

Introduction

The only constant is change. As teachers, how do we adjust to these ever-changing times while keeping our confidence and cool?

The reality is that we are preparing the students in our classrooms for jobs that might not even exist yet. Let that sink in for a second.

In 2021 Education Week surveyed executives at some of the nation's leading companies, including companies that specialized in everything from consulting to hospitality to automotive, with the prompt, "Tell us what you'll want and expect from today's K–12 students when you're eventually hiring them, and make suggestions for how schools can provide students with those skills" (Education Week, 2021). The responses included these skills:

- **Agility and flexibility.** Ability to sense unpredictability and act quickly in response; ability to identify new ideas and approaches. Demonstrate curiosity—ask questions and have the courage to move quickly.
- **Growth mindset and resilience.** Desire to continuously learn. Ability to recover and bounce back from adversity and hardships. Take ownership and accountability; develop strategies for reflection and learning.
- **Teamwork and collaboration.** Desire to work with others different from yourself—different backgrounds, genders, functions, geographies, cultures—to create better, more durable results. Ability to work as a member of a team to achieve an agreed set of goals.
- **Learning to learn.** The world is changing fast, and successful companies are evolving even faster to serve their customers and remain competitive. Associates with the ability to identify and anticipate changes in the environment and who can acquire new knowledge and skills will be needed and effective in this environment.
- **Conflict resolution.** Workers in all fields will need to be able to independently resolve conflict.

These skills are specifically taught and practiced in classrooms where students become a community of learners, where students are encouraged to ask questions and challenge each other, where critical thinking is more valued than rote memorization, and where every student is seen and heard. This is where I want to offer a helping hand, because it's not always easy to create that type of classroom.



[Read the full Education Week article here.](#)

To read a QR code, you must have a smartphone or tablet with a camera. We recommend that you download a QR code reader app that is made specifically for your phone or tablet brand.

In this book I'll tell it like it is to you, teacher to teacher. I'll share real best practices that have worked time after time, real anecdotes to illustrate those best practices, real conversations I've had with my students, and real classroom management scenarios I've experienced in my classroom. (The only aspect of the book that isn't real is the student names.) I would like to share what I have learned with those who are in need or perhaps just curious to build on what they already know.

The beautiful thing about our profession is that you will always be needed. And you will most likely always laugh with your class every day because Camille said something outrageous, or Javier glued his hands together by accident, and yes, students still pass gas in class at every grade level. That's never going to change. Here's more good news: Your students are more aware today than ever, they are more curious about our changing world more than ever, and they are more empathetic than ever. Let's take advantage of that in our classrooms and help them keep up with today's world.

It's important to hold on to why we first went into this profession and cherish that feeling we get when a lesson goes really well. Teaching K–12 students is one of the most rewarding professions when we lead with love, follow our gut instincts, and know we are shaping the adults of tomorrow. To give students the opportunity to thrive we need to create and nurture classrooms where positive energy flows, students are collaborating, academic rigor is high and engaging, and strong student-to-student as well as student-to-teacher relationships exist. I'm here to help you get there because I've messed up, but then I figured it out and thrived. I want the same for you and your students because we are in one of the most noble professions in the world. This book will get vulnerable at some parts and I'm okay with that. So, here's a bit of my story.

Who Am I? And Why Am I Writing This Book?

The first classroom management strategy I tried in my first year was good old-fashioned yelling. I figured if I could get my voice louder and stronger than the students', I could startle them into listening. It's really all I could think to do with a rowdy class of twenty-nine sixth graders. I eventually realized yelling is only a short-term—*very* short-term—and detrimental solution.

The first time I realized yelling can be detrimental not only to a classroom but also to your health was around the middle of my very first year in the classroom. I noticed my ears ached after class. The pain became so unbearable that I eventually went to an ear doctor. The doctor told me both of my eardrums were very swollen, which was causing the pain. He asked what I did for a living, and I told him I was a sixth-grade teacher. He chuckled and replied, "That's why your eardrums are swollen." My ears did return to normal, but it was literally a painful wake-up call as

to how much I was raising my voice in the classroom. Something had to change. If *my* ears were in pain, I couldn't even imagine how my students felt. Something was off, and I was determined to find a better way to teach. This is where my quest to find the best practices in teaching began.

I've always considered myself fearless. I've bungee jumped and sky-dived in New Zealand on the same day, rafted through class-four rapids, free-fall jumped from casinos in Las Vegas, snorkeled with sharks, back-packed solo through Australia and Costa Rica, canoed down deadly hippopotamus-infested waters in Zimbabwe, and jumped in frozen lakes for fun—twice. None of these adventures comes close to the accomplishment I felt when I finally figured out what makes classrooms work. Most of us, including myself, make mistakes trying to figure out what works. Most new teachers have little help, a few teaching books, and maybe a classroom management course or two to guide us. I'd like to give back to the profession and tell you everything I know and direct you to practices that most teachers say work. I'm here to make it easier for you.

I am not claiming to know the only right way to teach. What makes teaching so difficult, so complex, and so beautiful is that there are many right ways and more are being discovered every day. However, many best practices form a common thread among good teachers. I am sharing my knowledge and insights about what has worked for me and my peers. What is revealed in this book is just the tip of the iceberg, and it took me years to figure it out through trial and error, through tears and triumph. I hope to save you from some of the mistakes I made and share with you the many joys I had in the classroom and how I got there.

