

Twenty IFs - The Yearly History of a Change in Plans 1969-1970 - Special Education - The Forever School and Five IFs

Mary's and my original plan as the 1969-1970 school year began was to teach at the same school for so long that the children of the children we had taught would be our students, too. We had no thoughts of writing books that would serve as curriculum guides for teaching mathematics, or of publishing a Reading Program, or of becoming teachers of teachers, or of starting a Center. However, a collection of new IFs changed our plans. This chapter is a year-by-year history of the twenty-seven IFs that led to that change in plans.

Changing How Children Felt About Themselves

When I dropped out of law school on the first day of class (see [Chapter 1 - How Mary and Bob Ended Up as Teachers](#)), it was because I wanted to be an age-group swimming coach instead. Becoming an elementary school teacher was only meant to be a side job that would keep me gainfully employed while my young swimmers were themselves in school.

My original coaching plan was based on my desire to change how children felt about themselves, not because I was obsessed with making anyone a better swimmer. It did not occur to me at all that the curriculum being taught in schools was a major cause of the good and bad feelings many children had about themselves. As a student myself, I had been unhappy in school from the fifth-grade on, but my unhappiness had nothing to do with the curriculum being used. Since I had always been a top student, no matter how unhappy I was, the effect of the curriculum on my feelings of self-worth never crossed my mind.

In [Chapter 11 - A K-6 Math Curriculum and One Big IF](#), I responded to a question I was asked about on which educational thinkers or educational philosophies I based my teaching. I answered that the inspiration for my teaching was my friend Keith Bush. I had always known Keith was terrible at school, but I had also always thought, that's just how things were. Always that is, until the Teacher Intern Program made it quite clear to me that the curriculum being taught had a direct effect on how children like my friend Keith felt about themselves.

The focus of the Intern Program was the failure of the curriculum then in use. With that as my focus, my commitment as an Intern Teacher was to abandon that curriculum and create a new one in its place. I still wanted to change how children felt about themselves, but I now saw that I could change their feelings through the curriculum used to teach them. The reason I wanted to remain at a single school for my whole teaching life was because I wanted to affect children's lives, not for a year or two but for generations in the same community.

Mary's reason for becoming a teacher came about because she had been called off a waiting list. The late opening in the Intern Program gave her the opportunity to choose between being a teacher and being a librarian. She picked teacher because the teacher-training came with a salary, while the librarian position simply meant more time in college, for which she would have to pay.

Mary was only looking for work to keep herself gainfully employed while her boyfriend was off at medical school. He was now a long-gone ex-boyfriend, and Mary found that she really loved teaching and the freedom she had been given as a teacher to create her own kindergarten curriculum. So, Mary was quite content to join me in my plan to teach at the same school forever.

1969-1970 - Special Education (EH)

At the beginning of my second year of teaching at Cortez school in Richmond, the Federal Government created funding for a new category of teachers for Educationally Handicapped (EH) students. EH students were defined as children of average intelligence who were substantially below grade level in academic achievement.

The definition was nice, but it did not actually describe what an EH class was like. In the inner-city schools where I taught, about half the children were technically EH, but only one or two children in any class would be singled out as candidates for an EH classroom.

Picture a classroom filled with underachievers. Now, picture a teacher in this classroom full of underachievers having to pick only one or two out of thirty or more children to send to this special EH class. Who would a teacher pick? The child causing the most trouble in his or her classroom, of course. So, while an EH class had a high-sounding description, it was often a dumping ground in the inner-city for children with whom classroom teachers had grown tired of dealing.

For my third year of teaching, I decided to become an EH teacher for a year or two rather than continuing as a fifth-grade teacher. I regarded becoming an EH teacher as a way to concentrate on the learning problems of the bottom students in my class.

I personally did not believe there should be any EH classes at all. I believed every child should be taught in the same classroom, regardless of any learning difficulties. I became an EH teacher so that I could develop ways to teach these bottom students that I could then use to enable these same students to learn just as well in my regular classroom.

