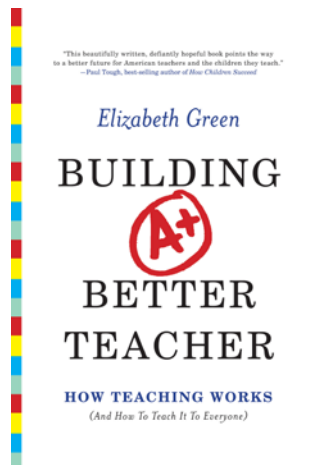


Book Review



Building A+ Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach it to Everyone). Elizabeth Green. 2014. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company. 372 pp. Hardcover. ISBN-13: 978-0-393-08159-6. US\$27.95.

Reviewed by

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Inhabiting a troubled educational landscape, today's P-12 teachers and teacher educators face increased demands for accountability, seemingly unending student assessment, and efforts to establish *value added* matrices to link individual teacher performance and student achievement. As the rank of the United States falls in relation to other developed nations on international assessments, such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the demand for highly qualified and highly effective educators, regardless of the absence of a consistent definition of those terms, has escalated to a near-fever pitch.

In *Building A+ Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach it to Everyone)*, Elizabeth Green attempts to identify those factors that define an effective teacher. To do so, she begins by tackling the concept that teachers are *born, not made*. Statement such as *she's a born teacher* or *he just has a gift for teaching* permeate conversations about education, and once the *teachers are born* fantasy is accepted as at least partially, if not completely, true, it precludes the concept that there are skills associated with effective teaching, skills that can be taught. Accepting the *born teacher* fantasy renders teacher education programs irrelevant and prohibits efforts to identify and teach specific skills. To interrogate and also push against the notion that good teachers are born with particular personality traits and mindsets that predispose them to become effective educators, Green provides an overview of the work of notable figures in modern education (e.g., Nate Gage, William James, Edward Thorndike, Lee Shulman, James Wilson, Eric Hanushek) whose theories shaped the philosophies and practices of many of today's U.S. teachers and teacher educators.

Green further counters the natural born teacher myth by focusing on the work of two well regarded, highly experienced educators: Magdalene Lampert, Professor

Emeritus at the University of Michigan and Senior Advisor of the Boston Teacher Residency Program, and Deborah Ball, the University of Michigan's Dean of the School of Education. Both educators began their careers as classroom teachers focused on helping children develop their own understandings of mathematical concepts, and they have continued to provide the world of teacher education, in its various instantiations, with replicable ways to provide opportunities for children to become thoughtful, resourceful, and productive students.

Green's skills as an educational journalist shine as she explores the moves that Lampert and Ball appear to effortlessly enact in their interactions with children. In recounting classroom conversations between children and either Lampert or Ball, Green describes models of the kinds of interactions that illuminate the craft of teaching. As Green provides snapshots of these interactions, two powerful themes recur: first, effective teaching is comprised of skills that can be taught, and second, effective teaching is extremely difficult and demands that educators master a complex *mélange* of pedagogical knowledge and content skills that allow them to skillfully respond to in-the-moment decisions on how to effectively position children to create their own understandings of mathematical concepts. Being able to help students recognize and voice accurate concepts requires teachers to intuit student thinking, to know which questions have the greatest chance to encourage students to follow productive pathways, and to recognize how and why students are most likely to make missteps.

In questioning how U.S. educators might learn effective teaching skills, Green turns to Japanese Lesson Study, or *jugyokenkyu*. Educators in Japan routinely visit each other's classes to observe the teaching of particular lessons. Following the observation, the teachers discuss the facets of the lesson, the responses of the students, the strategies which seemed to be especially effective, changes that might enhance the strategies, and how those strategies may be replicated in other classes. Thus, these observations and discussion sessions provide regular opportunities for colleagues to make visible and share their craft of teaching through regular opportunities for local professional development. Such opportunities rarely occur in American schools where, in contrast, professional development often consists of visits from outside consultants who present workshops showcasing materials developed outside the local school. Even in locally enacted professional learning communities, in which groups of educators from a particular school or county come together to discuss and study concepts or topics of interest, participants rarely observe each other teaching and meet to discuss their observations. Consequently, the notion of *lesson study* is rarely enacted.

In the second half of her book, Green strays from her central focus, the enactment of effective academic skills, and turns her attention to classroom and school-wide discipline. While the nearly 100 pages devoted to the topic offer a cautionary tale about confusing discipline with academic rigor and student engagement, the side trip is distracting and threatens to disrupt the power of her earlier chapters on effective skill-based teaching.

When Green returns to her discussion on effective instruction, she considers the impact of new and emerging elements that now inhabit the U.S. education system: Common Core standards, new research on teacher education, and the impact of a growing presence and variety of charter schools. She leaves her readers with questions that demand to be answered. If the skills of highly effective teachers can be studied, identified, and defined, then why aren't educational researchers examining them? If the skills can be taught, then why aren't teacher educators teaching them to teacher candidates? In her book, Green builds a case that it is difficult to identify, replicate, and teach the moves and ways of thinking that Lampert and Ball enact so well, but she also asserts that their moves are highly effective and that students desperately need teachers who possess those skills. The notion that great teachers can stimulate extraordinary learning gains is not hyperbole. It is a reality that comes when educators master the *complex craft* of effective teaching. Green challenges her readers to consider the impact such teachers might have on our children and, therefore, on our nation.

About the Reviewer



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