

# Prelude

---

I'll tell it to you like it really is: teacher to teacher. I'll share *real* best practices that worked time after time, *real* anecdotes to illustrate the 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 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 theirs, 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-, 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 would ache after class. The pain became so unbearable that I eventually went to an ear doctor. The doctor looked in my ears and told me both of my ear drums 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 ear drums are swollen." I was put on steroidal medication to alleviate the pain and swelling. My ears did return to normal, but it was literally a painful wakeup call 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 in my classroom. 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 bungee jumped and skydived in New Zealand on the same day, rafted through Class 4 rapids, free fall jumped from casinos in Las Vegas, snorkeled with sharks, backpacked solo through Australia, Costa Rica, Turkey, Namibia, Botswana, and five other countries, 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 them. I'd like to give back to the profession and tell you everything I know that has worked over and over again with students, and direct you to everything that most teachers say works. I'm here to make it easier for you.

I am not claiming to have the 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 seven-plus years to figure it out through trial and error, through tears and triumph. I hope to save you some of the mistakes I made and share with you the many joys I had in the classroom and how I came to have them. I wrote this for you, so you can spend less time on the errors and discovering what works for you and your students. Many of my practices are inspired by *real questions* teachers would ask 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 practice for this book, because if one person is asking, there's every chance that other people have the same question.

Learning these insights took me years of practice, trying every-and-any teaching method, reading the research, working closely with a mentor, and working in challenging school settings. Through my growing determination, reflective practices, curiosity about what works in teaching, passion to always be better, and 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, interdisciplinary problem based units, 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 and taught K–12 classes in Turkey.

What I found from coaching teachers and working with students around the world is that even through 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.

**Let me break it down for you with a few *real* statistics. Times are changing.**

According to a study conducted by Child Trends (2015), there are five critical skills most likely to increase the odds of success across all outcomes, and which employers expect employees to have: social skills, communication skills, and higher-order thinking skills (including problem solving, critical thinking, and decision making); supported by the intrapersonal skills of self-control and positive self-concept (Lippman, Ryberg, Carney, & Moore, 2015).

Here's another real-world statistic to support this: It has been reported that 85 percent of those who lose their jobs are terminated because of inadequate social skills (DeRoche, 2013). "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, ¶1). 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. How do we prepare our students for the real world?

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 them for today's world, we should think of classroom management as guiding students to work collaboratively, communicate with each other, and listen to their classmates' thoughts and opinions. Classroom management is about building students up, not breaking them down. This means we teachers are starting to shift our own perspective.

Perhaps you've already heard of a few of these best practices. Or, perhaps you have your own twist on the practices, and those are perfect to share with your colleagues in the discussion questions at the end of each chapter. The point is that each of these parts warrants discussion, because they are all critical parts of what makes learners engaged, confident, empowered, and independent learners.

We should think of classroom management as guiding students to work collaboratively, communicate with each other, and listen to their classmates' thoughts and opinions.

## 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. 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. Just like anything you open your heart and mind to, it brought out the best in me but 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. You'll have students who need your support because their parents both work two jobs, or maybe they need you as a role model because they don't have one. Or just maybe, you'll be the kindest adult they know. As educators, we get to be exactly what they need, complete with all our imperfections. 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. 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 other 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.) Having friends was more important to me than learning. My junior year of college is when my light switch went on and I actually started feeling smart. I was a different student.

My history of academic apathy is probably the single most important factor in my success as a teacher. I understand why students get bored, feel unengaged, fall asleep, get rowdy, et cetera. 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 she found success in a student. If you look around any teacher's desk, you'll probably see a thank-you card from a student displayed. These cards bring us so much joy. That's why I've included actual quotes from real students in the beginning of each part. 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 teachers 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 teachers and student alike.

There's a time 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 able 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 ever had in your classroom, I've most likely been there. I'm listening, I understand, and I can help. To all the teachers reading this book: Thank you for joining our team. We need people like you.

—Serena