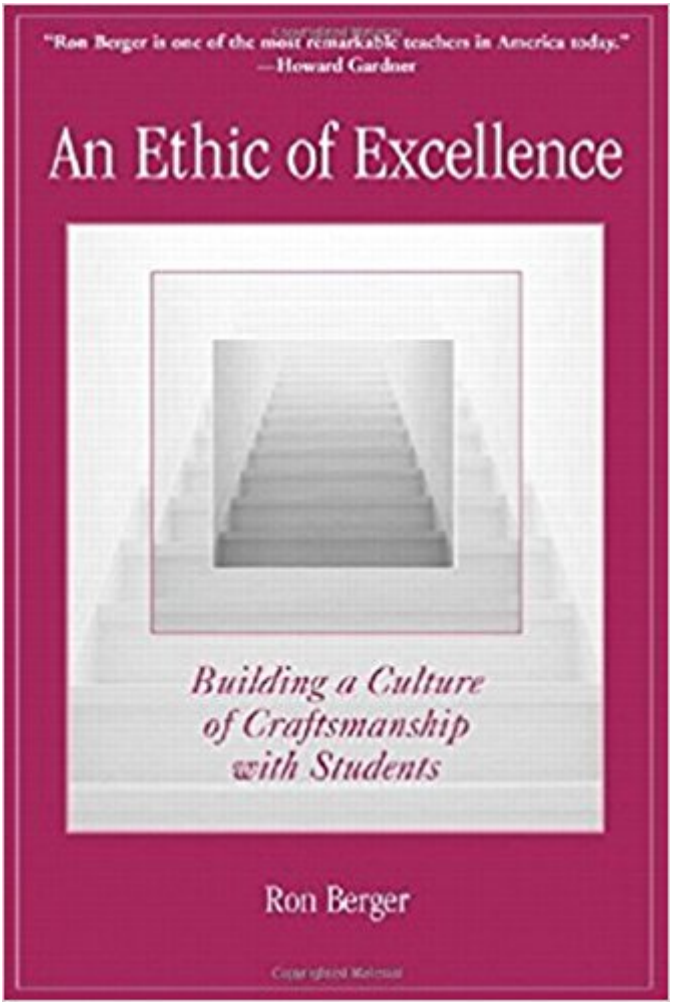
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An Ethic Of Excellence: Building A Culture Of Craftsmanship With Students



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Synopsis

Drawing from his own remarkable experience as a veteran classroom teacher (still in the classroom), Ron Berger gives us a vision of educational reform that transcends standards, curriculum, and instructional strategies. He argues for a paradigm shift - a schoolwide embrace of an "ethic of excellence." A master carpenter as well as a gifted teacher, Berger is guided by a craftsman’s passion for quality, describing what’s possible when teachers, students, and parents commit to nothing less than the best. But Berger’s not just idealistic, he’s realistic - he tells exactly how this can be done, from the blackboard to the blacktop to the school boardroom.

Book Information

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Age Range: 7 - 13 years

Grade Level: 2 - 8

Customer Reviews

Ã¢â ¬Å“. . . an important book for our time, for teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â œAnn Lieberman, Senior Scholar, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of TeachingÃ¢â ¬Å“Stop everything youre doing and take the time to really read this. Not once. Not even twice, but over and over. Make your colleagues read it . . . every legislator and policymaker ought to too, so they can see when and where their favorite, best-designed, top-down mandates may actually hinder this kind of culture of high standards. But, of course, what in the end makes it such a good read is in the details, those precious and well-told stories of what the real stuff looks like.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â œDeborah Meier, Coprincipal, Mission Hill School, BostonÃ¢â ¬Å“Ron

Berger is one of the most remarkable teachers in America today. He sets incredibly high standards in his classes and his students measure up to those standards. Yet Ron Bergers authentic standards bear little resemblance to what passes for standards in todays test-obsessed America. For a reminder of what education can and should be, read this passionate book - and give it to every policymaker whom you know.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â œHoward Gardner, Harvard Graduate School of EducationÃ¢â ¬Å“. . . passionate stories from an inspiring, ever imaginative teacher whose demands on his students are high and those on himself even higher. He writes of teaching as an ethic . . . a way of thinking . . . that is built carefully by hand, a craft that defies "scaling up" in mechanistic ways and that requires powerful, autonomous work close to the students.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â œTheodore R. Sizer, Founder, Coalition of Essential Schools

Ron Berger has been a public school teacher in western Massachusetts for 25 years. He works with the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound school network, Harvard Project Zero, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

For an independent reading project, I chose to read An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students by Ron Berger, published by Heinemann. The paperback is 156 pages and priced currently on at $21.55. I was intrigued by the premise of this book as my family is currently in the midst of remodeling our home. I have really come to notice and appreciate the craftsmanship of the different skilled workers who have dedicated their talents to our project. Ron Berger is a carpenter but also a teacher, and profoundly extends this idea of craftsmanship to the sphere of education.Berger is direct in explaining there are no quick fixes and no proven steps for success in this endeavor. This may be frustrating to some, but I agree with his assessment and appreciate his clarification. Berger provides well-developed ideas and specific examples but places the responsibility on teachers to understand their own unique environments and apply the information he presents.Berger organizes his ideas into three ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“toolboxes.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• His first toolbox, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“School Culture of Excellence,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• suggests the power of culture by posing the question, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“What if being normal in a school, fitting in, means caring about your work and treating others with respect?ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (P36) Berger believes relationships are essential in shaping this sort of culture, and opposes the notion that bigger is better in education. He contends that although facilities should not be poorly maintained, community is lost in our movement in education towards larger districts offering more amenities. While I agree with much of

BergerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s assessment on school culture, I am disappointed that Berger does not offer much past a condolence that teachers, in reality, have little to no control over this area.Berger devoted the most time to his second toolbox ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Work of Excellence.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• BergerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s emphasis on utilizing models particularly resonated with me. I personally find it so much easier to critique than create. I would rather have an example, identify areas of excellence and areas for improvement, and then apply this knowledge to my own undertaking. Berger explains that he uses a variety of models to encourage creativity, but I believe originality would still be at risk and a disadvantage to consider for this practice.I appreciated that Berger emphasized quality over quantity, and the expectation of multiple drafts for work. He contrasted this to his experience as a student where ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“the norm was one draft; anything else was a failure.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (P89) Berger shared how often in his travels that others assumed he was sharing the work of gifted students because of the quality. The quality, however, was a result of hard work and revisions, not innate ability. I found this encouraging and believe this reflects how quality and success in the real world are achieved as well.I was impressed with the opportunities that Berger designed for students to interact with adults and publicly display their work. I am often surprised at my own kidsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ ability or lack of ability to interact appropriately in certain situations, and definitely believe this is a useful skill. I also think Berger identified a very important motivator with students displaying their work publicly. Even in my house project, each craftsman is excited to share their work with my family. They have taken the time needed to complete it to the best of their ability and they are proud of it. They want others to see it and appreciate it. I believe this is true a thousand times over for students and can be employed through so many different avenues.Finally in the second toolbox, I liked BergerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s insistence that projects do not have to be viewed as additional activities. In his classroom, they are standard aligned curriculum. I appreciate his dedication to work being completed in the classroom instead of assigning projects primarily as homework. I believe this more fairly supports all students to be successful since resources and support at home can vary significantly. Berger also stresses giving students important work; work that they know matters. I agree this engages students and improves effort.In his third toolbox, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Teaching of Excellence,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• Berger empathizes that teaching is a calling which makes the desire of educational decision makers to ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“teacher-proof curriculumÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (P126) especially heartbreaking. Berger laments the increasing number of teachers who feel ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“isolated, self-protective, and insecure.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (p128) Berger contrasts the United States to other countries where teachers are better supported and better results with students are observed. As with the first

toolbox, while I appreciate BergerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s insight and agree with much of his analysis, there is not much provided for teachers to be able to improve this area.I would recommend this book to educators as an inspiration to revitalize your passion for excellence and a continued treasure of resources upon which to reflect. Berger described the portrait of a teacher who did not care and poignantly concluded that the teacher probably did not begin that way. This book is a good start down a better path. As Berger exhorts, ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“start smallÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â¦do something well and build from there.ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (P152)

This book is simply extraordinary. What you have here is not politically correct mumbo-jumbo, nor radical institution bashing. This book is the result of 25 years of Berger refining his own craft (one of many, in fact), namely being a good teacher, evaluating what works and what doesn't, thinking about it deeply, observing patterns, and delivering them in this gem of a book with dozens of anecdotes to prove his points.Berger's insight into learning, society, community, politics and human nature is astounding. If you yourself are the kind of person who think deeply about this kind of thing you will find that Berger summarises your conclusions in simple sentences with huge impact. I've never thought "exactly, that's exactly what I think" while reading a book as much as this one.My field is music education and more specifically composition in music education. I have folders and folders of beautiful work made by children who reworked and reworked draft after draft. I felt the pressure of the paperwork to move onto the next part of the syllabus, but resisted it to allow students more weeks to refine their work and make something truly jaw-dropping. Transformative. Inspirational.This is the approach that Berger takes - but there's so much more in this book. It points out that the route to success (by which he means both happy, engaged children *and* better grades) is not always easy, and involves more of a philosophical approach to our jobs as teachers (and leaders in our communities) than taking up a bunch of dot points to follow. There's a lifetime of hard work to do. And then he shows why it's worth it.

Berger's anecdotes and reflections are very captivating can be easily read within a few hours. I believe his project & research based approach with high expectations of students and rework until quality is achieved works and should be a championed approach to engaging students' learning through authentic projects and community impact. I just wish he had more examples of how this could be implemented in secondary education where a teacher can only hold students for an hour a day instead of in elementary school, where a teacher can teach interdisciplinary projects more easily because they hold dominion of the students for the whole day and can devote hours each day

to a singular project. Practicality-wise, our secondary & middle schools simply are not going to switch to a 1 teacher format, so I wonder what the best way to is to wrap some of his work into higher grade teaching, because it truly is valuable.

This book provides a completely different side to educational practice as opposed to the typical focus on the asumption that high test scores are the only gauge of student learning and pre-scripted curriculum, canned instruction, and narrow administrative evaluation are the only ways to achieve that "high level of learning". In other words, if you are looking for a quick fix approach to improving student test scores, you will not glean much from this book. Mr. Berger offers an approach to quality student learning though authentic learning experiences for kids as well as ongoing learning for the teachers working alongside their students. Using his experience as a carpenter as a backdrop for his success as a teacher, Mr. Berger provides three toolboxes that collectively provide a clear picture of what an excellent school culture, excellent student work, and excellent teaching look like. As a secondary school principal constantly looking for ways to improve his school, this book provided a tremendous example of what is possible in public education. If you are serious about quality change in our schools - this is a must read for you and for your staff.

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