

Book Review

*Inside Teaching:**How Classroom Life Undermines Reform*

By Mary M. Kennedy

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Reviewed by Barbara Garii*State University of New York at Oswego*

Expert knowledge is defined by several factors, the most important of which are insight, judgment, and management (Ardelt, 2004; Kotzer, 2005; Lacquerment, 2003). The ability to effectively evaluate and integrate theory and practice within a dynamic environment, as a means to make appropriate decisions, is the hallmark of an expert (Schön, 1983).

Professionals are those who are able to broadly utilize expert knowledge within their disciplines. Educators in the academy, whose work-life resides outside the K-12 classroom, have been accepted typically as experts or as purveyors of educational excellence. However, the professionalism and expertise of classroom teachers, whose position requires them to manage specific academic content while ensuring that all their students effectively participate in the classroom community, continues to be questioned (Weems, 2003).

These non-K-12 classroom educators, often at the pinnacle of their own academic careers, observe the outcomes of public education and easily identify the failings of public schools. However, they do not often recognize the many, perhaps smaller, on-going successes in the classrooms that are the efforts of a teacher's continuous reflective assessments and evaluations of his or her own classroom practice (Kennedy, 2005). The reformers make recommendations and suggest solutions to the many problems and limitations that they perceive in the classroom.

Barbara Garii is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the State University of New York at Oswego.

The suggested reforms, some of which have been well researched and tested, others of which are idealistic possibilities, are expected to cure all the ills of schools. Yet, over and over again, these reforms fail, and these failures are laid at the feet of the teachers who were asked to do the challenging task of implementing the reforms.

Kennedy (2005) suggests that reformers' assumptions about the realities of the classroom and of teachers' experiences fail to account for several important variables. Content and pedagogy shape reformers' perspectives. If teachers can help students find meaning within the content, then students will be curious and willing to engage in the learning process. While teachers understand and often accept reformers' suggestions, mandates, and imperatives, their perspectives also are influenced by K-12 educational realities.

Thus, a myriad of concurrent and compelling responsibilities and concerns temper teachers' reactions to reform in their own classrooms. These include the mandated inclusion of simultaneous, yet competing, reform initiatives into the same classroom, continual building-wide and classroom-specific disruptions and distractions, and the reality of overly ambitious, rigidly structured, and complicated lesson plans and supporting props introduced by reformers, which require additional preparation time not available to most teachers.

Why do teachers seemingly ignore the guidance of "the experts" who offer these solutions? This is the question that Mary Kennedy (2005) grapples with in her compelling discussion of 45 teachers at ten schools, representing six different reform initiatives, and selected to illuminate the dilemmas faced by ordinary teachers and schools. Kennedy's goal was to understand the realities of the classroom and compare the daily lives and concerns of teachers with the expectations and visions of the reformers. As she reports, the classroom teachers, whom she sees as the true experts, are neither respected nor heard, and their realities and their concerns are not identified, understood, or integrated into reform initiatives. According to Kennedy, unless and until the voices of the classroom are acknowledged, these reform efforts are doomed to failure.

While this assertion sounds dreary and frightening and appears to undermine the optimism of the American educational reform movement, Kennedy also paints a picture of teachers whose classrooms are vibrant and alive. She describes teachers who embody the reality of classroom teaching in America today. They are deft jugglers of multiple, simultaneous, and often contradictory classroom reform initiatives, while focusing on the specific needs of the students in the classroom and attending to the managerial nightmares that are part and parcel of the reality of public school.

While reform efforts focus on content, intellectual engagement, universal access to knowledge, and pedagogical stance (Kennedy, 2005), and often integrate school-wide administrative and organizational concerns (Borman et al., 2005; Lagemann, 2000), teachers also must consider a wide variety of other classroom issues not recognized in the reformers' presentations. These concerns include lesson momentum (the ability of the teacher to ensure that students are engaged, the lesson and learning move forward without going too far afield, time constraints are acknowledged, and the underlying content is acknowledged and learned), creation and maintenance of classroom community, and student behavior and willingness to participate. As a rule, these classroom-based concerns are not included in the reformers' proposals, yet the reforms themselves cannot be successful unless these concerns are taken into consideration.

