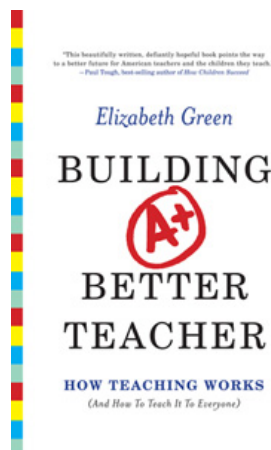


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'Building A Better Teacher': An Interview With Elizabeth Green

By [Larry Ferlazzo](#) on August 27, 2014 8:58 PM



This summer, I'll be alternating between publishing thematic collections of past posts (ones on [Student Motivation](#), [Implementing The Common Core](#), [Teaching Reading & Writing](#), [Parent Involvement](#), [Teaching Social Studies](#), [Best Ways To Begin & End The School Year](#) and [Teaching English Language Learners](#), [Using Tech In The Classroom](#), [Education Policy Issues](#), Teacher & [Administrator Leadership](#), [Instructional Strategies](#), [Assessment](#), and [Teaching Math & Science](#) have already been published) and sharing interviews with authors of recent books I consider important and useful for us educators ([Meenoo Rami](#) was the first, co-authors [Carmen Fariña & Laura Kotch](#) were the second, [Warren Berger](#) was the third, [Annette Breaux and Todd Whitaker](#) were the fourth, [David Berliner and Gene Glass](#) were the fifth, [Eric Sheninger](#) was the sixth, and [Regie Routman](#) was the seventh).

For today's author interview, Elizabeth Green has offered to answer a few questions about her book, [Building A Better Teacher](#). You can read Education Week Teacher editor Anthony Rebor's commentary on her book [here](#).

LF: You frame the educational debate in this country as one between "accountability" and "autonomy," both which you say illustrate a "culture of abandonment" of teachers. How would you summarize what you think is the way forward if you are accurate in this analysis?

Elizabeth Green:

I think the way forward can be borrowed from the classroom, where teachers learn to balance between autonomy and accountability with their students. Expert teaching means holding students accountable but also giving them the space to think for themselves, and the way that teachers do that is by creating smart structures that not only create consequences for good and bad performance, but also guide students forward. We need to do the same thing with teachers by creating structure and learning opportunities for teachers.

LF: You spend a good portion of the book highlighting specific teaching and learning methods related to math. What might be some "universals" from those experiences that could be applied in just about any classroom or subject?

Elizabeth Green:

One of the universal takeaways is that it matters what subject you're teaching. There's a danger in universalism. In each discipline I learned that a teacher needs to know the canon of important knowledge, but the teacher also needs to know the subject's epistemology -- the rules for what makes knowledge in that subject true. What kind of evidence is good for a historical argument or a scientific claim or a mathematical proof or a literary interpretation? That's important for teachers to know.

The case of math teaching also helps illuminate the fact that the dichotomy between so-called "constructivism" on one hand versus direct instruction on the other hand is a false choice. Teaching is about creating encounters between students and ideas, along with structures that allow them to move faster and further through those ideas than they could have on their own. Ultimately, students can only learn by thinking for themselves, but at the same time, the teacher is the teacher, and she needs to guide them and not just leave them to their own devices.

Another common thread is that teachers need to anticipate how students will make sense of a topic or subject. For example, in math, a teacher needs to know common ways students misunderstand fractions; in English, the teacher needs to know which novels grip students' attention and which leave them bored. The teacher doesn't just need to know the subject and the students, but also how the students interact with the subject.

"Expert teaching means holding students accountable but also giving them the space to think for themselves, and the way that teachers do that is by creating smart structures that not only create consequences for good and bad performance, but also guide students forward."

- Elizabeth Green in Ed Week Teacher

LF: In much of your discussions about many so-called "no excuses" charter schools, you seem to clearly point to the dangers of their seeking compliance over engagement. You even talk about them in the context of what one writer called "the progress trap," where something is pursued as progress but is ultimately self-destructive. It seems to me that one of the reasons that they can get away with this type of methodology is their ability to recruit primarily from the most motivated families in a given community -- who are willing to sacrifice some elements of freedom for what they envision might be a bigger educational advantage down the line. That kind of "creaming" seems to me to be a pretty important part of the overall charter school context, yet it didn't seem like you discussed that much, if at all.

Is my summary of your message about no-excuses schools an accurate one, and was there a particular reason you omitted the "creaming" element?

