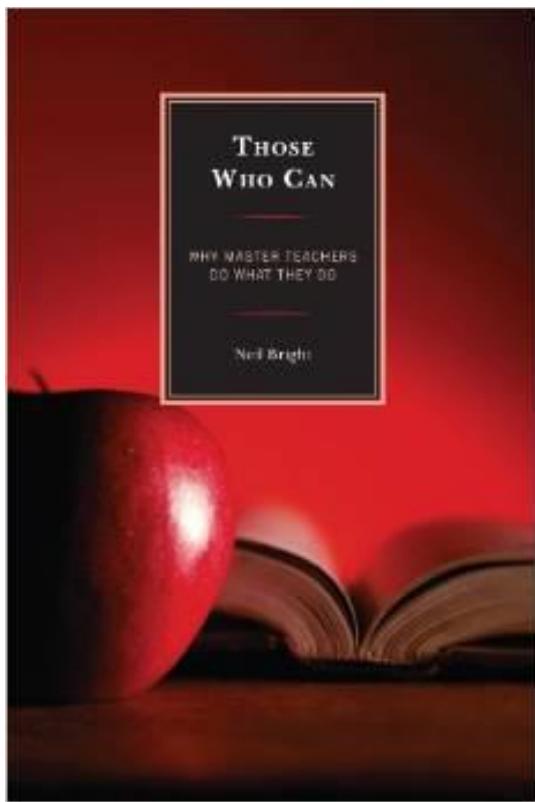


Book Review

Why Master Teachers Do What They Do

“Those Who Can” by Neil Bright

By Meghan E. Marrero



In *Those Who Can: Why Master Teachers Do What They Do*, master teacher, administrator, and curriculum developer Neil Bright distills the secrets of effective teaching into fifteen “practices” that he describes using clear language and extensive support from research literature. Throughout the text, Bright emphasizes the idea of putting research into practice, urging current and future teachers to rely on research results to effect change in

United States schools, to ensure that children achieve their very best. His tone is authoritative, yet empowering and readable, and no-nonsense. In the introduction, for instance, he declares, “American teachers can’t have it both ways. If they are willing to accept praise when students do well, they should be equally willing to accept criticism when students do poorly” (p. xiv). He describes criticism of state mandated curricula as “fashionable,” but points out that passive resistance makes students less prepared for future realities (p. 3). He insists that teachers act as professionals, from “dressing for success” (p. 23) to modeling responsibility (p. 84) and reminds us that students deserve nothing less. Underpinning the book is an unwavering philosophy that all children can learn, and that teachers must have a vision for children’s success, working with a community that includes schools, parents, and the students themselves. He implores teachers to take charge and be the change they want to see, to become teacher leaders and to lead and support students on their paths to success.

Bright begins the book with an introduction that immediately dismisses oft-cited excuses for ineffective teaching and underperforming students. He reminds readers that good teaching matters, and is “the single most important and controllable factor contributing to student success” (p. ix). He notes that defenders of the United States educational

system often discount comparative international studies, as they do not take into consideration American diversity or other factors. Bright points out, however, that “relatively privileged American children performing at high levels often do not compete favorably, even with average students in well-off European and Asian countries” (p. xiv). He cuts down the notions of too little time in the curriculum, that teaching is an “art” that cannot be learned, and poor funding for schools. While his arguments are strong, and his assertions about teaching and learning are evidence-based, in this overview he ignores compounding and well-documented factors that influence student achievement, e.g., poverty and home literacy levels (Rothstein, 2014).

The main section of the volume is broken down into short chapters on each of the fifteen identified practices, which Bright asserts that master teachers consistently demonstrate. The first two, Clarifying Vision and Unifying Vision, are about the meaning and desired outcomes of education. Bright argues that education’s purpose is “not in and of itself for students to do well in school, but for them to do well in life” (p. 1). He reminds us that as educators, we must design instructional activities and engage in pedagogical practices that will make students better thinkers and better citizens. Bright asserts that master teachers must join together with their school community to create a unified vision of education that is consistent from year to year, striving for a more cohesive curriculum that is assessed with performance assessments rather than standardized tests. He stresses the importance of teachers taking the lead on enacting change, while acknowledging roadblocks that frequently occur, e.g., pushback from colleagues and administrators alike, and encourages master teachers to “fight the good fight” toward school improvement (p. 11), pushing through the naysayers to help students

succeed and achieve the vision set for them. In concert with these ideas, his thirteenth practice, Partnering with Parents, asks teachers to engage with parents and work cooperatively toward school improvement, with the belief that collaborative efforts will achieve greater success. Bright also offers practical advice for conducting parent-teacher conferences, and for creating shared visions of responsibility. Similarly, his eleventh practice, Promoting Effort Belief, is related to teachers’ philosophies. Bright stresses the importance of embodying the philosophy that students should work hard to achieve greatness, noting that the “only variable leading to success or failure one can fully control is effort” (p. 95).