Kennedy (2005) observed a series of classroom lessons that exemplified the imbalance between the reform ideals and the classroom realities. Mrs. Toklisch encouraged independent, creative thinking, a common reform ideal that is expected to foster student identification with and interest in academic subject matter. During a mathematics lesson, one of Toklisch's students unexpectedly identified a "highly refined and complicated" (p. 97) solution strategy, a strategy that was not accessible to the other students in the class. Mrs. Toklisch worried about how to continue and complete the lesson within the limited time allotted to mathematics. Too much time attending to and supporting the student with the advanced understanding would lead other students to withdraw from the lesson. Yet, if she gave short shrift to the advanced student, she risked alienating this student from further creative explorations within mathematics. Mrs. Toklisch was troubled as she tried to balance the time constraints, while continuing to encourage student insight and creativity and simultaneously support less advanced students to enable them to move forward in their own learning.

Kennedy (2005) also observed teachers struggling with the maintenance of classroom community, a reform ideal that suggests that safe, supportive classrooms enhance the ability of all students to learn and succeed. One teacher wrestled with a school-wide disciplinary procedure that encouraged teachers send their severely misbehaving students to another teacher's classroom for a time-out, rather than to the office. Thus, without warning, Ms. Keeblefrau often hosted rambunctious and angry students, students who were not party to her classroom community and who did want to join, even temporarily, that community.

Another teacher modeled an active, interested, and curious classroom demeanor that she wanted her students to emulate as they created their community. One of her students, a troubled young man, responded

by inappropriately acting out in class, violently disrupting lessons, and attacking other students. Her recourse was to create a classroom persona that was “calm, deliberate, even boring” (p. 38), a demeanor that better supported the troubled young man and allowed all students to attend to at least the rudimentary tasks associated with learning. This new persona, however, promoted a teacher-controlled classroom community that was in conflict with her ideal of enthusiastic student participation and active intellectual engagement.

Reform efforts rarely address the incompatibility of engaging lessons, which encourage students' enthusiasm to explore unexpected ideas, with state standards and testing expectations that mandate knowledge of specific content ideas. Nor do reform initiatives consider the ongoing balancing act that teachers must maintain, an act that recognizes students' differing levels of engagement, interest, and academic preparation. Teachers continuously and simultaneously cope with state standards and expectations, schooling issues (such as PA announcements, visitors in the classroom, and students entering and leaving the classroom for individual or special work), and the real lives of the students (including health issues and the minutia associated with hunger, lack of sleep, and disrupted or reconstructed families).

Reformers suggest that, for reforms to be successfully implemented, teachers need more pedagogical training and deeper content knowledge (Borman et al., 2005; Kennedy, 2005). Kennedy, however, suggests that most “ordinary” teachers have expert knowledge: pedagogical expertise, content knowledge, and the ability to “reflect in action” (Schön, 1983). Teachers recognize the unexpected events in the classroom and subtle threats to community that require immediate decisions in order to maintain the productive life of the classroom. They work in the moment to ensure that the learning environment is tranquil and supportive.

Yet, teachers, who hold this expert knowledge, are not asked to create or initiate reform. Moreover, when reforms are introduced into the classroom, teachers' responses to the reforms are not given credence. This lack of recognition of teachers' realities will continue to ensure that many reform initiatives will fail. They will fail not because teachers disagree with the thrust of the reforms, but because the implementation of the reform cannot be effectively managed and maintained within the constraints of the classroom.

Kennedy challenges reformers to acknowledge the complexity of teaching and that reform is viable if and only if the complicated realities of classrooms are included within the reform agendas. The history of educational reform is fraught with contradiction, discouragement, and disappointment and, at times, outright catastrophe (Lagemann, 2000)

because teacher expertise has not been sought or valued.

As we struggle with a national mandate to ensure adequate yearly progress for all our students, while guaranteeing that our teachers are well prepared for the truths of the classroom, Kennedy offers a pessimistic future. She also offers hope, however, by showing us that true expertise, which will allow reform efforts to thrive or at least allow them a fighting chance of survival, is found at the intersection of classroom practice and academic theory. Cooperative learning, a common classroom practice, is valuable because each individual's knowledge supports the growth and learning of the group. As teachers and reformers, we need to remember that lesson and work cooperatively, valuing not only the idealistic views of those who want to restructure American education, but also the concrete perspectives of the practitioners who know intimately what happens when we try to educate our children.

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