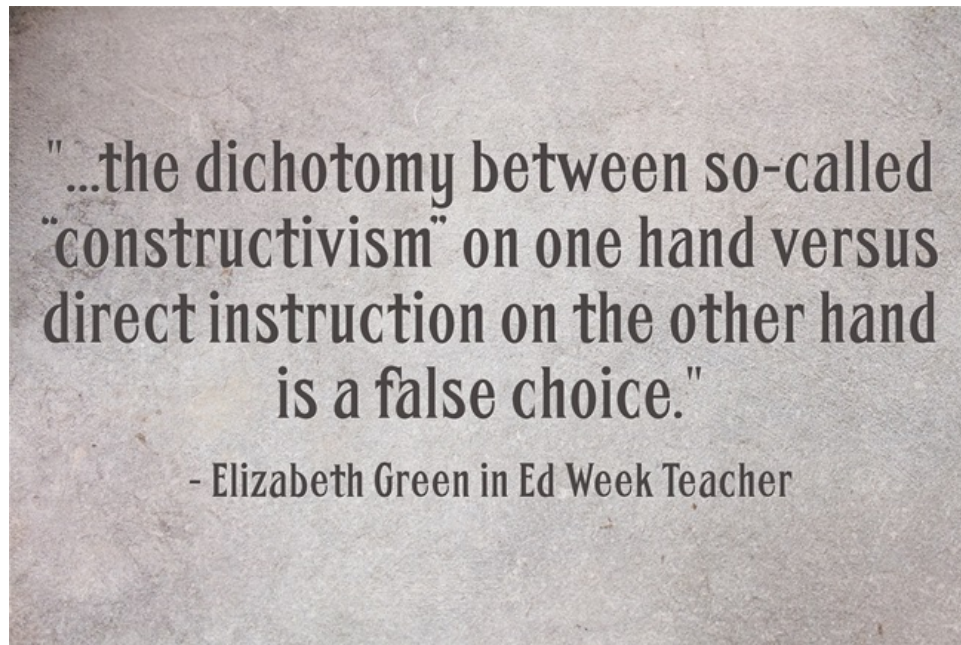
Elizabeth Green:

I think that's an accurate summary. The only thing I would add is that there is an irony. On one hand these no-excuses charter schools treat teachers in a way that is ahistorical in American education. Teachers are treated as learners. Yet the standard for learning for the students in these same schools is less ambitious than the definition of learning for teachers. For students, there is an over-emphasis on compliance and an under-emphasis on deeper understanding. That over-emphasis is not uncommon among all schools in the United States, of course.

One theory -- put forward by people inside the no-excuses charter schools -- is that the focus on more superficial learning stems from standardized tests that set relatively low standards. Many no-excuses schools are now changing and can evolve over time and many conversations are happening at these schools about how the shift away from compliance. We'll see over the next twenty years if they can pull it off. I certainly hope they can.

As for who charters serve, I'm really troubled by some of what I have found in my own reporting over the years. There are absolutely charter schools that are not serving who they want to serve or who they say they serve. It ranges from deliberate attempts to skew the student population to unintended consequences of lottery-based admission.

What matters about that most to me is that some of these organizations have a real opportunity to change how schools work for teachers and students, and I would not want that available to just a certain population. Equity matters. I do think there is a connection between discipline policies I write about in no excuses schools and enrollment that is not equitable, and I hope that was clear in the book.



LF: Based on all the research you did for your book, can you point to something that is going on in education today that makes you particularly optimistic about the future as well as pointing to something that makes you pessimistic?

Elizabeth Green:

I feel like my answer to both questions is the Common Core. What makes me optimistic about the Common Core is that it has the potential to help resolve the weaknesses of no excuses schools that critics rightly point to, especially the challenge of raising academic rigor. Common Core has given these schools permission and external validity -- with funders, with boards -- to make the changes they want to make in order to move beyond compliance. The schools only reach a small subset of students, but I think they have a very real shot of making the changes envisioned by the Common Core. And if they can do it, that will be very beneficial to their students and to the national conversation.

The thing that makes me feel pessimistic or concerned is the resistance we're seeing to the Common Core standards simply because they are common -- that is, shared among states. The resistance isn't surprising given our tradition in this country of wanting to protect local autonomy in education. But local autonomy in education has led to a very incoherent governance structure that has historically harmed education more than it has helped. I write about this "coherence problem" in my book. I also write that, for all its flaws, the Common Core offers a strong first step in the direction of coherence. It's simply easier for teachers to work together on the difficult enterprise of helping students learn if they can start from a common baseline agreement on what the learning goals are in the first place.

LF: Thanks, Elizabeth!

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