



WHEN YOU'RE THE NEW TEACHER

28 STRATEGIES

to Align Your Good
Intentions with Your
Teaching Practices

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Elizabeth Soslau, Ph.D.

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9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100

Minneapolis, MN 55442

(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

freespirit.com

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Introduction



TEACHER SPOTLIGHT

Starting Out

“When I first started teaching, I was fearful of being majorly unprepared. I was fresh out of my undergraduate program and felt so certain I was nowhere near prepared to start teaching. My biggest fear was being inadequate to teach such young, inquisitive minds. I came to learn that confidence is a big part of teaching. I felt more confident when I asked our instructional team for help, having them come into my room, watch a lesson, and then give me pointers on things to change or tweak. Overall, while my fear was valid, I was able to overcome it and learn more about myself in the process.”



“I couldn’t wait to set up my room and get started teaching. Soon after being hired, I found out that I would be teaching first grade. I was terrified because I had no idea what to do with little ones. I got started right away, planning out my classroom and looking up different websites for ideas on how to teach first grade and what to expect. On the first day of school, they all came in with a smile and an excitement for learning. We spent most of the day getting to know each other, exploring the classroom and materials while creating an environment where they felt safe and loved. We all made it through our first day—they didn’t want to go home, and I didn’t want them to leave either. It was at that moment that I knew I could teach first grade and love it.”



“I was so excited for my first teaching job! I always dreamed of being a teacher, and to finally have my own classroom was a dream come true! It was also a bit surreal that I was now in charge of teaching these 120 students. I was eager to show them how cool math can be and to have them see that they could all be successful in math!”

We each begin our teaching journey with a clear set of aims. We want to teach well so our students thrive. We commit to becoming lifelong learners. We are armed with good intentions. Too often, though, many of us are confronted with the hard realities of schooling: mandated curricula, scripted lesson plans, inauthentic instructional materials, systems that hinder parental collaboration, schedules that hamper our attempts to reflect and improve our teaching . . . the list goes on. What practices can we enact that help us navigate these realities? How do we make good on our good intentions?

As a longtime teacher educator and former public-school teacher, I have a keen sense of what it feels like to want to teach well, yet not feel fully equipped to do so. Over the years, I often craved a resource for self-directed, self-paced professional learning that I could use to improve my practice.

Importantly, as a classroom teacher, I wanted to implement teaching practices that helped me fulfill my intentions to meet my students where they were, to show that I valued their identities and skills, to make their learning meaningful and authentic, and to make what we did in the classroom matter. As a teacher educator, I wanted a practical and empowering resource my teacher candidates could carry with them as they began their careers and as they moved forward, with ideas they could easily digest and implement in their classrooms from the start. I could never find quite the right guidebook, so I decided to write it.

Why This Book?

There are numerous books offering strategies for lesson planning, coordinating lessons to meet curriculum requirements, and organizing the classroom to meet these requirements. The strategies in *When You're the New Teacher* focus on tasks and activities that cut across—and move beyond—planning, instruction, and classroom management. Great teaching requires strong relationships among teachers, colleagues, students, families, and communities. Teachers who engage in relationship building know how to navigate challenges and overcome barriers. They leverage their students' skills and interests as legitimate curricular starting points and create context for deep learning, reflection, and student-centered instruction. This book addresses those critical teaching qualities, offering practical, step-by-step activities to help you know and understand students and families, build effective relationships with coworkers and supervisors, and put love and care at the heart of your teaching.

Who Is the Book For?

New teachers want to become excellent teachers. Excellent teachers are always trying to get better at teaching. This book is meant to help you as a teacher starting out, or wherever you are along your teaching path. It invites you to reflect on the course you

want to set for yourself and to grow professionally from the start and as your career progresses.

- As a teacher candidate or a beginning teacher, you can use the book to prepare for your first year of teaching; to implement activities to get to know students, their families, and the surrounding community; to practice student-centered instructional approaches; and to reflect on your teaching toward the goal of continuous improvement.
- If you are a more experienced teacher moving to a new school, the book can help you get to know your new colleagues and deepen your skill set by thinking through ways to incorporate culturally responsive practices in your daily repertoire and engage more productively with colleagues around complex teaching topics.
- Teacher educators, induction leaders, teacher mentors, student teaching field supervisors, and instructional coaches: this book is for you as well. Use it as a professional learning tool to guide teacher-learners through activities and reflective exercises to improve their practice.

