

## BOOK REVIEW

# BUILDING A BETTER TEACHER

Jeff Frank

Elizabeth Green, *Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It to Everyone)*. New York: Norton, 2014. 372 pp. ISBN 978-0-393-08159-6. \$27.95 (hbk).

Elizabeth Green's *Building a Better Teacher: How Teaching Works (and How to Teach It to Everyone)* is an excellent book that deserves the widest possible audience. It is a tremendously insightful and engaging look at teacher education, and I believe it has the power to change public discussions of teacher education for the better. Though it is written for a popular—and not a scholarly—audience, Green's book raises a number of questions that will be of particular interest to philosophers of education. I turn to those questions at the end of this review after describing Green's project and what it accomplishes.

To begin, Green finds a way to make educational research interesting—even intriguing—to a general audience. She does this by making the quest to transform teacher education into the complex and often contentious pursuit that it is. Instead of offering simplistic dichotomies or silver bullets, Green tells stories that underscore the difficulties and uncertainties of teacher education while at the same time illustrating (through the work of teacher educators like Magdalene Lampert and Deborah Loewenberg Ball) that teacher education can—and is—improving. These stories of improvement empower Green to make what some readers may feel is a contentious claim; namely: public discussions and policy decisions related to teacher education are often off base because they are held captive by the “Myth of the Natural-Born Teacher” (6). This myth leads its adherents to subscribe to the belief that teachers are born, and that teacher education is—at best—something of a moderately pleasant distraction, and at worst a waste of time, money, and attention. Saying this, Green's work should not be read as an endorsement of university teacher education. Like many critics of schools of education, Green believes that faculty at these schools are incentivized to spend as much time as possible on their research and as little time as possible teaching teachers the practice of teaching.<sup>1</sup> Because there is a strong emphasis on scholarship in the leading schools of education (often scholarship that is only tangentially related to the practice of teaching and building a knowledge base on how teacher educators can prepare their students to teach),<sup>2</sup> graduates of teacher preparation programs may struggle when they begin teaching because they were not taught how to enact what they learned during the teacher preparation process.<sup>3</sup>

In light of these perceived flaws, Green devotes significant attention to work being done in charter schools. In particular, Green highlights Doug Lemov's taxonomy of teaching to show what can happen when teaching is decomposed into its most important and its most common components, and when teachers are then taught (often on the job) how to become better at these components.<sup>4</sup> This approach accomplishes what schools of education often fail to do. Instead of leaving teachers to enact what they learned with little or no guidance, Lemov's taxonomy (and things like it) give teachers a framework within which they can work toward clearly defined teaching practices meant to promote student success. Instead of leaving teachers on their own to imagine (and enact) what the good or just classroom might be, Lemov's taxonomy tells teachers what they can do to make an immediate impact on student learning as measured by things like admission to competitive colleges and achievement on standardized assessments. Green appreciates this type of taxonomy because it explodes the myth of the natural-born teacher. Lemov's taxonomy does what many schools of education cannot: It demonstrates that an individual interested in teaching can become a better teacher if she follows a clearly articulated (and then regularly assessed) protocol. Instead of wasting time taking courses learning about how schools might be transformed or reconstructed (foundations courses, courses about the aims or ends of education),<sup>5</sup> the protocol tells you how to make an impact now.

To Green, there is something terribly optimistic in knowing that there are in fact ways to help a teacher become better. She makes the case that current discussions about improving teaching are unhelpfully divided into those advocating increased accountability and those advocating increased autonomy. One side of the dichotomy argues that if we used more high-stakes assessments of teachers, teaching will get better; the other argues that if the high-stakes testing mentality were abandoned and teachers treated like professionals capable of addressing the dilemmas of teaching, then teaching will also improve. "As descriptions, both arguments—accountability and autonomy—contain a measure of truth." But, as Green goes on to argue, "Neither accountability nor autonomy is enough . . . because both arguments subscribe to the myth of the natural-born teacher" (12). Giving teachers more freedom without also teaching them how to become a better teacher (using something like Lemov's taxonomy) will not have a large-scale effect on student learning. As well, simply finding out which teachers are effective and which teachers are less effective using standardized (and other forms of) assessment will not have a wide-ranging impact on the lives of learners.<sup>6</sup> Teachers need to be educated if they are going to improve, and Lemov's taxonomy offers one vision of how this can happen on a large enough scale to actually make an impact on the lives of learners across the United States.

