

work group, team, or department involved in making the product. When "front line" people evaluate product quality, the data are immediately provided to the group most likely to improve the product, rather than filtered to them through an accounting department or an audit or inspector brigade far removed from the product—whose data might not be accurate, pertinent, or useful. One might argue from Peters' message that statewide evaluations and competency tests should give way to the collection and analysis of data by small groups of teachers, who would then diagnose students' needs and determine the content of programs.

Peters also suggests the need for small continuous improvements fostered mostly by the workers themselves, not large-scale changes brought in from outside the organization. He cites abundant examples of organizations that routinely implement thousands of suggestions each year and, in fact, actively encourage them. If teachers and students regularly made suggestions on how to im-

prove the quality of the educational program and if their suggestions were implemented quickly and efficiently, imagine what school districts might be like.

Another set of prescriptions focuses on innovations, which Peters says occur through small experimental programs, numerous pilots, the continuous "swiping" of creative ideas from others, and from champions of new ideas within the organization. He devotes an entire section to the support of "fast failures"—small, risk-free pilots with people constantly learning from the ones that fail. Based on his prescriptions, schools with small teams of teachers working together could design experimental programs; find examples of new programs in other schools to pilot, adapt, and modify to suit local needs; and learn from each other and from "failures." If these policies were the norm in education, imagine what kinds of schools we would have.

All five prescriptive areas are richly detailed and described through quotes, stories, case studies, and practical suggestions. For example, Peters

illustrates the need to celebrate the successes of people in the organization and details ways to do it. He focuses on ways for leaders to create inspiring visions and to be visible managers. In a section on measuring what's important, he brilliantly analyzes ways to measure the "intangible" factors of success—service, listening, innovation, responsiveness, support of failures—which educators can use to brainstorm and create new measures of educational success. Almost every page has an idea or a kernel of an idea with significant implications for schools. Few books have the potential to foster major changes in thinking and acting that can have long-term beneficial effects for schools and school systems. This book is one of them. *Thriving on Chaos* can help lead us, and help us lead others, to thriving, innovative, and productive school systems. □

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— LOWELL HORTON —

What Educators Can Learn from Chris Zajac: Observations on *Among Schoolchildren*

Tracy Kidder's keen eye provides a discerning look into the real world of a 5th grade classroom.

Mrs. Zajac means business, Robert. The sooner you realize she never said everybody in the room has to do the work except for Robert, the sooner you will get along with her. And ... Clarence. Mrs. Zajac knows you didn't try. You don't hand in junk to Mrs. Zajac. She's been teaching an awful lot of years. She didn't fall off the turnip cart yesterday. She told you she was an old-lady teacher.¹

So begins Tracy Kidder's latest bestseller, *Among Schoolchildren*, an engaging account of the day-by-day experiences of one teacher and one group of 5th grade children in a deteriorating neighborhood in a rust-belt community. The experiences observed and recorded, while warm

and involving, are not unlike the experiences of thousands of teachers in hundreds of schools every day. This, as much as anything else, accounts for the book's wide popularity. In it, the typical, the everyday, the mundane are elevated to heroic dimensions. A common experience, turned on its end

Kidder's account captures the warmth and satisfactions as well as the frustrations and sometimes pain found in classrooms where teachers care about children.

and viewed through fresh eyes, is a formula for engagement and introspection. And Tracy Kidder uses this formula as well as any writer today.

In preparing for his assignment, Kidder did extensive reading in the educational literature. He is especially impressed with Lortie's *Schoolteacher*, and he refers to Goodlad's *A Place Called School* and to Cuban's *How Teachers Taught*. *Constancy and Change in American Classrooms*, among other publications. Although conversant with the standard works in the history of education, he only occasionally attempts to relate what he observes and records to the literature. Rather, he is satisfied to let the day-to-day classroom drama speak for itself.