Scope and Organization

Five chapters present twenty-eight strategies to help you prepare, plan, act, and reflect on what you're learning, what's working, what you want to change, and how to go about it.

Chapter 1. Through four interrelated strategies, this chapter walks you through how to learn about students' lived experiences and integrate them into curriculum planning, become familiar with and determine how to make use of community assets, collect information about students' families, and help your students set and attain goals.

Chapter 2. Here you'll find ways to partner with school stakeholders and build relationships to enhance your students' learning experiences and your own. The chapter's six strategies offer activities that will help you plan for building positive relationships with families, colleagues, and administrators; craft ways to engage parents as experts in your classroom; partner with teaching peers to improve your instructional practices; and maintain a strong working relationship with your principal.

Chapter 3. Understanding the role of love and care in the classroom is addressed in chapter 3. Eight strategies include easy-to-follow directions for classroom-based activities to assist you in creating identity-affirming lessons and spaces, strengthening your classroom community, and expressing your respect and care for your students.

Chapter 4. This chapter presents four strategies to navigate challenges while identifying opportunities to develop your collaborative expertise. You will learn how to address

problematic decisions, remarks, or actions of other professionals and colleagues; seek help when you need it; build and contribute your own expertise; grow your tolerance for vulnerability; bring joy to required tasks; and support your emotional well-being.

Chapter 5. Teaching involves a host of transitions. Chapter 5 offers six strategies to use as you move from one teaching situation to another. In addition to learning how to plan to enter or reenter the job market or prepare to move to a different school, you will complete an exit strategy action plan that includes how to thank school stakeholders, how to lovingly say goodbye to students, and ways to request documentation of your own accomplishments.

Throughout the chapters, you will find real-life examples, sample dialogues, and stories from educators and students. At the end of each chapter are forms you can print or download to guide your planning and reflection.

How to Use the Book

When You're the New Teacher is self-paced and meant to be used regularly and year after year. My hope is that you will treasure this book as a personal reflective toolbox that enables you to systematically improve your teaching practice throughout your tenure as a practitioner. Alongside the book, be sure to keep a dedicated notebook or digital file for the journaling and reflective writing that are key to many of the book's activities.

Learning about teaching can be overwhelming, so I encourage you to pace yourself in a way that suits you best. It's fine to focus on the strategies one or two at a time. Use the table of contents as a menu, selecting chapters and strategies that fit your needs at any given time. For example, at the start of a new school year, begin with chapter 1 and find tools to learn about and consider how to incorporate what your students already know into your lessons, unearth families' academic desires, and locate neighborhood resources to connect your classroom with the community. If it is the middle of the school year and the culture and climate of your classroom could use a refresh, you might jump to chapter 3 for activities to build community. If you just found out that you will be moving to a new school, open to chapter 5 to get tips for making a smooth transition. Or perhaps you find yourself in a difficult debate with a colleague about how to approach a controversial classroom topic; chapter 4 gives you conversation protocols to navigate this challenge.

You can also use the book as part of professional learning community with a small group of teachers who wish to explore their instructional decision-making and work collectively to implement ideas from the book to improve their practice. In addition to the classroom activities and teacher reflections in the first three chapters, chapter 4 will be helpful in improving collaboration within and across groups of teachers such as grade groups and small learning communities.

If you are a teacher educator working with novice teachers or a teaching coach who supports teachers across the career lifespan, you will find many helpful insights to share with your mentees throughout this book. During student teaching or methods courses, you can assign activities based on an instructional area of need identified during field observations.

The book can also serve as curriculum material for student teaching seminars, clinical practice sites, or induction programs. Instructors in teaching seminars can assign chapters and activities for teachers to try out in their own classrooms; the teachers can then report back, sharing their experiences and insights on how they adapted any of the tools to fit the needs of their educational context.

Author's Perspective: Ideas That Underlie the Book's Strategies

Throughout this book, I share the wisdom of educational experts. You will find brief biographies of each of these individuals in the appendix.

Through my own teaching experience, research, and related scholarship in the field of teacher education, I've developed key ideas that position teachers as continuously reflective and intentional learners. These ideas, which follow, serve as the frame for this book. Think of them as my viewpoint or perspective.

Developing Teacher Expertise

There are three main types of teaching expertise that you can begin to develop during the student teaching practicum and build on throughout your teaching career: growth competence, adaptive teaching expertise, and collaborative expertise (Soslau and Alexander 2021; Soslau et al. 2019).