East Palo Alto

Mary's and my first two years of teaching were in schools in the Richmond Unified School District, where we had been placed as part of the Intern Program. Once I completed the Intern Program, I planned to teach in East Palo Alto, the inner-city area closest to my family home in Atherton. After returning from our time spent traveling around Europe, Mary and I applied for teaching positions in East Palo Alto.

Mary was hired as a kindergarten teacher at Runnymede School by a Principal who was so impressed with her that he placed his kindergarten-age daughter in her classroom. The principal had planned to send his daughter to the Harker School, a renowned private school whose K-5 tuition is currently \$43,650 a year. He delayed her Harker enrollment until her first-grade year. His daughter's picture can be seen on the cover of Mary's *Workjobs*.

I applied for an EH teaching position. Since the program was still relatively new, there were not yet any teacher-training programs set up to prepare EH teachers. Prospective EH teachers had to convince whoever was doing the hiring that they could do the job.

Keith's Mother

The supervisor in charge of selecting EH teachers assigned me a task that I had to complete to be hired. There was a student named Keith who the supervisor felt really needed to be in the EH program, but Keith's mother adamantly refused to enroll him. Keith's mother was influential in the community, and her negative view of the program could have a negative ripple effect. To be hired as an EH teacher, I had to convince Keith's mother to enroll him in my EH class.

A little background. The Federal Program that created EH had created a variety of other programs, one of which was funding for school-community workers in inner-city areas like Cortez School, where I taught in Richmond and in East Palo Alto, as well. The school-community workers were to serve as a liaison between parents and teachers.

Richmond had been a quick adopter of the program. The school where I taught had two school-community workers who paid frequent visits to my classroom. They really appreciated how much my students seemed to love being in my room and the fact that my class was the only class at Cortez where Black History was being taught.

Neighboring districts were sending their school-community volunteers to Richmond schools to learn from our school-community workers. My classroom was a guaranteed stop for all the visitors to our school.

Guess who Keith's mother was. When I met with her at her home, she recognized me as the teacher whose class in Richmond she had enjoyed visiting a little over a year ago. I recognized her, as well. She was pleased to have me as her son's teacher, EH or not. Task assignment completed. I was now an EH teacher at Kavanaugh School in East Palo Alto.

What Does ALC Stand For?

In East Palo Alto, it had been decided that using the two letters EH to describe classes for educationally handicapped students was not good for the students enrolled in the classes. EH had come to have a negative connotation. To correct this problem, the East Palo Alto classes would now be called ALC, for Accelerated Learning Class. So now I was not an EH teacher, I was an ALC teacher.

My fifth-grade EH class was composed of ten black male students who all had in common being way below grade level and not exactly loved by their previous teachers. On the first day of school, I asked my ALC students what they thought ALC stood for. They all said it stood for "Mentally Retarded." I said, "No! It stands for Accelerated Learning Class. This is a catch-up and pass class. I personally picked every one of you to be in my class because you were all of average or better than average intelligence, but were below grade level. In this class, we will catch up and pass everyone else."

I then taught all of my students how to use a process called lattice multiplication to easily multiply three numbers times three numbers. Lattice multiplication would eventually be included in the Advanced Multiplication chapter of the not-yet-written *Mathematics a Way of Thinking* book. An example of three numbers times three numbers can be found at the bottom of page 127 in that book.

Once I had shown my students how to multiply three numbers by three numbers on that first day, and they had mastered the process, I told them to go show their friends after school what lesson number one had been in their ALC catch-up and pass class.

How children feel about themselves, both as people and as learners, has a major impact on how they will do in school. Apart from the actual teaching involved, my goal was to give my students things to do in and out of class that they could brag about to their friends. What follows are two of many examples.

