

The New School

Two books assess the state of public education and the realities facing instructors today.

By SEBASTIAN STOCKMAN

"EDUCATION IS NOT the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." The greeting-card plithiness of this maxim obscures what is in fact a useful metaphor, and in "Building a Better Teacher," Elizabeth Green introduces us to educators who stick to their kindling. Her project is both a history of the research on effective teaching as well as a consideration of how that research

BUILDING A BETTER TEACHER
How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It to Everyone)

By Elizabeth Green
372 pp., W. W. Norton & Company, \$27.95.

GETTING SCHOOLED
The Reeducation of an American Teacher

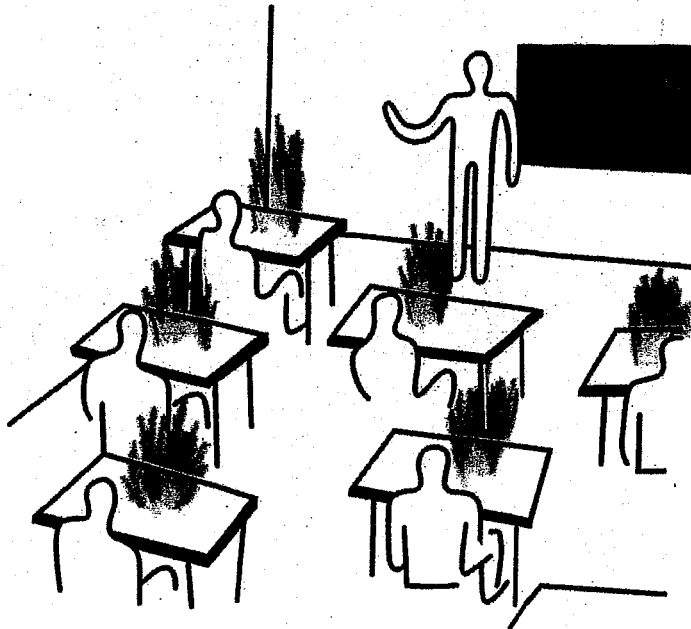
By Garret Keizer
302 pp., Metropolitan Books/
Henry Holt & Company, \$27.

might best be implemented. What emerges is the gaping chasm between what the best teachers do and how we go about evaluating what they've done.

Green outlines the teacher-training debate as one between proponents of accountability on one side and autonomy on the other. She points out that both sides assume what she calls "the myth of the natural-born teacher." The accountability folks want to use test scores to identify these gifted teachers and winnow out the others; the autonomy advocates want to give them creative control over their classrooms. Green, a journalist and the editor of *Chalkbeat*, an education news organization, argues that good teaching is largely "the result of extraordinary skill, not inborn talent." If lighting a fire is a skill, it can be learned, and it can be taught.

"Building a Better Teacher" is in part the story of Deborah Ball and Magdalene Lampert, two math teachers who met and collaborated in the 1980s and '90s at Spartan Village School in East Lansing, Mich., and at Michigan State's College of Education. Ball once had her public-school third and fourth graders conduct a "Conference on the Number Zero." Convened to determine whether zero is odd, even, or falls under some other category, the conference was remarkable not for its finding — zero is even — but for its spirit of investigation. In a subsequent discussion, the children debated the properties of odd and even numbers, with several of them constructing mathematical proofs. Ball even had a hard time drawing the discussion to a close. "The children," Green writes, "had been ignited."

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Similarly, each of Lampert's lessons centered on problems that were "rich," "open" and "productive." She would then ask her students to "confer," "conjecture" and "prove." She took "calculated" gambles when calling on her students, and like Ball, she didn't immediately correct them. "The students had to look to themselves for the correct answer," one of her colleagues marveled. "They couldn't just say, 'Oh, it's the right answer because the teacher said so.'"