If the book ended here, it would be nothing new. It is all too common to praise the impact of charter schools and—even if only by default—criticize

so-called traditional teacher education. Green does not do this for two important reasons. First, Green worries a great deal about the ends of education. Though charter schools may improve things like standardized test scores and admissions to selective colleges, she worries about the quality of the education students receive in charter schools. In particular, she wonders if the disciplinary techniques used in charter schools—even if they make a certain vision of success possible for students—are appropriate. She cites the example of a Fresno Unified School District investigation into a KIPP charter school that told “stories of punishing disobedient children by putting them outside in the cold, locking an entire class in a two-stall bathroom, and putting a trash can on a student’s head” (198). This is an extreme example and not representative of the culture of charter schools in general. But, Green does believe that the type of high-pressure, zero-tolerance climate that is representative of many charter schools has the potential to be mis-educative, even if students are ostensibly successful. Though it is easy to mock the progressive aims espoused in many so-called traditional teacher education programs, Green’s descriptions of charter school culture (and the change of heart some charter school leaders experience when they think about the long-term impact of their school cultures on the lives of students) allow readers to wonder what gets lost when progressive aspirations are traded for something like a success at any cost mentality. Second, critics of so-called traditional teacher education make claims about *all* teacher education programs on the basis of a narrow review of the work done in schools of education. Green makes the case that Doug Lemov felt that he needed to create his taxonomy for teaching focused on student learning and teacher growth because they didn’t exist. But, as Green so helpfully shows, they do, and they’ve influenced teaching in America and across the world. Two models, in particular, impress Green. The first is lesson study.<sup>7</sup> One of the main benefits of lesson study, according to Green, is that lesson study makes the practice of teaching public and subject to critical (but not unfriendly and certainly not punitive) discussion among educators. Teachers who engage in lesson study see the goal of teaching as always becoming a better teacher; one is not born a good (or bad) teacher, one is always in the process of becoming better through rigorous conversations with other educators about learners and the profession of teaching.<sup>8</sup> The second model is practice-based approaches to teacher education that focus on teaching teachers “high-leverage” practices that promote student learning and give teachers a common language to use as professionals who are always in the process of improving their practice.<sup>9</sup> Locating some of the core activities teachers engage in on a regular basis allows both aspiring and practicing teachers to focus on those activities and become better at the very things that promote student learning and engagement. Instead of being left to enact what they learned without a clear picture of classroom practices in mind, this approach to teacher education gives teachers much stronger support, scaffolding, and guidance.

What both of these approaches—lesson study and practice-based approaches built from high-leverage activities that promote learning—have in common is that they give teachers a common language. When professional educators share a background understanding of how to talk about teaching and what practices are most important (or at least most common) in the classroom, then it is easier to collaborate and grow together as professionals. In addition, when teachers have a common language, they can use that language to work together to improve those practices that promote student growth. Finally, when teachers have a common language, the difficult work of learning to teach becomes more manageable because aspiring teachers learn about how ideals can be enacted within practices that they can observe and grow into. Put simply, the existence of a common language allows the greatest number of teachers to experience the greatest amount of professional growth.

Interestingly, Green sees the accomplishment of a common language as the realization of Dewey's vision for a "science of education." She notes, "Dewey had written eloquently about the 'science of education' he hoped to develop—how it would help prevent the immeasurable 'waste' that comes from letting great teachers' secrets live and die with them" (20). Bringing together insights from lesson study and the practice-based approaches to teacher education developed by people like Deborah Ball and Magdalene Lampert builds a framework for teacher education that, according to Green, accomplishes what Dewey could not. This is where I think the story gets particularly interesting for philosophers of education. Green goes on to write that Dewey—like William James<sup>10</sup>—"wound up retreating to his original discipline, philosophy. All around him, educational researchers had followed Thorndike and abandoned the study of real schools. Discouraged, Dewey set his work in education aside" (26). As a point of fact, this seems inaccurate. I don't see Dewey ever leaving education and retreating back to philosophy, and I think it is particularly wrong to see him abandoning an interest in real schools. This may read like a minor quibble that would come, as a matter of course, from someone writing for a journal like this one. But I don't think it is. Green tells her story as a line of influence from Dewey's vision to Nathaniel Gage and from there to Lee Schulman and then to Ball and Lampert. We should not expect a book like this—one written for a popular and not a scholarly audience—to be comprehensive when it comes to the history of scholarship in education, but I do find it slightly problematic that not only are philosophers of education not mentioned at all in this book, they seem to have no role to play in teacher education. It is strange, then, that this would be the realization of John Dewey's vision for a science of education.