Cardboard Carpentry

There was one Elementary Science Study unit that I learned about in my first two years of teaching that intrigued me, but that I didn't really feel comfortable using in a full-class situation. That was cardboard

carpentry. Cardboard carpentry uses sheets of cardboard so thick that they must be cut with an electric-powered saber saw.

There was no way I would let any student of mine in a class of thirty or so students use an electric power saw in my classroom. With only ten students in class, a power saw was something the use of which I felt I could comfortably monitor. So, building all kinds of things with cardboard was something my students could do and brag about to others. Two of my students even made themselves a small boat that was still big enough for them to ride together in a local canal.

Swimming Lessons

My ALC classroom came with funding for a teacher's assistant. Coincidentally, the assistant the district hired was the daughter of a woman who had been a schoolmate of my mother. My assistant and I arranged to enroll all our students in a special program designed to provide swimming lessons for EH students.

While we took advantage of our students' EH classification for enrollment, we never shared the actual qualification requirement with them. One advantage of having an assistant was that we now had the two cars we needed to get our students to the pool each week. This was before there were seat belt requirements, so simply cramming five boys in each of our cars was still allowed.

Weekly trips to a swimming pool during school hours. Another thing for my students to brag about.

No Need for The Class I Was Teaching

As I said earlier, I regarded becoming an EH teacher as a way to concentrate on the learning problems of the bottom students in my class. So, what did I learn?

The boys in my class were there because they were discipline problems, not because they were below grade level. You can see in the pre-test scores of my fifth-graders shown in [Introduction - Credibility](#), the average level for my class at the start of that school year was 3.5, meaning third-grade fifth month. Below grade level pretty much described most of that class. However, none of my ten ALC boys were ever discipline problems in my classroom. There was no reason why they had to be discipline problems in any other class, either. They were not the problem. The problem was the curriculum.

My teaching philosophy was and is based on every child helping every other child learn. We still did cooperative learning in my ALC, but the very fact that my students had been separated from all the students

most able to help them served only to slow their learning. Rather than helping students, EH classes were hurting them. What did I learn? I learned there was no need for the class I was teaching.

Open Court

Mary learned from her fellow teachers at Runnymede of a reading program called Open Court, which was being used in a school in San Jose. Mary thought I might be interested in learning more about it for teaching reading to my EH students. Kindergarten did not teach reading, so Mary had no need for the program. I visited that classroom.

What I saw there were pictures of images representing what Open Court said were the 42 sounds of English. Traditional classrooms have pictures of objects with letters underneath, like a picture of an apple with the letter A beneath it, to have the child associate the A with the word apple, or the letter B with a picture of a ball.

The Open Court program replaced the traditional pictures with 42 pictures representing letter sounds, like a picture of a leaking tire associated with the “s” sound. Beneath each sound picture, Open Court listed the letter or letter combinations that could be used to spell that sound. No other use was made of the sound pictures.

As soon as I saw the pictures, I said to myself (and later to Mary) children could use these sound pictures to learn to read before they learn to read with letters. We wrote to the Open Court publisher to convey this thought. Mary’s book *Workjobs* had not yet been published, so we were just two unknown teachers among thousands of other teachers and not even worth responding to. The publisher never answered our letter.

Connections and ITA

The old PBS TV series “Connections” (for which I still have the DVDs) demonstrated the assorted seemingly unrelated links that led to eventual innovations. My “read with-the-pictures” idea had that kind of “Connection”. As I mentioned in the [Summertime](#) section of [Chapter 5 - The Twenty-Two IFs of The Intern Years](#), one of the courses I had taken as part of my master’s degree work at Cal was “Curriculum Trends.” Our professor was one of the developers of the Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA).

Instead of spelling words with the traditional 26 letters of the alphabet, ITA created 18 additional letters, so that each of the 44 (two more than Open Court’s 42) sounds that were used to form every word in the English language now had its own unique letter. ITA was presented to us as the most effective way of teaching then available.