Of course, several practices focus on classroom instruction. With his third practice, Performing Instruction, the author discusses the importance of student engagement, leaning on the research to connect student success with being engaged in learning. He cites teacher preparation for lessons as one of the key factors, likening this process to an actor rehearsing his lines, and notes that students recognize passion and enthusiasm as defining characteristics of strong teachers. Supported by a wide variety of educational research studies and reports that span decades, Bright outlines specific practices shown to engage students during class, from promoting effective note taking, using lesson structures that allow for practice and review, moving around the classroom, to using every minute of class time. He emphasizes the importance of getting to know one’s students, validating their ideas and concerns, and creating a classroom climate in which children feel welcomed and supported. He explicitly notes that students who fear teachers, or being humiliated in class, do not learn. At the same time, Bright’s fourth practice requires that we hold students accountable, refraining from enabling students to not achieve the highest

possible levels of success. Ever realistic and practical, he outlines the “games students play” (p. 26) and how not holding students to high standards is detrimental to their success.

In his discussion of how to design rubrics that effectively assess students, however, Bright seems to contradict himself. He argues that educators must set their expectations high and have a vision of success, but when it comes to rubric design, he suggests that teachers gather student work that illustrate various levels of mastery, and create a rubric from these work samples, using, for instance, a top sample as an *A* paper. This practice directly contradicts best practices in assessment and rubric design, which hail the importance of using rubrics as a way to communicate expectations to students (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Moskal, 2000). This critical feature of rubrics cannot be leveraged if the rubrics are created after student work has been submitted.

Later practices are also classroom focused. Bright discusses the importance of maintaining discipline (Practice 8), noting “highly effective teachers have a seemingly innate ability to diagnose and remedy the problem before the infection of misconduct spreads” (p. 63). He again gives detailed and evidence-based examples of effective and ineffective classroom management techniques, discussing why and how some common techniques do not work to improve classroom climate and learning. He follows this discussion with specific ways in which master teachers Question Skillfully (Practice 9) and use questioning to support higher levels of critical thinking and link to effective assessment practices. Practice 12, Understanding Motivation, begins with a statement that “the fact is that most students are motivated to learn” (p. 99). He provides instructions for effectively enacting strategies for increasing motivation, e.g., cooperative learning, differentiated instruction and avoiding “textbook

abuse” (p. 107). These examples are written in ways that allow educators to immediately try out in their classrooms.

Beyond the classroom, Bright asks teachers to take responsibility for their own instruction, thoughts, and actions. Practices 5 through 7, 10, and 11 remind us that educators are responsible for reaching all students, regardless of ability or motivation level, and that teachers must continuously strive to be better, to learn new techniques, and not to fall into traps (such as taking student behavior personally or making situations out to be worse than they are). He prompts us to remember that teachers are continuously “modeling what matters” (Practice 10) for students in our classrooms, and again implores educators to be professionals in every aspect of their career, both in and beyond the classroom.

Bright also unapologetically states things that teachers may not want to hear—picking on educational behaviors and characters that most teachers meet during their careers in schools. Bright warns teachers to beware of teachers who oppose reform just to be contrarian, who are “too busy” to help students, or who blame others, e.g., administrators, parents, or students, for their own ineffectiveness (pp. 54-56). He cautions against those colleagues who will speak against teachers recognized for their successes, and asks prospective master teachers not to conform to negative group behavior. Instead, he implores them to try to view administrative decisions and other controversies with “greater school-wide perspective” (p. 60). While Bright’s characterizations of ineffective teachers may at times seem contemptuous and patronizing, most experienced teachers have met teachers like these—those who automatically oppose change, disparage students and their families, or immediately run to the aid of teachers who are ineffective and unprofessional. He does not adequately discuss, unfortunately, what teachers

striving to become master educators should do when there are unsuccessful administrators steering the ship, and engaging in these ineffective and unprofessional behaviors themselves.

The final two practices are also challenges to students and teachers as they look ahead. Practice 14, Internalizing Kaizen, reminds educators to be reflective, to solicit feedback and to take risks. Bright views master teachers as lifelong learners, who although they employ his effective practices, can always improve their effectiveness. He throws in the final practice, Challenging Students to Courageously Pursue Their Dreams, almost as an afterthought, not citing the practice in the table of contents, but rather providing food for thought near the book's conclusion. The final chapter is a numbered, distilled review of the principles with significant details that may assist educators in translating what they have read into practice. To this end, Bright also provides appendices, such as rubrics and planning documents.

Those Who Can is a useful book for pre-service and in-service teachers and is an excellent starting point for discussion of the art and science of teaching, particularly for those who teach, or will teach, secondary students. Unlike other books aimed at this audience, Bright provides very specific, research-based, and easily implemented ideas that a reader can try right away. This approach empowers teachers rather than disheartening them, providing strategies that equate to keys to success for those striving for teaching excellence. At the same time, Bright is a realist; he recognizes the realities of today's schools—from unsupportive administrators and uninvolved parents to antagonistic colleagues—but insists that master teachers must rise above and employ practices that will make them better, and ensure that students get the best possible education.

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About the Author

Neil Bright is a retired assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, a former faculty union officer and chief negotiator, a college professor of psychology and government, a staff developer, and a teacher of students from fifth grade through high school seniors. Currently a writer and student teacher supervisor in New York's Catskill Mountains, he was nominated for the Dean's Award as distinguished county educator, was named outstanding district instructor, and gained semifinalist recognition for the New York State Teacher of the Year competition in 1992.

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