

Protecting Learners and Learning

For star teachers, the ultimate value to be preserved is learning. For quitters and failures, it is order. Stars live this belief by constantly seeking out and capitalizing on problems, questions, discrepant events, current crises, and emergencies. They bring these into the classroom and use them to involve students in learning—and going beyond—traditional textbook curricula. Stars' sources are twofold: they are alert and sensitive to current events that might capture the imagination of children, and they have their own interests and avocations that they share with the children. Examples of the former are usually one-time or short-term topics, such as a heroic dog saves a child who has fallen into a river, a local hero makes a hit record, or the controversy about where to dump chemical waste. Such issues provide food for thought, analysis, discussion, and problem solving. Children are involved in reading, writing, debating, and thinking about the particular issue. Star teachers use these "hot topics" as vehicles for bringing to life concepts in science, math, and language and making them meaningful to children. Topics such as "the spread of disease" or "property rights as a constitutional guarantee" are in the rooms of typical teachers, "covered" by reading a series of abstractions with little or no relevance to students' lives. When stars use organizing themes such as "the chemical waste in my neighborhood and how it might cause specific diseases and other problems" or "who has the right to tell people where to dump stuff and why," then concepts regarded as largely irrelevant suddenly take on personal meaning. Taught in these personal ways, grand ideas and ideals can be learned and remembered by even the youngest children. Unfortunately, teachers without sufficient knowledge of basic science, math, language, or social studies do not know these concepts and can only follow along in textbooks. Stars use texts while failure teachers.

What this means in day-to-day practice is that the actual work of teaching and learning—what is discussed, written about, read, the actual activities in classrooms—is entirely different in the rooms of stars and in the rooms of other teachers. In the rooms of failures, one sees a clear pattern of "Take out your math books and turn to page 58." "It's ten thirty and time for science. Take out your books and open to Chapter 3. Who hasn't read yet?" "Open your *American People* to page 164. Now yesterday we left the Pilgrims meeting Squanto. . . ." What a classroom observer witnesses are teachers reading the text to children, perhaps stopping to explain. More likely, the teacher will use a set of prepared questions from the teacher's guide to ask questions at appropriate points. Another likely scenario is that the children will take turns reading the text aloud and the teacher will interject with questions or

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elaborations. Another common practice is for children to read the material silently and answer the questions at the end of the chapter in writing. The teacher then repeats the questions and calls on children to read aloud the answers they have written. Sometimes there's a test, and children exchange their papers. Another possibility is that the teacher has taken a workshop in cooperative learning. The class may then be divided into groups or teams who answer a set of questions as a group, thereby enabling peers to help each other. Children spend five or six hours a day for 13 years and emerge not only semiliterate and largely ignorant but without any commitment to learning. They have never experienced the joys of learning.

In these ways teachers “cover” the material in textbooks. Publishers sell the texts or “packages” to administrators and school boards as teacher-proof programs rather than as sets of books. In addition to the books themselves, there are teacher guides, pictures, a bibliography of supplementary materials, and tests. The whole package is premised and sold on the notion that the teacher may be ignorant or disinterested in the material he or she is teaching but that, by following the teacher's guide, he or she can effectively teach it, even to reluctant learners.

Supporting the premise that you can teach what you don't know or particularly care about are the patterns of how teachers typically cover textbook material. The teacher is usually a better reader than the children. The teacher also has the teacher's guide and the answers to the questions. The elementary teacher, as a more experienced older adult and a college graduate, is likely—but not necessarily—to have a broader information base (not basic knowledge) about the subjects. With this edge, teachers who don't know why it rains, or how the earth was formed, teach science. Using their skills of reading, perhaps a chapter or paragraph ahead of the class, teachers who don't know what's in the Constitution teach children about being good citizens. Untroubled by ignorance, teachers with no understanding of concepts such as zero, infinity, sets, or symbolic language teach arithmetic. Indeed, we have substantial evidence that many elementary teachers are not only limited or ignorant of the subjects they teach, they are actually casualties and college failures of these studies, particularly subjects such as math, science, foreign language, music, and dance. In most states that require a written test of basic skills for teacher certification, the level of passing is set at about eighth grade, which is the same passing level set for the GED high school equivalency diploma. The typical teacher-preparing institution requires one course in general math for future teachers, and two or three low-level courses in science. Any passing grade will qualify an individual for a teaching license (Haberman in press).