



A LEARNING COMMUNITY IN THE PRIMARY CLASSROOM

Jere Brophy, Janet Alleman, and Barbara Knighton

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Jere Brophy

Michigan State University

Janet Alleman

Michigan State University

Barbara Knighton

Waverly Community Schools &

Winans Elementary School



First published 2010
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Sabon by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in the United States of America on acid-free
paper by IBT Global

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN13: 978-0-8058-5573-9 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-8058-5574-6 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978-0-203-85182-1 (ebk)

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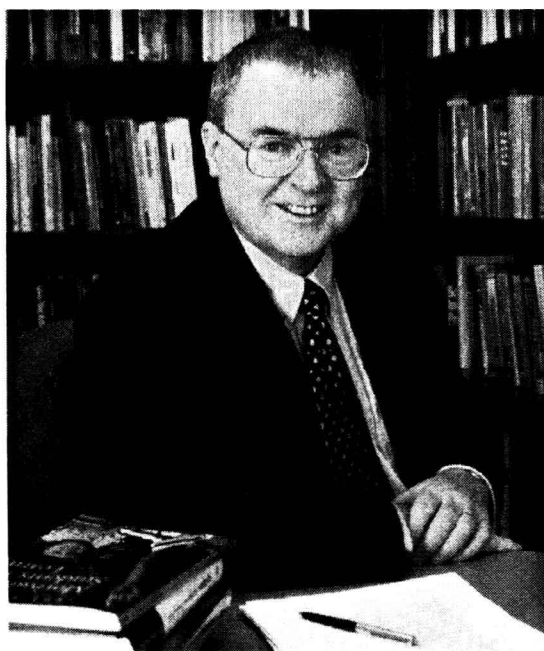
This richly detailed description and analysis of exemplary teaching in the primary grades looks at how a teacher establishes her classroom as a collaborative learning community, how she plans curriculum and instruction that feature powerful ideas and applications to life outside of school, and how, working within this context, she motivates her students to learn with a sense of purpose and thoughtful self-regulation. The supporting analyses, which ground the teacher's practice in principles from curriculum and instruction, educational psychology, and related sources of relevant theory and research, are designed to allow teacher-readers to develop coherent understanding and appreciation of the subtleties of her practice and how they can be applied to their own.

Resulting from a lengthy collaboration among an educational psychologist, a social studies educator, and a classroom teacher, the aspects and principles of good teaching this book details are widely applicable across elementary schools, across the curriculum, and across the primary grade levels. To help readers understand the principles and adapt them to their particular teaching situations, an appendix provides reflection questions and application activities.

Jere Brophy was University Distinguished Professor of Teacher Education and Educational Psychology, Michigan State University. Jere passed away shortly after completing this book.

Janet Alleman is Professor of Teacher Education, Michigan State University.

Barbara Knighton is an Early Elementary Educator, Waverly Community Schools & Winans Elementary School, Michigan.



This book is dedicated to our dear friend and co-author, Jere Brophy.

Shortly after our manuscript was sent to the editor, Jere Brophy sadly passed away. Jere was a dedicated husband, a proud father and grandfather, and a world-renowned educator. His unwavering commitment to excellence and his thoughtfulness inspired everyone who knew him. Jere was humble, kind, exhibited a dry sense of humor, expressed equity and equality in all his actions, and was truly brilliant! He was an amazing researcher, teacher, colleague, and friend.

Preface

This book is a product of years of collaborative research, development, and reflection on teaching conducted by a team consisting of a researcher on teaching, a social studies educator, and a primary teacher. It describes in rich detail and illustrates with excerpts from recorded lessons how primary teachers can establish and maintain their classrooms as collaborative learning communities and teach subject matter in ways that focus it around big ideas and personalize it to their students' prior experiences and home backgrounds.

The team's collaboration culminated in the kind of research that produces findings of most interest and value to teachers and teacher educators: fine-grained analysis of exemplary teaching. The work began with development of instructional units that were suited to the developmental stages and prior knowledge levels of primary students, yet much more coherent and powerful than what was found in the major publishers' textbook series. The next step involved audiotaping and observing an exemplary primary teacher who adapted the units to her students' personal backgrounds and taught them in her classroom. The resulting sets of transcripts and supporting field notes, compiled over several years, then were analyzed by team members to elaborate what occurred in detail and induce principles of good teaching.

These analyses were unusually penetrating, including not only rich description of the teacher–student interaction that occurred during lessons, but detailed information about how and why the teacher adapted the lesson plans to her students' needs and background experiences, how and why she adjusted these plans to take advantage of teachable moments or react to other events that developed during teaching, and what all of this might imply concerning principles of practice.

