

## Book review

# Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It To Everyone)

Reviewed by Dave Lehman, Connections Executive Editor

### *Building a Better Teacher*

by Elizabeth Green

New York:

W.W. Norton & Company, 2014

*Building A Better Teacher* was recommended to me by a colleague who uses the book in his introductory undergraduate course for teacher education candidates. The book also has a subtitle, “How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It To Everyone).” This may lead the reader to believe that the book will tell one how to become a teacher, and not just an “A” teacher, but an “A+” teacher. (The “A+” is encircled and in red, like a grade on a student paper.)

Initially, I found the book interesting, and a helpful overview of many of the most recent efforts to improve teaching and to develop methods and programs to train classroom teachers. But readers may initially be disappointed that it does not seem to live up to its title and subtitles. An undergraduate interested in becoming an elementary or secondary school teacher, hoping to learn how actually to teach will be disappointed.

But then again, for anyone who teaches, or who has tried to teach, that is perhaps an unrealistic expectation. Teaching, as the author indicates, is a complex and difficult profession. Yes, there are “skills” involved which can be described to a neophyte, and even shown in a videotape of a teacher with a classroom of students. But, like other professions, it is largely learned by doing. As Millard Fuller, Founder of Habitat for Humanity once said, “It is generally easier to get people to act their way into a new way of thinking than it is to

get them to think their way into a new way of acting.” Learning to teach involves more than knowledge about what is involved in teaching. As in learning how to play a sport, at some

Spartan Village Elementary School in East Lansing, Michigan. (This was a lab school of the University that closed in 2003 due to state budget cuts to education, and now houses a post office, community police office, and other administrative offices).

Elizabeth Green also draws on videotapes of Lampert’s teaching as well as material from Lampert’s book, *Teaching Problems and the Problems of Teaching* (Yale University Press, 2001), about teaching mathematics. This excerpt from Green’s book demonstrates Lampert’s approach of developing generalities about teaching by zeroing-in on a single subject in depth:

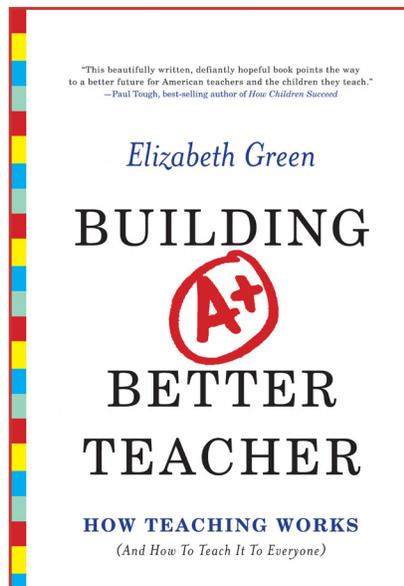
*“[Students have] been working on a math problem you wrote on the chalkboard while they were out at recess.*

*Condition: A car is going 55 mph. Make a diagram to show where it will be*

- A. after an hour
- B. after 2 hours
- C. after half an hour
- D. after 15 minutes

*Consider how to get everyone to quiet down. Next to you, on a table, is a small bell. Do you ring it? Perhaps you should raise one hand and put the other hand over your mouth. Or what about that old line? When my hand goes up, your mouths go shut. You go for the bell. Thankfully, it works, and you launch a discussion.*

*Soon, fifteen minutes have passed, and class is almost over. So far, the students have worked on the problem in small groups of four to six. You have circulated around, peer-*



point you have to actually get out on the court and shoot the basketball at the basket! Then you must do it again, and again, and again, until you develop at least the beginning skill of a basketball player.

There are some great examples of truly effective teaching in this book, particularly in the prologue, “How to Be A Teacher (Part One), chapter 2, “A Teacher is Born,” and the epilogue, “How To Be A Teacher (Part Two).” In those first two chapters the author draws on several interviews between with Magdalene Lampert, then a Professor at Michigan State University.

During the 1989-90 school year, Professor Lampert taught the standard, district-mandated, mathematics curriculum to a fifth grade class (children ten and eleven years old) at the

ing over shoulders at their varying degrees of success, deciding when to talk and when to not and when to hold in a laugh.... All of you, together, have reasoned your way through A, B, and C.

