

INTRODUCTION

As soon as you get your first teaching job, you will be like many other new teachers: super excited and thrilled you are actually employed. For some of you, it will be a time of great hope and promise and the realization of years of hard work and dreaming. Others will come to it with a renewed sense of vigor, as it will be a second career with a chance to impact a future generation of learners. Some “new” teachers are actually veterans who have made a decision to rededicate themselves to their craft and therefore take on the mind-set of a new teacher all over again. Regardless of how you find yourself in a classroom as a new teacher, the opportunity to dramatically change your teaching for a new generation of learners will be upon you. Most teachers will look back at the first couple of years and think,

“Man, I wish I could go back and apologize to all of those students who I taught those first years.”

I don’t mean that as a joke. I mean that seriously. It is with this sentiment that I share my insights and those of the many educators and individuals who helped me navigate those first few years and still impact my practice today.

When you receive your degree and get hired as a teacher, it is often accompanied by a spectrum of emotions and attitudes. Some will get their first job and assume they have it all figured out. They will have confidence in their coursework. They passed all the tests, so clearly they’re going to be phenomenal teachers. Others will come into that first day of school as I did and be a nervous wreck. I remember clearly thinking to myself, “I am not sure they hired the right person.” In fact, it took several years until I was confident in my work and felt I was earning my paycheck.

It was not until several years into my career and numerous students, teachers, and observers that later I realized one of the biggest problems

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new teachers face. Simply put, they do not have enough time behind the wheel before they are told to drive. Many undergraduate programs do not prepare students for an entire year of teaching. They have short student teaching experiences, which do very little in truly preparing a teacher for what the real job of teaching is or at least what a full year of teaching is really all about. I have had the pleasure and displeasure of working with new teachers, both as a colleague and as a parent, and I will tell you there are two different kinds of new teachers. The first kind, the ones who I really get frustrated with, are the ones who think they know everything. Often, they are the ones who butt heads with colleagues and parents. They're the teachers who come to faculty meetings or department meetings telling everybody they have a new idea that is better than what is already being done. They come about it from a place of arrogance rather than a place of collaboration. This type of teacher is often short lived in the profession.

The other type are those teachers who are a little nervous or worried they may not know what they're doing. They come into the job with a bit of fear. They really want to do the best job they can but they're slightly hesitant because maybe they aren't prepared. Now one may think this is a bad thing, yet I would disagree. It is these teachers that often are the most open to suggestion, help, and mentorship from other teachers. It is this attitude that allows them to grow and improve as teachers. With that in mind, a very serious question will begin to surface: How will they become better teachers? I have been very fortunate to be around amazing teachers both in my school and in many connections I have made with teachers around the world. Every single one of these phenomenal teachers has one thing in common: They all believe they could be doing better and seek out ways to improve. If you take nothing else away from this book, I hope you recognize that all great teachers are never satisfied with where they are but rather are constantly looking for better ways to do their job.

I wish I knew as a first-year teacher the tremendous opportunity I had to change public education from the ground up as a part of a new teacher revolution. Yes, *revolution* has a strong connotation but is what we need as educators if we want to evolve the practice of teaching and improve learning for all students. Many generations of education in schools have looked like the ones before. The world in which our students live in is rapidly evolving, and yet schools largely remain unchanged. We need a revolution of ideas, pedagogy, and the way in which we talk about teaching and learning. The reason for this revolution is not to increase test scores or bolster placement in advance classes. Rather, it is to create a generation of students prepared and amply supplied with the skill set to achieve as citizens. It is only through this change that we can meet the needs of this new generation of learners to provide high-quality and relevant education for all.

It is new teachers and those who look at their role as a teacher in a new way who have a profound opportunity to radically change the way school

is being done and essentially rewrite the story of education. It is often those who are newest to the profession, who have less ingrained belief systems, who are most open to change. It will also take veteran teachers to think like a new teacher and be open to learning new things and exposing themselves to new ideas and better ways of doing things. If we want to improve the landscape within our schools and rethink the way teaching and learning happens, a revolution of ideas and pedagogy has to happen. No longer can we be content doing things the way they have always been done.