Growth competence is your ability to learn how to learn and to engage in critical reflection before, during, and after instructional delivery for the purpose of continuous professional self-improvement. Support for your critical reflection is woven throughout the book. Teaching experience alone will not enable you to grow your skills; rather *reflection on teaching* is what enables you to engage in continuous learning and improvement now and for years to come.

For example, every teacher can recall a time when a lesson did not unfold the way they had planned. How does a teacher reflect on the lesson in a way that leads to better instructional decision-making? Teachers who have multiple strategies to assess their own lesson effectiveness are practicing growth competence. Teachers might decide to record their lessons so they can rewatch and identify missed opportunities to improve student learning. Or they might categorize and analyze student work to determine students' misconceptions and tie those misconceptions back to their own

instruction—identifying ways they could have slowed down, retaught, or modeled concepts a bit differently. All these self-initiated reflective tasks are examples of growth competence.

Adaptive teaching expertise requires being adept at balancing innovative teaching approaches with pupil learning and social emotional well-being, at questioning what seems routine, and at unearthing overlooked causes of common problems of practice. Teachers with this expertise are able to acknowledge unique classroom dynamics, adapt decision-making based on pupil cues, and make real-time decisions to deviate from planned curriculum and instruction.

A wide array of strategies in this text support your growth as an adaptive teaching expert. You will complete activities that help you build connections between students' lived experiences and the required curriculum that you need to teach. Further, you will engage with positive identity development strategies that allow you to create a deeper connection between your instructional decision-making and the social emotional well-being of your students. Through peer observations, you will consider ways to adjust or pivot in order to better engage students.

At some point, for example, every teacher will teach a lesson during which their students become bored, disinterested, or confused. What does a teacher do in the moment they notice this dreaded occurrence? A teacher with adaptive teaching expertise will have the skills first to notice that they are losing their students, and then to reach into their proverbial bag of tricks to select an alternative instructional approach and implement that approach in real time. It is incredibly difficult to notice, sift through alternatives, select one, and implement it in the moment; doing this requires an adaptive skill set honed over time and with systematic, reflective self-assessment.

Likewise, when a teacher wants to stave off a future lack of engagement, they need to be proactive in trying a different instructional approach. Yet this often carries risk. What if the new approach doesn't work? What if students become upset by the change of course? These are risks an adaptive teacher needs to balance. The teacher might explicitly explain their decision-making, they might get parents and guardians on board first, or they might involve their own students in deciding on the best approach to an academic topic. Adaptive expertise is required to implement any of these choices.

Collaborative expertise includes speaking up, speaking out, asking questions, contributing ideas, being vulnerable, and being willing to seek help. In addition to strategies and activities to support your process of building collaborative expertise, you will encounter a range of information to support your growth as a collaborator. In the book, principals offer suggestions about building school-based professional relationships. Practicing teachers share their experiences of partnering with other teachers and of placing love and care at the heart of their teaching. You will also find exercises and sentence starters for productively engaging in difficult conversations as well as ideas and tools to help you build lasting relationships with your students and their families.

Schools can be contentious spaces. Principals may make requests that you deem unreasonable. Colleagues may make inappropriate comments about students. Grade team partners may push back when you attempt to implement an alternative approach to teaching your subject material. These are all people you must be able to work with and, on many occasions, collaborate with for the benefit of your students. So how does a teacher with collaborative expertise reply to the principal? How do they respond to colleagues when they overhear them making disparaging remarks about students? What does a teacher say to defend their curriculum approach and to invite other teachers to explore new avenues to better reach and include students? Collaborative expertise is the set of skills that a teacher uses to navigate these difficult scenarios.

Positioning Yourself as a Teacher and Learner

For you to develop these skills, you need to engage in deep reflection to create or identify opportunities for your own learning and professional development. You also need to be vigilant in keeping the learning of all students foremost in your actions and decisions. Three conditions, when recognized and embraced, will enable you to do this (Soslau and Alexander 2021; Soslau et al. 2019). The following are the conditions:

Embodiment of dual roles. You must see yourself as a teacher of learners *and* a learner of teaching. The fluid movement between these two roles necessitates a willingness to listen to, learn from, and share ideas to improve teaching practice and positively impact pupil learning and well-being.

Positioning, power, and agency building. It's crucial to recognize that you hold a position of power. That is, you are well equipped with innovative coursework and prepared to serve as a classroom contributor on day one of your career. A strong sense of efficacy—the belief that you can positively impact pupil learning and well-being—is essential so you can contribute and thrive as a teacher-learner now and in the future.