On the chalkboard, you've drawn a straight horizontal line, with distance represented on top and time underneath.....

Point to the board. Ask: Can anyone show where the solution to part D should go on the diagram?

Hands shoot up. Then, right in front of you, Richard adds his. You know enough about the others to have an idea of how they understand 'rate,' or at least an idea of what they will be able to do with the problem. Richard, though is something of a mystery.... Now he's volunteering to answer the most difficult part of the question - and you have no idea what he'll say.

What do you do?

Look at the clock; only 10 minutes left. Do you have time to risk a wrong answer? What about Richard. What if he isn't even close? If he's wrong, will he, an African American boy in a racially diverse classroom, shut down and hesitate to participate again? On the other hand, what message does it send to the others not to call on him?

'Richard,' you say. He stands up, turning his notebook so he can see it from the board, and walks slowly to the front. Everyone waits, silent....."

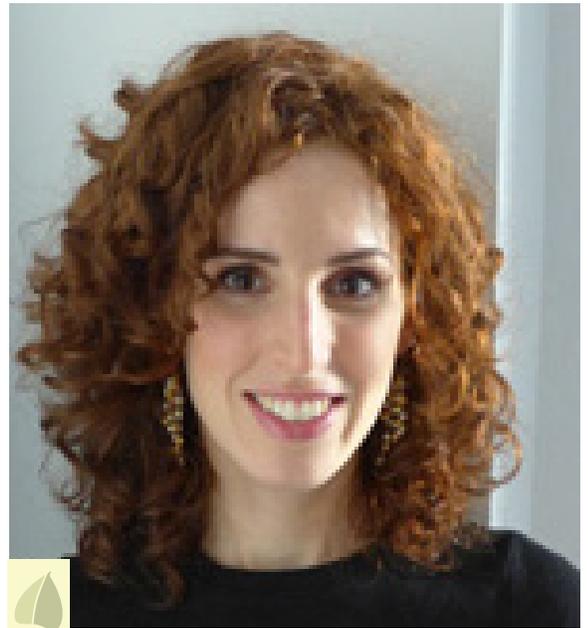
Several things are happening simultaneously in this excerpt from Magdalene Lampert's mathematics class with her fifth graders. She is thinking and rethinking her teaching strategies in the moment; asking herself questions about how to respond next, how to modify

the activity, how to include all students in the work, how to make the work rigorous and relevant while continuing to build her relationships with each individual student and the class as a whole, etc., etc. This is why it is so difficult to give teachers a simple set of things to master in order to be a successful teacher: context matters.

In this book Elizabeth Green (cofounder, CEO, and editor-in-chief of "Chalkbeat," a nonprofit education news organization) provides an overview of a number of different efforts to improve teacher education. Working on the book over five years, Green visited schools, interviewed educators, and analyzed the research. She includes "Teach for America," Doug Lemov's "Teach Like a Champion," the KIPP schools, No Child Left Behind, the Race to the Top, Common Core Standards, and others, noting not only their successes but their failures and disappointing results as well.

I found Chapter 4, "Knead and Rise," particularly insightful. It's about the dramatic reforms in Japanese schools which actually were based on three American sources: John Dewey's progressive education ideas; George Polya, a Stanford mathematician whose writing about problem solving had influenced Magdalene Lampert; and "NCTM," the mathematics standards produced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Referring to a study done comparing American, German, and Japanese approaches to teaching elementary mathematics, Green summarizes the



Elizabeth Green

key differences:

"Japanese math teachers led class with a different pace, structure, and tone than did other countries' teachers [Germany and the US]. Instead of a series of problems, the teacher used just one, and instead of leading students through procedures, they let students do much more talking and thinking.... The American and Japanese scripts were the most different from each other....some American teachers called their pattern 'I, We, You': after checking homework, teachers announced the day's topic, demonstrating a new procedure: 'Today we're going to talk about dividing a two-digit number by a one-digit number' (I). Then they led the class in trying out a sample problem together: 'Let's try out the steps for 24 divided by 6.' (We). Finally, they let students work through similar problems on their own, usually by silently making their way through a worksheet: 'Keep your eyes on your own paper. If you have a question, raise your hand.' (You)