The problem I could see with ITA was that the children who had difficulty with remembering things, or who had perceptual difficulties, would find that the ITA alphabet simply added another layer of confusion to the learning process. ITA might be great, but it still was not the answer I felt I needed for my non-reading fifth-graders.

If I had not randomly taken that course on first-grade reading programs as a part of my master's degree course work, I would not have thought anything at all about the Open Court sound-pictures I saw in that San Jose classroom. However, when I saw the sound pictures, I saw the answer to my concerns about ITA. Among other things, having children learn to read first with the sound-pictures would eliminate the perceptual difficulties my non-reading students had with letters.

Concept – Connecting - Symbolic

The idea of using sound pictures as a starting point offered something else as well. I had already been using a concept-connecting symbolic approach in teaching math to my students (see [Chapter 11 - A K-6 Math Curriculum](#)). To summarize it briefly here, I used manipulative materials to present each new math concept, and only when the concept was understood did I connect it to the number symbols used to record that concept.

It is easy to represent mathematical concepts with materials and then use numbers to record what is already understood. What I had wished for and did not think I would ever find was a way to teach children the concept of reading before the introduction of letters and only introduce letters when the concept of reading was already understood. I had now found that way.

Children could use these sound pictures to learn to read. Once they could read the sound pictures, they could connect them to their letters. They could learn to write, as well. For reading, all we would have to do is put the sound pictures together to form words. For writing, all we would have to do is find a way to give children sound pictures they themselves could use to form their own words.

How to do either of these things? I did not know. However, I had been successful in finding ways to help my students learn things I had not known before. I would find a way to use the sound pictures, as well.

Mayfair – Our New Forever School

I had planned to remain in East Palo Alto for all my teaching life, so much so that Mary and I even put an offer in on a home for sale in Menlo Park (across the freeway from East Palo Alto). Our offer was accepted, but while we were waiting for the Veterans Administration to decide if we

could include a swimming pool with our VA loan, the owner lost patience with us and sold our almost-home to someone else.

Mary had a student-teacher in her kindergarten class at Runnymede who told her about an inner-city school in the Alum Rock School District in San Jose where the principal was specifically looking for teachers wishing for the freedom and the administrative support for creating an innovative curriculum.

Mary visited Mayfair School in Alum Rock and spoke with Jerry Skow, the school's principal, about his plans for his school. Mary was quite impressed and decided to switch from East Palo Alto to Alum Rock for the next school year. Having heard what Mary had learned, I, too, visited the school and agreed with her decision to switch schools.

The principal of the school where I was teaching was not particularly supportive of anything I was doing. She didn't even like that an ALC had been placed at her school. The idea of having a principal who actually liked what I was trying to do was quite appealing. That alone caused me to decide I would see if I could join Mary at Mayfair for the coming school year. The Alum Rock School District had a policy forbidding married couples from working at the same school. My visit with the District Superintendent convinced him to waive that policy for Mary and me.

When I was being interviewed by Jerry, we were interrupted by Jerry's need to rescue a substitute teacher from an out-of-control fifth-grade class whose students were now streaming out of the classroom (it was NOT recess!) and were running all over the playground. The fifth-grade teacher of this apparently often out-of-control group of students was on paternity leave that day. That was my first introduction to Richard Cossen, my soon-to-be best friend, besides Mary, at Mayfair school.

Five IFs

IF Keith's mother had not visited my classroom at Cortez School,
Then I would have taught fifth-grade that year and not the ALC class.
IF Mary had not sent me to visit the classroom using Open Court,
Then the Reading Program's sound-symbol concept would never have occurred to me.

IF I had not taken John Downing's class that introduced me to ITA,
Then my visit to that Open Court class would have had no more effect on me than my visit to the Cuisenaire Words in Color program had.

IF the VA had approved our offer on the Menlo Park home,
Then, Mayfair School would have been too far away from us to consider.

IF Mary's student-teacher had not told her about Mayfair School,
Then we would have spent all our teaching lives in East Palo Alto.