I think should have been given further attention within the text. First, although Burns and Botzakis briefly mention the need to differentiate within Chapter Seven, they do little to further recognize its use outside of assisting students who have varied abilities. Differentiation should be seen as central to responsive and purposeful teaching beyond only those students who are identified with disabilities. Second, the authors' focus on funds of knowledge is essential to, and provides a clear mechanism for, understanding students' backgrounds, experiences, and differences. However, the authors' discussion does little to recognize the complexity of student identities. Instead, it often compounds difference and diversity into the blanket term *marginalized groups* throughout the text. Fortunately, the book provides a helpful discussion on how funds of knowledge could potentially be used to lead to more nuanced understanding.

Although standardization and accountability often still dominate what educators are asked to teach in K–12 classrooms, *Teach on Purpose!* offers a breath of fresh air for counteracting prescriptive approaches in instruction. It also inspires invigorating (or re-invigorating!) teaching as a reflective practice that is inquiry-based and centered on students. The ideas presented by Burns and Botzakis are not new, as many of the concepts should be familiar to teachers and teacher educators alike. However, it provides a timely and thoughtful discussion on why teaching purposefully is of vital importance. The authors focus on purposeful teaching as being responsive to students by placing *their worlds* at the center of the planning process. This decision is well-founded and a helpful reminder to new and continuing educators.

## References

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