"The Japanese teachers meanwhile, turned 'I, We, You' inside out. You might call their version 'You, Y'all, We.' They began with an introduction, but a single problem [like Magdalene Lampert] that students spent ten or twenty minutes working through alone: 'Come up with as many



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solutions as you can.’ (You). While the students worked, the teacher wove through the students’ desks, studying what they came up with and taking notes to remember who had which idea. Sometimes the teacher then deployed the students to discuss the problem in small groups (Y’all). Next, the teacher brought them back to the whole group, asking students to present their different ideas for how to solve the problem on the chalkboard. Give the answer and the reason for your answer. Finally, the teacher led a discussion, guiding students to a shared conclusion: ‘What did you learn from today’s problem, or what new questions do you have, if any?’ (We)

“Americans asked a lot of simple questions and sought quick answers. ‘1 - 4: What does it equal?’ Japanese teachers, working at the slower pace provided by a single focused problem, used questions not simply to understand whether the child had the right answer, but to peek into her mind,

**“Mathematicians need to understand a problem only for themselves; math teachers need both to know the math and to know how 30 different minds might understand (or misunderstand) it. Then they need to take each mind from not getting it to mastery. And they need to do this in 45 minutes or less.” —Elizabeth Green**

discerning what she understood and what she didn’t: Who had the same thinking? Anything to add to this way of thinking? Did anybody else use another way?”

Additionally—of particular interest to those of us involved with NSRF and CFG work—the Japanese teachers regularly and consistently observed

each others’ classrooms (but by standing quietly in the back of the room to avoid disrupting the teacher whom they were observing). They regularly and consistently discussed the lessons after such observations and studied the curriculum materials with their colleagues, fine-tuning their teaching.

In the epilogue, Elizabeth Green ends **Building A Better Teacher** with her own effort to teach several sections of a high school social studies class of a teacher friend at the School of the Future in New York City. [It is interesting, particularly given her critique of the misuse of standardized tests, that Green doesn’t mention that the School of the Future is a member of the “New York Performance Standards Consortium” which uses performance-based assessments, portfolios, and demonstrations in assessing student learning.]

Green discovers for herself how hard it is to plan even one lesson for one day that will have rigor, be relevant, and be effective; how learning doesn’t happen in sixty-minute periods, but over weeks and months; how a teacher needs to know her students well, building caring relationships with each of them. And she ends her book with these words: “No amount of reading and watching and interviewing could substitute for real practice working with students.”

So you won’t necessarily take away from reading her book that you’ll need to master Doug Lemov’s list of 62 “techniques that put students on the path to college,” or start using the 19 “high-leverage practices” of Deborah Ball. However, you may gain some new insight into just how complex teaching truly is, with a renewed appreciation of not only the craft and skill involved, but the deep thinking and caring inherent in our profession, as well as the essentiality of a supportive, critically thinking group of colleagues meeting regularly to work on being “A Better Teacher.”

## REVIEWS AND TESTIMONIALS from other sources:

“Great education is the foundation of a flourishing society, and it depends on great teachers. *Building a Better Teacher* illuminates how we can develop gifted educators who prepare children for a brighter future. With strong evidence and compelling cases, Elizabeth Green has written an important book that every educator ought to read.” — Adam Grant, Wharton professor and best-selling author of *Give and Take*

“Elizabeth Green draws upon years of interviews and research as an education writer and CEO of Chalkbeat to make the case for why teaching is a craft and that it can be taught to anyone. Her excellent book should be read for a detailed account of the history of teacher education, an international context, and an entertaining narrative.” — Jonathan Wai, *Psychology Today*

“At the heart of Green’s exploration is a powerfully simple idea: that teaching is not some mystical talent but a set of best practices that can be codified and learned through extensive hands-on coaching, self-scrutiny, and collaboration.” — Sara Mosle, *The Atlantic*

“Everyone who cares about teaching should read [Building a Better Teacher]. Right away.” — Judith Shulevitz

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