I wrote this for you, so you can spend less time on the errors and more time on discovering what works for you and your students. Many of my chapters are inspired by *real questions* teachers have asked me as we were walking down the hallway, during lunch, during my prep period, after school, or through e-mail. Every time a teacher asked me a question, I immediately started developing a new chapter for this book, because if one person is asking, there's every chance that other people have the same question.

Achieving these insights took me years of practice, trying any and every teaching method, reading the research, working closely with a mentor, and working in challenging school settings. Through my growing determination, curiosity about what works in teaching, passion to always be better, and my love of the students, I earned Teacher of the Year in my school and was awarded a Fulbright Distinguished Teacher grant to coach educators in Botswana, Africa, on student engagement, technology, and student-centered lessons. I've coached teachers in Kathmandu, Nepal, on student-centered lessons and empowering students. I've worked with students from Eastern Europe and Russia, taught K–12 classes in Turkey, and taught graduate-level classes at the University of San Diego to teacher candidates entering our beautiful profession. I've been invited to keynote education conferences and have consulted with districts around the country. What I'm saying is these strategies work.

What I found from coaching teachers and working with students around the world is that even despite language barriers, there are universal best practices that consistently bring success to teachers and students. I knew I had to share what I learned and accomplished with others. These positive and powerful moments are what got me up way too early in the morning and what kept me working countless hours after school. I hope you can use this book to build on my experiences for even greater successes in your own classrooms and homes.

And before we move any further, understand that in these pages I'm by no means saying do more; I'm suggesting that you think differently. When we think of classroom management, we traditionally think of ways to keep students quiet, well behaved, and on task. However, in order to prepare students for today's world, we should think of classroom management as guiding students to work collaboratively, communicate

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with each other, and listen to their classmates' thoughts and opinions. We now know classroom management practices that are better for students than what has been done in the past. Older classroom management practices traditionally focus on compliance, while more modern, progressive practices focus on student well-being, social-emotional learning, belonging, equity, and engagement. Classroom management is about

building students up, not breaking them down. This means we are starting to shift our own perspective.

Times are changing. According to a study conducted by Child Trends, Inc. (2015), there are five critical skills most likely to increase the odds of success across all outcomes and which employers expect employees to have. The first three are social skills, communication, and higher-order thinking skills (including problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making). These three are supported by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept.

Here's a real-world statistic to support this: It has been reported that 85 percent of those who are terminated from jobs are let go because of inadequate social skills. According to a *Forbes* article discussing what skills employers look for, "Employers also want new hires to have technical knowledge related to the job, but that's not nearly as important as good teamwork, decision-making and communication skills, and the ability to plan and prioritize work" (Adams, 2014). Today, companies are hiring people who can work independently just as well as they can with others. Obedience is not valued as much as other 21st century skills, which has teachers rethinking how this translates to classroom management for us. How do we prepare our students for the real world?

Perhaps you've already heard of a few of these best practices. Or perhaps you have your own twists on the practices, which are perfect to share with your colleagues in the discussion questions at the end of each

chapter. The point is that each of these practices warrants discussion because they are all critical parts of what makes learners engaged, confident, empowered, and independent.

Why Teach?

They say the person you fall in love with should bring out the best in you, making your light shine. The same goes for the job you fall in love with. Teaching is one of the most vulnerable professions out there, yet it should make your best qualities shine, lighting you up from the inside out. Teaching did this for me. It brought out characteristics in me that I did not know existed. It also exposed my raw weaknesses. However, those moments when my weaknesses were most glaring motivated me to work toward becoming a better teacher.

The kids out there need you. There might be times you mess up a lesson or a conversation with a student. That's more than okay, it's expected—you're human. It's all part of the process. As educators, we get to be exactly what they need, imperfections and all. How lucky are we?

There is something special about teaching. We all have our own reasons that drew us to this profession, and they are all unique from one another. I'm not sure if any of my teachers from middle or high school know I became a teacher. I'm pretty sure if you told them that I was a teacher, it would surprise them. Until college, I was never particularly motivated as a student. I flew under the radar and did just enough not to draw attention to myself. I wonder what was going on all of those years in the classroom when I was passing notes to my friends. (I filled an entire box of notes. My friends and I earned an *A* in note-writing, not note-taking.) My junior year of college is when my light switch went on and I actually started feeling smart. I became a different student.

My academically apathetic history is probably the single most important factor in why I have succeeded as a teacher. I understand why students get bored, feel unengaged, fall asleep, get rowdy, etc. I get it. But I also know how to convert that energy into engagement and excitement in the classroom.

I bet you can't find one teacher who hasn't shed a tear of joy the first time they found success in a student. If you look around any teacher's desk, you'll probably see a thank-you card hanging up from a student. These cards bring us so much joy. That's why I've included actual quotes from real students at the beginning of each chapter. Students remember the way we make them feel. You'll see the light switch turn on in a child's eyes when you explain a concept well and they get it. When you ask a teacher what they do, they'll usually smile as they explain what grade and subject they teach. You can't say that about many other professions. This book will show you ways to make your students feel good while learning. The emotional element is a significant part of the process for teacher and student alike.

A time will come in your teaching career when you feel lucky just to be a person in your students' lives every day, because they are phenomenal. And there's a point where your students, even when they are difficult, will feel lucky just to be in your class. With love, patience, skill, and creativity you will actually be working and changing a person's life in your classroom every day.

There's going to be a point where you are working way too hard, and that's where I'd like to come in and help take some of the load off of you. Whatever classroom management frustration you've had in your classroom, I've most likely been there (times two). I'm listening, I understand, and I can help. To all the teachers reading this book: Thank you for joining our beautiful profession. We need people like you.

—Serena

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