

Letting Teachers Be Teachers

Starting with the [But Then...](#) sub-section of [The First In-between Year](#) section of [The Book of IFs Chapter 2 – Life on My Path to Becoming a Teacher](#), I described my decision to drop out of law school to become an age-group swimming coach. I mentioned there that I decided to become an elementary school teacher because it was the perfect side job for me as an age-group swimming coach. What I did not mention was that I personally had a very low opinion of teachers instilled in me by my parents. The contempt my parents had for teachers was always expressed as, “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.”

My low opinion of teachers evaporated as soon as I became one. Even though my overriding desire was to be an age-group swimming coach, I still felt my role as a teacher was an important one. Whether I was a swimming coach or a classroom teacher, my goal was the same. I wanted to change how children felt about themselves. I learned right away that I was not alone in my desire to better the lives of the children in my care. While the other teachers in my intern program and at my school may not have shared my specific goal of changing children’s feelings about themselves, it was obvious to me that my fellow teachers and I all had the desire to put our students on the path to better lives.

Elementary school teachers had not used their college degrees as a ticket to some high-paying job. Teacher pay at that time was about the lowest wage a college graduate might expect. We were all there not for the money, but for the difference we might make in the lives of our children. This quote of mine expresses how I felt about teachers after I became one: “Those who can, do. Those who want to make a difference in the lives of children, teach.” Mary’s and my math books were written expressly because we both had very high opinions of our fellow teachers. Our books required more effort on the part of the teachers using them than the textbook-workbook approach. However, greater effort was no hindrance for any teacher when better learning was the result.

I knew that I was in a unique situation. I had permission to completely abandon all textbooks and workbooks the State had adopted for my use in my search for better ways to teach. My first principal did not actually give me permission. Except for his one visit to my classroom, he never even bothered to find out what I was doing. The reason he did not care was because student discipline was his only concern. Since my students were not causing any problems at his school, he couldn’t care less about what I might be teaching. My second principal gave me permission to teach any way I wanted when

he initialed my Lesson Planner, returned it to me, and never asked to see it again.

Mary's situation was also unique. When she was teaching kindergarten, she, too, rejected the materials our school district had acquired for all kindergarten teachers to use. Her district supervisor could have compelled Mary to use the materials the district had given her. Instead, the supervisor sent as many people as possible to visit Mary's class to see what she was doing.

Mary's and my situation was unique in another way. We had been given permission to create curriculum. However, creating curriculum from scratch was both time-consuming and expensive. What was unique about our situation was that we had both the time and the money. Mary and I spent hours after school each day and even more hours every weekend developing different ways to teach our children. It can be a bit difficult to maintain any kind of social relationship when one of the people in the relationship spends all of his or her time getting lessons ready for his or her classroom, while the other person has very different plans for how they should spend their time together. Since we were both equally busy creating lessons, we understood and accepted each other's busyness.

The first summer of our married life was filled with curriculum creating. I said that we had the money, but we only had the money because creating or acquiring materials for our classes was how we chose to spend almost all of our teachers' salaries that summer. Our main meal for the times we were waiting for our next paychecks to arrive was all we could afford by then - macaroni and cheese.

Mary and I always felt that what we were doing was no different than what any other teacher would have done in our place if they had our same permission to start over and the same time available to do it. Our first proof of this was the quick acceptance of Mary's book *Workjobs*. In the [Teachers](#) sub-section of the [One Question – Three Answers](#) section of this chapter, I said that *Workjobs* sold 100,000 copies before Addison-Wesley even began advertising it, in a teacher market where selling 15,000 books marked that book as a best seller. All it took to prompt our fellow teachers to buy Mary's book was a description of its use in a magazine article about her classroom. Addison-Wesley ended up selling 430,694 copies of *Workjobs* into that 15,000 books is a best-seller market. Even now, *Workjobs* earns five-star ratings from teachers buying it on Amazon and eBay.

As further proof that our fellow teachers were just like us is the mathematics curriculum we created. Mary and I wrote our math

books assuming that what we were doing in our classrooms was just what our fellow teachers would want to do in their own classrooms if given the opportunity. The success of both our math books and our math workshops was only possible because our assumption was correct. The only difference between Mary, me, and our fellow teachers was that we were given the freedom to create curriculum and had the time and the resources to do it.

As I also said in the [Teachers](#) sub-section, if 15,000 was the measure of a best-seller, then what would the sale of 570,000 copies of *Mathematics Their Way* in that same teacher market represent? Teachers all across the country were using our math books and signing up to take our workshops. They, like us, were more than willing to abandon the use of textbooks and workbooks because they had witnessed the failures of the textbook-workbook approach in their own classrooms. Hundreds of thousands of teachers choosing a curriculum that would require more teaching effort on their part than simply using the textbook-workbook model. When more work means more children learning, every teacher I know would always choose more work and more learning.

As I also said in the [Teachers](#) sub-section, the most common remark from teachers written on the Mathematics Their Way end-of-workshop evaluation forms was, “I wish I had been taught this way when I was in school.” Doesn’t everybody want every child to learn with no child left behind? The universal answer from every teacher I have ever met is YES!

Textbooks Versus Learning

When allowed to, learning takes place naturally. As I have said repeatedly, all children are little learning machines. Each baby is born into its very own learning environment. Babies will learn language from whoever is around them. The baby’s language teachers need no formal training. All they need to do is talk to the baby. The little learning machine will do the rest.

Each child learns many things from birth until the beginning of school. All of that learning takes place with no fear of failure. When school begins, then for many children, so does failure. As I have said and as we all know, learning takes time. When there is time, it takes place. Before school begins, learning takes place naturally. Every child learns at his or her own pace. When school begins, so does textbook learning. Textbooks and workbooks, by their design, take the naturalness out of learning.

If this book is successful in conveying to parents that illiteracy really can be ended in America, my wish is that it be equally successful in conveying to parents that, just as every child can learn to read and to write without exception, every child is equally capable of learning mathematics. In the [Terrible at Math](#) section of [Chapter 2](#), I said, “It’s not something a person boasts about if he or she is illiterate. However, there is no shame felt by people saying of themselves, “I am terrible at math!” That section then points out how much math plays a part in all of our everyday lives. The point being made is that everyone who feels he or she is terrible at math has confused being terrible at math in school with being terrible at math in real life. School math is the problem, not math itself.

Thousands of teachers purchased Mary’s and my math books, took our workshops, and shared with their fellow teachers that it was possible to create an environment in their classrooms that would allow every child to learn mathematics as naturally as they learned everything else before they came to school. However, in spite of the success these teachers were experiencing with their students, their freedom to teach their students in the ways that were best for their learning was taken away from them.

What parents can do is ask their children’s schools to abandon the standardized math tests that only measure their children’s ability to parrot back their textbook’s lessons, and measure their children’s understanding of mathematics instead.

Let’s give teachers the freedom to be teachers. Teaching is not a matter of knowing what page in the textbook we should be on today. Teaching means setting up a learning environment that lets every child learn at his or her own pace with the help of every other child. Let’s give teachers permission to abandon the textbooks and instead, create that learning environment. Let’s make it possible for every child to learn without the fear of failure. It is possible to end illiteracy in America. It is also possible to raise a generation of students who would never think to say, “I am terrible at math!” because they will never have experienced the failure that textbooks and workbooks bring with them.