

## Teaching Teaching

I'm starting to wonder if we've entered some kind of golden age of books about education. First came Paul Tough's book, "[How Children Succeed](#)," about the importance of developing noncognitive skills in students. It was published in September 2012. Then came "[The Smartest Kids in the World](#)," by Amanda Ripley, which tackled the question of what other countries were getting right in the classroom that America was getting wrong. Her book came out just about a year ago.

And now comes Elizabeth Green's "Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It to Everyone)," which will be published next week, and [which was excerpted in The New York Times Magazine over the weekend](#). The first two books made the New York Times best-seller list. My guess is that Green's book will, too. It certainly ought to.

Over the past few decades — with the rise of charter school movement and No Child Left Behind — reformers and teachers' unions have been fighting over how to improve student performance in the classroom. The reformers' solution, notes Green, is accountability. The unions' solution is autonomy. "Where accountability proponents call for extensive student testing and frequent on-the-job evaluations, autonomy supporters say that teachers are professionals and should be treated accordingly," Green writes. In both schemes, the teachers are basically left alone in the classroom to figure it out on their own.

In America, that's how it's always been done. An inexperienced teacher stands in front of a class on the first day on the job and stumbles his or her way to eventual success. Even in the best-case scenario, students are being shortchanged by rookie teachers who are learning on the job. In the worst-case scenario, a mediocre (or worse) teacher never figures out what's required to bring learning alive.

Green's book is about a more recent effort, spearheaded by a small handful of teaching revolutionaries, to improve the teaching of teaching. The common belief, held even by many people in the profession, that the best teachers are "natural-born" is wrong, she writes. The common characteristic of her main characters is that they have broken down teaching into certain key skills, which can be taught.

"You don't need to be a genius," Green told me recently. "You have to know how to manage a discussion. You have to know which problems are the ones most likely to get the lessons across. You have to understand how students make mistakes — how they think — so you can respond to that." Are these skills easier for some people than others? Of course they are. But they can be taught, even to people who don't instinctively know how to do these things.

One of Green's central characters is a woman named Deborah Loewenberg Ball, who began her career as an elementary school teacher and is now [the dean of the University of Michigan's School of Education](#). "Watching Deborah teach is like listening to chamber

music,” Green quotes an admirer. But she didn’t start out that way. She struggled as a young teacher, and, as she became a better teacher, she began to codify, in her own mind at first, the practices that made her successful. And she asked herself, “Why hadn’t she learned any of this before?”

Green has a chapter about why schools of education value things other than the actual teaching of teachers. But the University of Michigan under Ball is one place that is trying to reverse that trend, not just at Michigan but across the country. Ball is pushing the idea that teachers should be prepared to teach — that they should have the tools and the skills — when they walk into that classroom on the first day on the job. That is rarely the case right now.

“We need to shift teaching to be like other fields where you have to demonstrate proficiency before you get a license,” Ball told me not long ago. “People who cut hair and fly airplanes get training that teachers don’t get.”

One thing that Ball and Green both stress is the importance of scale. I’ve also come to see the ability to scale successful programs as the single biggest issue facing public education. It is great that there are charter schools that give a small percentage of public schoolchildren a chance for a good education — and a good life. And it’s all well and good that Michigan graduates maybe 100 or so teachers a year who genuinely know how to teach by the time they get out of school.

But these small-scale successes won’t ultimately matter much unless they are embraced by the country at large. You can’t teach every kid in a charter school. And schools of education need to change their priorities. Learning on the job just shouldn’t cut it anymore.

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