Focusing on student learning. The heart of teaching is your impact on young people. You must move beyond your own needs and maintain a vigilant focus on student learning. What do you want students to learn? How will you know if students learned anything? What evidence demonstrates that your decision-making had the desired impact? And what does the student data (anecdotal evidence) mean for your future decision-making (acceleration or remediation)?

These three types of expertise and the three necessary learning conditions anchor this book. My hope is that you will clearly see how each chapter, activity, exercise, and journal prompt supports your development of teaching expertise and enables you to collaborate with various school stakeholders to co-create a learning experience that benefits everyone.

Two Common Truths

Finally, there are two common truths about teaching and learning to keep foremost in mind:

Humans have the capacity to learn and do better.

- All children can learn.
- All teachers can innovate and improve their practice.

Humans do not seek out failure.

- All children want to be successful.
- All teachers want to be successful.

There will be times when your belief in these truths will be shaken. Remember, no one wakes up in the morning, looks in the mirror, and says, “How can I fail today?” No matter what you witness or experience in the classroom or school, always know in your core that with the right mix of effort, support, and resources, we *all* can learn.

Getting Your House in Order

Strategies for School Year Preparation

This chapter is designed to prepare you to enter your classroom with concrete ideas to set your students and yourself on a pathway to success. Through questionnaires, letter writing, activities, and discussion, you will gain information about the skills and wisdom your students bring with them to your classroom and plan ways to integrate these skills into the curriculum. You will also request, analyze, and reflect on input from your students' parents or guardians about their expectations and help students develop plans for achieving goals aligned with their families' expectations. At the conclusion of this chapter, you will be able to answer the following questions:

- What are my students' funds of knowledge—unique lived experiences and skills—and how can I connect these skills to the curriculum that I need to teach?
- What community assets are available to enhance my instruction and support my students and their families?
- What expectations do my students' families hold?
- How can I help my students prepare to meet their own and their families' expectations?

Whether they're a teacher candidate, a first-year teacher, or a veteran, all educators need to prepare for the school year by getting to know the community they will serve. The activities in this chapter will help you learn about your students, their families, and the community assets and educational resources that are available to you. You can use this information in your teaching to create contexts for learning that relate to your students' lived experiences—to build connections between students' prior knowledge and the new curricular content you're responsible for teaching. You can use students'

unique cultural knowledge as valid curriculum material and processes for learning activities and assessments. The chapter can also support you in figuring out ways to incorporate community assets into your instructional planning and to be responsive to parents' expectations.

Strategy 1: Unearth Students' Funds of Knowledge

Your students arrive at school with specialized skills and experiences. Luis Moll's (2019) concept of *funds of knowledge* includes special skills, expertise, or knowledge that children have developed outside of the traditional school setting (at home, in faith communities, after school, with youth groups, on sports teams, and so on). Funds of knowledge are culturally developed over time, and these learned experiences enable children to contribute to their family and sustain themselves. Many of these types of knowledge and skills are likely to remain invisible to teachers unless students have the opportunity to reveal them.

Learning about and calling on students' funds of knowledge allows you to build connections between students' prior knowledge and the typical curriculum topics and materials. It can help you identify new culturally significant topics of study. You can also incorporate into projects, activities, assignments, and assessments the culturally specific ways students learn and demonstrate understanding.

At the start of each school year, I highly encourage you to find space for unearthing and calling upon students' funds of knowledge. Having students share information through a questionnaire is an efficient way to begin to do this.

Student Questionnaire

The "All About Me: Special Skills and Interests" questionnaire (page 26) is designed to help you elicit information about your students so that you can design a learning climate that builds bridges between their existing cultural knowledge and your required curriculum. In addition to bridging between prior knowledge and new material, you can use students' funds of knowledge as valid learning material and processes for everyone in the classroom, as shown in figure 1.1. With this activity you are working as an educational ethnographer to try to reveal, identify, and uncover the skills, expertise, and knowledge students have gained outside of school. The amount of autonomy you have to do this will vary depending on the grade level you teach, the type of school you are in, your district curricula requirements, your level of principal or administrative support, and the sociopolitical climate where you teach.

Use the questionnaire form in the way that works best with your students and in your setting. Feel free to adapt the form and its questions to the ages and instructional levels of your students and the parameters set by your school and district.