Hugging the Middle -- How Teachers Teach in an Era of Testing and Accountability by Larry Cuban

I know of nobody who does the long view of educational reform better than Larry Cuban, and this text exemplifies this more than ever. For those genuinely interested in sustainable rather than superficial reform, this is required reading.

-- Ciaran Sugrue, University of Cambridge, UK

Larry Cuban's How Teachers Taught has been widely acclaimed as a pathbreaking text on the history and evolution of classroom teaching. Now Cuban brings his great experience as a classroom teacher, superintendent, and researcher to this highly anticipated follow-up to his groundbreaking work. Focusing on three diverse school districts (Arlington, Virginia; Denver, Colorado; Oakland, California), Hugging the Middle offers an incisive portrayal of how teachers teach now. It is a revealing look at a range of current, workable pedagogical options educators are using to engage students while satisfying parents and policymakers -- options that succeed by creating hybrid practices that combine both teacher-centered approaches (e.g., mostly direct instruction, textbooks, lectures) with student-centered ones (e.g., team projects on real-world problems, independent learning, small-groupwork).

A state-of-the-profession assessment in this era of top-down educational policy, Hugging the Middle:

* Brings Larry Cuban's years of experience and keen historian's eye to an analysis of teaching today.

* Looks at teachers continuing adaptations to standards-based education reform and the No Child Left Behind Act.

* Compares classroom practices in a cross-section of U.S. urban schools.
My Personal Review:
Larry Cuban has been a keen observer of education for a long time, and he has been able to articulate the trends that have influenced what happens in classrooms. In his latest book (Hugging the Middle) he draws attention to the pressures exerted on classroom teachers as a result of high-stakes testing.

Cuban's innovative contribution to pedagogic research was to articulate a model that saw either ends of a continuum marked as either student-centred or teacher-centred pedagogy. He argues that teachers hug the pedagogic middle ground when they mix elements of both student and teacher-centred pedagogies. The problem arises when poor test results elicit a move to more conservative mix of teacher-centred pedagogies.

Of real concern is the perception that students from lower socio-economic groups require more teacher-centred direct instruction than their middle-class counterparts.

You will love this book. It is an easy read and it provides an understandable model to help work out what is happening in classrooms around the world. This book has been chosen as the first book for our School Leaders' Reading Group in 2009.

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