As the collaboration developed, the two professors became increasingly impressed with the teacher's practice, not just in social studies but across the curriculum, and not just in how she taught subject matter but in how she addressed her students' affective and social needs. She shaped each new class into a coherent learning community in which members

shared responsibilities to one another and to the class as a whole, including learning collaboratively and interacting supportively.

The ways that she reached out to include her students' families were especially noteworthy. She took pains to establish collaborative relationships with them and to learn things that would enable her to personalize her curriculum by incorporating connections to her students and their family members. She also displayed impressive classroom management skills (in her classroom, very little time is lost from lessons and activities to accomplish transitions or deal with behavioral issues), and infused a remarkable volume and variety of motivational elements into her teaching.

She was consciously goal-oriented in planning and implementing lessons and learning activities that "brought home" the curriculum by connecting it to her students' lived experiences. She also was reflective and analytic as she assessed each day and planned adjustments for the future. She consistently communicated learning goals and strategies to her students, modeling the self-talk involved in active and self-regulated learning, and in other ways helping them to remain metacognitively aware of their learning goals and strategies and prepared to make adjustments if necessary (even though they were still in the primary grades).

Eventually, our collaboration accumulated more than enough lesson transcripts, observational field notes, interview material, and analytic summaries to provide a basis not only for writing the originally intended book on the teacher's curriculum and instruction in social studies (Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2008), but this volume as well. It describes and analyzes how she establishes her learning communities at the beginning of each new school year; maintains learning community norms through her daily classroom management throughout the rest of the year; incorporates motivation, modeling, and metacognition into her teaching in ways that encourage her students to become active and self-regulated learners; adapts or elaborates her basic instruction to meet the special needs of individual students; and plans and implements coherent teaching of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies. The book concludes with a chapter on how she sustains her own professional motivation and remains reflective and growth-oriented, always seeking to find ways to improve as a teacher.

This book focuses on how an exemplary teacher establishes her classroom as a collaborative learning community, and working within this context, motivates her students to learn with a sense of purpose and thoughtful self-regulation. The supporting analyses ground her practice in principles from curriculum and instruction, educational psychology, and related sources of relevant theory and research. They are designed to develop coherent understanding and appreciation of the subtleties of her practice, synthesized in enough detail to allow preservice and inservice

teacher-readers to understand it well enough to be able to apply it in their own teaching—not just by rote imitation, but adapting it to their own students and teaching circumstances.

The teacher worked in a school serving primarily working-class and lower-middle-class students of mixed racial and ethnic backgrounds, so the principles of practice derived from research in her classroom are likely to be applicable in most elementary schools in the United States. In addition, as will be seen when reading the details, most of the principles developed from this work are applicable to teaching across the curriculum and across the elementary grades (not just the primary grades).

Although not written as a textbook, the book should be useful as a text for courses in preschool and primary education, as well as courses in general elementary education. It is rich with explanations and examples relating to both the content (structured around powerful ideas) and the processes (engaging students in thoughtful participation in authentic learning activities) involved in creating powerful learning experiences for young learners. To help readers understand the principles and adapt them for application to their particular teaching situations, it concludes with an appendix that features reflection questions and application activities.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the colleagues, students, and teachers who have collaborated with our work and enriched our understanding of classroom teaching and learning. This includes the faculty and staff of the College of Education at Michigan State University, an institution that exemplifies the concept of learning community and nurtures groundbreaking and collaborative work such as ours.

We also wish to express our appreciation to two individuals who provided vital text processing support to the project. June Benson was our secretary throughout most of the years of our collaboration. She consistently handled manuscript preparation and other normal secretarial tasks with efficiency and good humor, but in addition, produced remarkably complete and accurate transcriptions of observational field notes and audiotapes of classroom lessons. Her successor, Amy Peebles, has continued to provide us with very high-quality text processing support, including preparation of the manuscript for this book.

Although this book is dedicated to Jere Brophy, who passed away suddenly shortly after this manuscript was sent to the publisher, we want to acknowledge Arlene Pintozzi Brophy and Janet Alleman's spouse, George Trumball, for their unwavering patience and support.

We also wish to thank the administrative staff of the Waverly Community Schools for supporting our research and work together, especially Ruth Foster, the principal who first suggested and supported our collaboration. We also thank the families of Barbara's students over the years who agreed to allow their children to participate in our research.