Instead of offering a criticism of Green at this point, I want to ask questions. Though Green's work should not be expected to be comprehensive, what would a more comprehensive book look like? In particular, in imagining such a book, would work done by philosophers of education like Philip Jackson or Hugh Sockett or Gary Fenstermacher or David Hansen or Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon be included?

Put another way, though works written by these philosophers of education are very much responsive to the practice of teaching (especially its moral dimensions), are they written in such a way that they can be used, for example, in a student teaching seminar aimed at helping teachers develop the core elements of classroom teaching? The high-leverage practices listed on Deborah Ball's TeachingWorks website do not seem to explicitly emphasize the moral dimensions of teaching. Saying this, her list doesn't preclude them, but it leaves me wondering how much philosophical work on teaching is, or even will be, valued in what I take to be a very positive approach to teacher education. Pam Grossman, Morva McDonald, Karen Hammermas, and Matthew Ronfeldt make the following point when addressing this topic: practice-based approaches to teaching

may require blurring curricular lines between what are typically called "foundations" courses and those that focus on "methods" or teaching. . . . Foundational courses in multicultural education, for instance, may need to go beyond their focus upon conceptual understandings of racism, injustice, or urban schools . . . they also need to help prospective teachers develop a set of specific classroom practices that will help them succeed with students from historically oppressed groups.<sup>11</sup>

Reading this in light of some of the questions Green's book helpfully provokes leaves me with one last set of questions on this issue: Are philosophers of education who work with teachers doing enough to make sure that they are developing a set of classroom practices that will allow future teachers to enact the conceptual understanding(s) they are developing in their philosophically oriented teacher education classes? And, if some of us are already doing this work (or are aspiring to do this type of work), how can we find collaborators in "methods" courses who value it and seek ways to integrate it more explicitly into the education of teachers and the work that they do?

Finally, I wonder about the feasibility and desirability of having a common language and shared practices. On the side of feasibility, Green struggles in this book to name the approach to teacher education she favors because it is called different things at different colleges of education. This makes sense. As Linda Darling-Hammond very clearly illustrates, there are many strong teacher education programs in the United States that share many common elements.<sup>12</sup> But, though they share common elements, they don't really seem to share a common language in quite the way that something like Lemov's taxonomy offers. Will this—or can this—change? I think a lot might depend on how collaborative teacher education programs can become, especially when these programs are often in competition in various ways for limited resources. How easy will it be to get different programs to agree on what practices are central and what language we should use to talk together about these practices? Putting aside questions of feasibility (which are very important), we might also wonder about the ultimate desirability of having such a taxonomy. An obvious,

but important, objection here is that a common framework like Lemov's taxonomy may lead to a leveling down of the profession and may limit an individual teacher's ability to reconstruct and imagine new futures for education. Though this objection feels compelling, maybe even conclusive, I don't think it is. A taxonomy that is too prescriptive and not philosophically informed does not have value. But a taxonomy that allows teachers to think about those practices that are most common and most conducive to student learning does. Teacher educators need to provide their students with aims (and justifications for those aims, and ways to eventually challenge and reconstruct those aims), and they also need to provide them with practices that will allow them to achieve those aims (and to talk with other teachers, using a shared language, about how to improve practices and reconstruct aims); practices enact aims, practice allows one to reconstruct aims, reconstructed aims lead to new practices. This sounds like an experiment in living the life of a teacher and becoming a student of teaching. A very Deweyan vision, it also seems to provide a bulwark against the many forces clamoring to define what the practice of teaching is and should be. I, for one, would prefer philosophically informed practices and a philosophically informed shared language of teaching than practices and languages developed by testing agencies and ideologues. Though there are dangers in creating this type of framework, Green's book offers a compelling case that the benefits far outweigh the risks. I can only hope that this book, and further engagement with the scholarship on practice-based approaches to teacher education, provides opportunities for philosophers of education to discover new possibilities for blurring lines and overcoming dualisms that will, I believe, lead to building better teachers.