I am often asked where the inspiration for my teaching and philosophies of teaching come from. The answer to that is as simple as it is complex and yet is the catalyst for this entire book. As I often tell teachers I work with, the single greatest way to improve your teaching is to expose yourself to more teaching. As a teacher, you're only going to be as good as your ability to adapt and evolve. This is largely done through the new, different, and more innovative ideas and strategies you open yourself up to. My goal is to share my inspirations with others to provide a resource for new teachers and those interested in looking at the craft of teaching in a new way.

Throughout this book, my goal is to show the reader new ideas that may seem revolutionary to some and obvious to others. I am a product of the people I have connected with and the many shared experiences I have had. Throughout each chapter, you will see additional readings and content, which are the places I sought inspiration but also where my thinking was challenged. My hope is to expose you to those very same revolutionary ideas. It is through that constant exposure that my beliefs took shape and I became the teacher I am today. Agree or disagree with the content but think, react, and talk about it. It is through conversations about what we believe to be true that real change and a revolution can happen.

The hallmark characteristic of phenomenal, even revolutionary, teachers is openness. It's what they all have in common. This simple ability to welcome new ideas, new methodologies, and new challenges over the course of an entire career is what sets them apart as change agents for children and our profession.

No matter their age or experience, awards or advanced degrees, truly great teachers never see themselves as anything other than a humble work in progress striving passionately to get better. It's that willingness to live with uncertainty, to question everything, to be brave enough to reject what no longer works that imbues teachers with the power to transform not just their own professional practice

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but the entire educational system. You've heard the expression that if we always do what we've always done, then we'll always get what we've always had. No teacher worth his or her salt is content with the status quo. We live in a time when the status quo hasn't gotten the United States where it needs to be and thus staying the course won't get us where we need to go. Instead, it's time for a great and mighty change in the way we teach kids and their teachers. We must change what we ask schools to do for students and what we ask students to do while in school. At the heart of this electrifying mission will be the great teachers described above, who have been doing this kind of exciting work all along.

—Rebecca Mieliwocki, 2012 National Teacher of the Year

For me, I looked back on the early years of my career and development as a teacher and how I wanted and needed to change. With this in mind, I laid out what I thought were the seven key areas of concern I had and continue to revisit even after several years of teaching. The progression of the chapters is such that the early chapters focus more on what I wish I would have known early on and consider vitally important. Classroom management, student motivation, and the family dynamic are crucial topics for teachers and often areas in which teachers struggle the most, especially those new to the profession. They are also the areas in which veteran teachers looking to start a revolution of ideas in their own classroom often need to evaluate and change first. I share not only examples of things working from my classes but also from colleagues and experts I have been fortunate to learn with and from.

A key component to a high-performing classroom teacher is how she leverages available technology, and this is often not an area most teachers are given a great deal of help in. The chapter on technology delves into how to move technology use beyond a shiny toy into a transformational resource for both you as the teacher and the students. The final chapters consider the evolutionary process of the profession and what I think to be food for thought, to be unpacked slowly and implemented as it suits the individual teacher. They take a hard look at status quo practices, education fads, and finally how to evolve and grow as a teacher. My goal in these last chapters is to leave you with something to think about, as well as concrete measures to take in order to move the small steps necessary to improved teaching.

To adopt everything in this book would be foolish; as any teacher knows, you can't change too much too fast or you will crash and burn. If you focus on one or two areas each year, the impact on your teaching and student learning will be immense. I think about the changes I have made and they have taken me nearly fifteen years of constant learning and growing—I know I am not done yet. I often share a story of when I started teaching, where I was always comparing myself to other teachers and felt incompetent when I saw what they were doing with their students. To be frank, I felt like a failure more times than I can recall. Yet, someone told me it is a long yet fruitful journey to become a great teacher. Everyone is at a different place along this journey. The key is to keep moving forward, constantly reflecting on where you have been while thinking about where you want to go.