This kind of teaching can look like ... nothing at all. So can working on just one problem per class, as though the teacher is just watching the clock while students chase a false supposition down a rabbit hole. In fact, those rabbit holes are where we learn; we begin to understand through trial and error, dead ends and towers of reasoning that collapse because of their faulty assumptions. Allowing students to make these errors, then identify and correct them, is one of the best things a teacher can do.

Ball, who is currently dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan, and Lampert, now a senior adviser for the Boston Teacher Residency, have both spent considerable time thinking about how teaching and learning work. Ball was able to use a light touch to guide her students through their adventure in basic number theory because she knew where she wanted them to go. A less confident teacher might have panicked at the first sign of the students' veering off course.

What Lampert and Ball want teachers to understand is that being wrong is an integral part of mapping the terrain.

This makes sense. We want students to develop "grit." What better way than to let them be wrong, figure out they're wrong and then try again?

But we also want results. And in a way, we've gotten them: millions of standardized-test results, usually disappointing. I submit that the scores themselves suffer because of the importance we attach to them. We are so fixated on the data that we neglect what the data are supposed to tell us: whether students are actually learning from their teachers.

We have an economist named Eric Hanushek to thank for this. Hanushek's ideas about teacher accountability, Green tells us, have spurred many education reforms over the last 25 years. He wanted to direct "attention to outputs rather than inputs, production rather than process." The "production" or "outputs" in Hanushek's models of teacher accountability are test scores. High scores on high-stakes tests become the point, leaving little room for the cultivation of useful failure.

Lampert, Ball and the other teachers in Green's book aren't against accountability. But they operate from the wild premise that evaluating teachers should also involve watching them teach. Hanushek called classroom teaching "the black box of the production process," one he pointedly ignored. Lampert and Ball recognize the necessity of opening that black box

and peering inside.

Even the best-performing charter schools are beginning to rethink some of their methods, having figured out how to drill students but not how to get them to understand what they are doing. "We looked so good on paper; we were kind of killing it," one California charter-school administrator told Green. "But we all felt like, jeez, when we walk into the classroom, we're not where we want to be."

IT WOULDN'T HURT if we had another million Garret Keizers. In "Getting Schooled: The Reeducation of an American Teacher," Keizer has returned to the classroom after a 14-year hiatus "mainly because my wife and I needed the health insurance." A contributing editor at Harper's Magazine and the author of more than a half-dozen books (including "No Place but Here: A Teacher's Vocation in a Rural Community," which he wrote while on sabbatical during his first, 15-year stint at Lake Region Union High), Keizer — who once imagined for himself the oh-so-Vermont bumper sticker "I'm a homeschoolin' gun-totin' Bible-bangin' ... SOCIALIST" — is an irascible idealist. He's just the kind of teacher Green celebrates: one who challenges his students and teaches them that learning can be an exciting endeavor rather than a demoralizing slog. His beautiful book holds much insight into the joys and frustrations of teaching.

Keizer's industry is astounding. He's up at 4 a.m. for a few hours of work before school, and he often works late. His industry nearly kills him, when he loses a month of teaching to pneumonia (but emails his lesson plans to the school every day). Standardized testing doesn't surprise him, but he's dismayed that in the name of accountability, he is asked to devote "more time to the generation and recording of data and less time to the educational substance of what the data is supposed to measure." Keizer sees the requirement to fill out daily electronic attendance and grade sheets "as part and parcel of the way in which 'the school of the 21st century' is continually trying to mask the ambiguities of evaluating student performance by a pretense of rigorous objectivity."

The reward of Keizer's experience and perspective is a prognosticatory modesty: "I'd as soon predict the weather on a day 30 years from now as predict the achievements of any student walking into his 10-year class reunion." Furthermore, "anything you do is bound to be, on some level and for some kid, wrong."

That is, while there are such things as "best practices" for teaching, there is no practice that is 100 percent effective, no practice that generates deep learning as well as perfect test scores. Students aren't widgets; neither are their teachers. We should stop pretending they are. □