Kidder spent one full year immersed in the life of Chris Zajac's 5th grade classroom, recording the drama of the commonplace unfolding there in a way that demonstrates, by its wide appeal and acceptance, that teaching is one of our most human undertakings. His account captures the warmth and satisfactions as well as the frustrations and sometimes pain found in classrooms where teachers care about children. And Chris does care about her pupils. She works hard to teach them and to see that they get the social services they need. More often than not, though, she is frustrated by a bureaucracy which, while not uncaring, simply cannot serve the needs of the teachers and students for whom it was created in the first place.

But Chris is pleased with her career choice. Her classroom is her kingdom. She has almost total autonomy there, but she has almost no control over curriculum, textbooks, student services, or any part of her professional life outside the classroom. This is an interesting dilemma in public school education, but it is one Chris and her colleagues apparently do not question. They understand that some decisions are not part of their job and freely accept this limitation of power. But the understanding that what they do in their classrooms is almost entirely up to them is as clearly understood. For example, one day in the teachers' lounge, Chris consciously avoids a discussion on discipline on the principle that it is none of her business what other teachers do in their classrooms.

What else is to be learned from Chris Zajac? Above all, she is a pragmatist, with no time for nor apparent interest in esoteric learning theory, research design, or a well-constructed philosophy of education. The educational literature gets short shift from Chris. While she occasionally casts about for new ideas, she seems interested only in those with immediate applicability for her classroom. Neither is she interested in pilot projects, in consciously fitting new methods into extant theoretical frameworks—or in considering philosophical ramifications of her decision. "If it seems like a good idea, I'll try it," is her approach, put simply.

Chris's colleagues are similar in their orientation. In the teachers' room, there is little talk about academic matters, the latest research findings, or learning theory. The talk is generalized and detached; one opinion has as much credibility as another. Often the value of an opinion is as dependent on who holds it as it is on its demonstrated validity. The principal's opinions appear to have the most weight, not that they are any more based in professional knowledge but by virtue of his position. One can look long and hard to find any connection between Chris's school and the intellectual community or the education hierarchy. The topics in most of the educational literature and the formats of our educational conferences are only tangentially connected to the real life of the classroom. Rather, Chris's concerns are with misbehaving children, many of whom find ways to subvert her best efforts to get them to do their work; with parents who are unwilling or unable to control children's bedtimes or fix them breakfast before sending them to school; and with practical matters like aching feet from standing for long hours and feeling isolated from other teachers.

The reading public will almost certainly find Chris Zajac a courageous and admirable personality. Her public image will reflect well on all teachers. Indeed, more people will form a favorable opinion and understanding of schools and teachers from this book than from reams of government and foundation reports, scholarly dissertations, and statistical treatments.

A thoughtful educator, though, has to come away from the experience with mixed feelings. The admiration for Chris is undeniable: she is warm, caring, and skillful, but she is by no means Superteacher. In fact, some educators will find fault with her methods, with the hard edge balanced between humor and sarcasm in her discipline, and with her understanding of professionalism. And she and her colleagues are heroic as often as they are petty. Further, their well-meaning but only sometimes effective principal is interchangeable with administrators we all have known and endured. But, it is clear that the school is not meeting the needs of its clients, and those who work in it seem not to have the essential insights needed to think of teaching and learning in novel ways. Things are done pretty much as they have always been done, and if children aren't learning—well, then the teacher can just try harder.

While the professional literature is replete with references to the revolution taking place in education and while consultants hold seminars on dealing with change, Chris Zajac's classroom is remarkable for its stability. The reader comes to understand that a teacher from a hundred years ago would not feel much out of touch with the methods of the classroom or with the organization of the school. This is the way schools are, the way they have been, the way they are supposed to be—and the way they are likely to remain. □

¹T. Kidder, (1989). *Among Schoolchildren* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company).

Author's note: Since I wrote this article, I've learned that director Steven Spielberg is making *Among Schoolchildren* into a movie for Universal Studios.

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