Finally, Barbara would like to thank her husband, Keith, for being the one to say, "You should be a teacher if that's what makes you happy," and also for allowing his life to be an ongoing social studies lesson, complete with photos, vacations, and innumerable conversations devoted to developing big ideas with young learners.

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Introduction

This book is about teaching in the primary grades (K-3). It offers a detailed analysis of effective primary teaching, illustrated with excerpts from audiotapes recorded in first- and second-grade classrooms. It demonstrates the importance of molding a class of diverse students into a collaborative learning community. It also reveals that primary students can learn with enthusiasm a much more substantive and coherent curriculum than they usually receive, when a skilled teacher connects this content to the students' prior knowledge and home cultures and develops it with emphasis on understanding, appreciation, and life application. Finally, it shows how this kind of powerful and challenging teaching can be embedded within a supportive environment that attends as much to the students' affective and social needs as to their learning needs.

This is one of two books developed through a unique collaboration between two university professors and a primary-grade teacher. Jere Brophy was a developmental and educational psychologist whose work prior to the collaboration focused on teachers' expectations and attitudes as they related to their patterns of interaction with their students, classroom management, student motivation, and generic aspects of effective teaching that cut across grade level and subject matter. Janet Alleman is a social studies educator whose previous work focused on curriculum, instruction, and assessment in elementary social studies and the teaching of undergraduate and graduate courses in social studies education. Barbara Knighton is a classroom teacher who has worked with primary students for 15 years and recently shifted to fourth grade. She enjoys a reputation for being a very successful teacher.

Our Partnership

Collaborations between professors and teachers are likely to be challenging but potentially productive because these two groups of educators often hold contrasting views about best practice (Brophy, Prawat, & McMahon, 1991; Hinitz, 1992; Marker & Mehlinger, 1992). Professors

tend to criticize teachers for relying too much on textbooks, teaching isolated facts and skills without enough emphasis on coherent structures and application opportunities, being overly accepting of textbook content as valid, and being unjustifiably pessimistic about what students are capable of learning. Teachers tend to criticize professors for being too academic and middle class in their orientation, overemphasizing generalizations from the disciplines while underemphasizing humanistic or value elements and content that is important in the students' lives or currently in the news, underemphasizing the need for direct teaching to develop a strong base of concepts and factual information before undertaking problem solving, and overemphasizing experimentation, inquiry/discovery, or other approaches to teaching that often are either impractical for classroom use or not worth the time and trouble they require (Leming, 1989; Shaver, 1987; Stanley, 1985).

Our collaboration bridges these tensions in ways that address the concerns of both professors and teachers and lead to powerful instructional programs for young students. It had its origins in the 1980s, when Jere and Jan conducted fine-grained analysis and critique of several elementary social studies textbook series, looking comprehensively at their instructional goals, content selection and representation, questions and activities suggested as ways to develop the content, and assessment components. Then, after working inductively to identify effective practices, they developed a teacher education textbook (Brophy & Alleman, 1996, 2007) and many articles on improving elementary social studies curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Textbooks and teachers' manuals are just resources, however; it is teachers who determine the curricula that students actually experience in their classrooms (Thornton, 2005). Recognizing this, Jere and Jan shifted their focus from analyses of instructional materials to analyses of ongoing classroom instruction, based on field notes recorded during observations and subsequent analyses of audiotape transcripts. Their intention was to analyze powerful social studies teaching in detail, and then induce models or sets of principles that captured the essence of this teaching and could be incorporated into teacher education programs.

To provide a content base for such powerful teaching, Jan and Jere produced full-scale instructional units (with detailed resources), in which not only the goals and big ideas but the content to be developed and the associated learning and assessment activities were elaborated at length. These units focused on cultural universals, the same topics emphasized in the textbook series and in most states' elementary social studies guidelines, but they were much richer in content and much more clearly structured around big ideas than conventional units. Jan and Jere eventually produced nine of these units, on food, clothing, shelter, communication, transportation, family living, childhood, money, and government. The

units were published as a three-volume series designed for use by elementary teachers (Alleman & Brophy, 2001, 2002, 2003).

Barbara Joins the Team

While developing the units, Jan and Jere searched for collaborators who could teach them at high levels of effectiveness and would allow us to observe and collect data in their classrooms. Gradually, our search focused on Barbara Knighton, who appealed to us for several reasons.

First, people familiar with her work led us to believe that she was an unusually good teacher, and our own early contacts with her and observations in her classroom reinforced this impression. She was warm, nurturant, and sensitive to the needs and interests of her students, but also concerned about developing their knowledge and skills and systematic in her efforts to do so. The clarity and detail with which she was able to talk about her teaching suggested that she would provide unusually observant and detailed feedback as she field-tested our units.