## NOTES

1. For an interesting recent discussion of this issue, see Jamy Stillman and Lauren Anderson, "Preparing the Next Generation of Teacher Educators," *Teachers College Record*, <http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=17581>.

2. For a very interesting discussion of this point, see James Hiebert and Anne K. Morris, "Teaching, Rather Than Teachers, as a Path Toward Improving Classroom Instruction," *Journal of Teacher Education* 63, no. 2 (2012): 92–102.

3. For an excellent and important discussion of enactment, see Mary M. Kennedy, "The Role of Preservice Education," in *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Teaching and Policy*, eds. Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

4. Lemov's taxonomy developed into the very popular *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010). At the 2012 Annual American Educational Research Association meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia, Sharon Feiman-Nemser offered a very interesting criticism of this type of approach to teaching (while discussing Green's 2010 *New York Time Magazine* article "Building a Better Teacher") in her presentation "Teaching the Science and Art of Teaching: Revisiting Teachers for the Real World."

5. There have been many very interesting discussions about the purposes of educational foundations courses. For one particularly illuminating example, see Gary Fensterm-

acher, "Teaching Educational Foundations: Multiple Explorations of Pedagogy in Teacher Education," *New Educator* 3, no. 2 (2007): 95–102 and the rest of the special issue.

6. Many who endorse increased teacher accountability also subscribe to what Green describes as unrealistic visions for maintaining the number of teachers needed in American classrooms. Fired teachers need to be replaced, and there clearly aren't enough "natural-born" good teachers to replace them. As such, it makes far more sense to focus on meeting teachers where they are and finding ways to make them better. The strong accountability stance does not allow enough space for this position.

7. Here Green emphasizes the work of Akhiko Takahashi, and James Stigler and James Hiebert's book *The Teaching Gap* (New York: Free Press, 1999). Though one cannot expect a comprehensive review of work done on lesson study in a book written for a popular audience, I believe Green's discussion of this topic would have benefited from a discussion of the work done by Catherine Lewis at Mills College. As well, it would have been interesting to discuss the descriptive review process (for more information, see Patricia Carini, *The Art of Seeing and the Visibility of the Person* (Grand Forks: University of North Dakota Press, 1979) as another example of teacher professional learning communities that promote teacher growth and student learning.

8. Far more could be said on lesson study. Again, I highly commend the work of Catherine Lewis to anyone interested in learning more about this valuable approach to teacher learning and growth.

9. Green focuses on the work of Ball, Lampert, and Pamela Grossman when discussing this approach to teacher education. For a good recent overview of this approach to teacher education, see Francesca Forzani, "Understanding 'Core Practice' and 'Practice-Based' Teacher Education: Learning from the Past," *Journal of Teacher Education* 65, no. 4: (2014). The TeachingWorks website at Michigan is another place to learn more about this approach to teacher education.

10. She is particularly harsh on James, and I think unnecessarily and inaccurately so. A far better discussion of James and his relation to teachers can be found in Philip Jackson's *The Practice of Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).

11. Pam Grossman, Morva McDonald, Karen Hammermas, and Matthew Ronfeldt, "Dismantling Dichotomies in Teacher Education," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education: Enduring Questions in Changing Contexts*, 3rd ed., eds. Marilyn Cochran-Smith, Sharon Feiman-Nemster, D. John McIntyre, and Kelly E. Demers (New York: Routledge, 2008), 246.

12. Linda Darling-Hammond, *Powerful Teacher Education: Lessons from Exemplary Programs* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006). As well, it is ironic that while Green tells the story of the development of one type of teacher education at Michigan State University, another very valuable approach developed there as well. For its story, see David Carroll, Helen Featherstone, Joseph Featherstone, Sharon Feiman-Nemser, and Dirck Roosevelt, *Transforming Teacher Education: Reflections from the Field* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007). Telling this story may also involve writing about the work of Margaret Buchmann, whose work on learning to teach builds many bridges between philosophy of education and the preparation of teachers.

Jeff Frank is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York. Email: jfrank@stlawu.edu.