Second, although she had never participated in a similar collaboration, Barbara felt ready and willing to do so because she viewed it as an opportunity to improve the weakest aspect of her teaching. As an experienced teacher who had received a lot of positive feedback, she had come to view herself as a skilled professional and was generally well satisfied with most aspects of her curriculum and instruction, but she knew that she did not have a clear vision of social studies.

Third, she taught in the public schools of a bedroom suburb of Lansing, Michigan, in a district that served a racially and ethnically diverse but socioeconomically midrange population. Most of her students lived in modest homes or apartments. Many came from traditional and intact families, but typically half or more lived with a single parent (divorced, separated, or never married), were members of reconstituted families, were being raised by grandparents or other relatives, or lived in adoptive or foster homes.

Within this district context, there was nothing special about the school in which Barbara taught (it was not a magnet school or a school that did anything special in social studies). Nor was there anything special about Barbara's assignment (she was a regular classroom teacher) or students (classes were not grouped by ability). If anything, she was likely to be assigned a few more of the most challenging students (e.g., autistic, behavior disordered) because of her reputation for good management. These classroom setting aspects appealed to us because they meant that what we observed in her classroom would have much broader generalizability than it would if we observed in a school near the university, where most of the students were achievement-oriented children of unusually well-educated parents.

As it happened, over the next several years Barbara's teaching context shifted in ways that allowed us to observe her working under varying conditions. She taught a self-contained first-grade class for several years, then collaborated with a second-grade teacher in a multi-age teaming arrangement for two years, then taught self-contained first- and second-grade classes within a looping arrangement for several years, then returned to teaching self-contained first-grade classes. When looping, she taught a new first-grade group one year, retained the same students the next year for second grade, and then started over with a new class of first-graders the following year.

Finally, Barbara understood and found appealing our emphasis on structuring curricula around big ideas. She was familiar with the problems implied by terms such as emphasizing breadth at the expense of depth, trivial pursuit curriculum, and mile-wide but inch-deep, so she immediately recognized the potential power of structuring curricula around big ideas developed with emphasis on their connections and applications.

Negotiating Understandings and Inducing Principles

Jan and Jere's instructional units supplied Barbara with a content base structured around major goals and big ideas, along with suggestions for activities and assessments. Barbara then applied her professional experience and her knowledge of pedagogy and her students to adapt and elaborate on these plans in preparation for teaching the units in her classroom.

Whenever Barbara taught one of our units, Jan would come to her class to tape record and take notes. Her notes described how the day's instruction went and identified where and how Barbara did anything more or different than what our unit plans called for. Jan also noted any other information that might be needed later to add context to the verbalizations that would appear in the transcripts (e.g., use of books, photos, or other instructional resources; involvement of special education teachers or any other adults who were present during the lesson). As soon as possible following the instruction, Jan also would get Barbara's impressions of the day's activities.

Once the tapes were transcribed, the three collaborators analyzed them in exhaustive detail. Prior to a half-day meeting each week, Jere, Jan, and Barbara independently studied and made notes on copies of the transcripts. Then, during the meetings, we worked our way slowly through the transcripts, raising questions, making observations, and offering interpretations.

These analyses included two levels: clarifying specifics and inducing generalities. *Clarifying specifics* involved filling in gaps or correcting any

misinterpretations about what had occurred. This included such things as filling in missing words or making corrections in places where the transcriber had rendered a word incorrectly, noting that Barbara had been pointing to a photo at a certain point in the transcript, or clarifying whether she had stayed with the previous respondent or had called on a new one when she asked a follow-up question. These clarifications ensured that all three of us shared a common understanding of what was happening at each point in the lesson.

Induction of generalizations occurred as we discussed the potential implications of these events: What had worked very well and what had been less successful, and why? Which content explanations, question sequences, and activity segments were very well implemented, and which might have been improved (and how and why)? We did not always develop clear and confident answers to these questions, but frequently we did, and many of these conclusions about specific lessons provided bases for inducing principles that have broader ranges of application.

As Jere and Jan became more familiar with Barbara's teaching, they began to raise questions about issues that went beyond social studies, such as how she set up and maintained a productive interpersonal climate in her classroom, her approaches to classroom management and student motivation, and how she developed knowledge about her students and their families and then used this knowledge to personalize her curriculum.

Summaries of the understandings and generalizations that we negotiated in our meetings were preserved in meeting notes, and these were later revisited for potential alteration or elaboration. Over several years, we accumulated a volume and variety of notes (along with the transcripts they were based on) that went well beyond what we had envisioned when we started. Also, Jan began to visit Barbara's classroom to tape record and take notes at times when Barbara was doing things other than teaching social studies. Those visits focused in particular on the beginning of the year (when Barbara was connecting with families and socializing her new students into their roles as members of her classroom learning community), the end of the year (synthesis and culmination activities), and key lessons in literacy, mathematics, and science.

Over the years, Barbara became a more complete partner in our collaboration, and we often spent time developing models and principles of good teaching of primary-grade children in general, not just in social studies. We ended up with more than enough material to write not only a book on powerful teaching of primary-grade social studies (Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2008), but also this companion volume on building a learning community in the primary classroom. It deals mostly with generic rather than subject-specific aspects of good primary teaching.

Focus of the Book

This book focuses on principles of best practice in planning and implementing primary teaching. Its analyses are more fine-grained and extended than those found in methods texts, because the material is drawn from thick description data collected over several years in the classroom of a talented teacher. Many of the principles are elaborated within the context of existing theory and research on best practice. However, the instruction documented here goes well beyond these existing guidelines, both by elaborating what is involved in implementing them and by suggesting additional guidelines that break new ground. The book exemplifies the subtleties involved in teaching at a very high level, based on collaborative analyses that surfaced many of these subtleties and developed guidelines for implementing them.

We believe that Barbara's teaching would be judged as highly effective according to just about any commonly accepted criterion, and that it is far more coherent and powerful than what is offered in most primary classrooms. We do not mean to suggest that it is the only or even necessarily the best way to teach primary students, but we can say that it worked well with her students, and given the diversity of the students she teaches, it should work well in most schools in the country.

We offer a coherent view of Barbara's teaching that reflects the consensus we developed over several years of frequent meetings. To simplify the presentation, we have personalized it around Barbara as the central actor (e.g., talking about Barbara's goals, how Barbara motivates students, and so on). However, these passages also reflect Jan and Jere's ideas. Therefore, except in a very few instances where the text explicitly states otherwise, it should be assumed that Jan and Jere support Barbara's approaches to teaching and her underlying rationales as described in this book, and endorse them as models of exemplary teaching practice.

As we elaborate on Barbara's teaching, we identify its major features, place them into context by reviewing relevant theory and research, and illustrate them with examples drawn from lesson transcripts, field notes, and our frequent interviews with her. These examples illustrate Barbara's teaching of first- or second-graders. Many are paraphrased or embedded in the text as brief quotes, but some are edited transcript excerpts. Most of the editing was done either to: (1) delete or change the names of students, teachers, or other individuals (to protect their anonymity); or (2) delete material that was tangential to the flow of the lesson around the points selected for highlighting in the excerpt (e.g., interruptions that occurred when the principal broadcast an announcement or a special education teacher came to pick up or return one of Barbara's students).

In this first chapter, we have explained the rationale for our work and described how our collaboration developed and functioned. In

Chapters 2, 3, and 4, we back up, broaden our lens, and analyze what she does to establish the classroom as a collaborative community, how she communicates with families, and how she manages her classroom on a day-to-day basis.

In Chapter 5, we introduce Barbara's teaching style, highlighting her storytelling approach to introducing new content to her students. Because she works in the primary grades, much of what she teaches is new to her students, and much of the rest is currently available to them only in the form of experience-based tacit knowledge (they have not yet thought about it systematically or articulated clearly-formulated understandings of it). Consequently, storytelling lessons like those illustrated in Chapter 5 occur frequently in Barbara's classroom, and incorporate many of the most salient features of her approach to teaching.

Chapter 5 also appears (as Chapter 4) in our companion volume on Barbara's social studies teaching (Brophy, Alleman, & Knighton, 2008). It is reproduced here (with additional examples drawn from the other core subjects) because the narrative style that Barbara uses to build content bases in social studies is the same style that she uses to build content bases in the other subjects. It also is among the most striking and characteristic features of her teaching, so we introduce it early in the book as a way to give readers a richly descriptive and professionally absorbing introduction to her practice—the same kind of introduction you would get if you visited her classroom on a typical day.

Chapters 6 to 8 describe and analyze how Barbara implements some of the qualitative aspects of her teaching, such as motivating students to learn, modeling the self-talk that guides learning, and meeting special needs within her inclusive classroom. Chapters 9 to 12 explain how she approaches instructional planning and her teaching of each of the major school subjects.

In the final chapter, we provide highlights of Barbara's inspiring philosophy of what it means to constantly renew oneself and grow as a professional.