

Eight Essential Techniques for Teaching with Intention

WHAT MAKES
REGGIO and OTHER
INSPIRED APPROACHES
EFFECTIVE

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Foreword by Howard Gardner



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Introduction

I was 23 when I took my first job in education as administrator of a parent-run Montessori school. The school was housed in the social hall of a fire station. Parents had designed large cabinets on heavy castors that served as shelving, room dividers, and movable walls so that the school could be rolled away for fire-fighters' frequent events. The cabinets divided the space into four classrooms; each had 35 students, one teacher, and one aide.

My office was in the coatroom, with a large window facing the classrooms. Two of the classrooms were settled, the children engrossed in using the Montessori materials. The other two were chaotic; children flew around using their smocks as capes, crying "B-a-a-a-t Man"! How, I wondered, could one method produce such different results? Perhaps, I thought, I should become trained as a Montessori teacher in order to understand why the classes were so different. My motivation was the strong curiosity generated by scenes from the coatroom.

The differences in the teachers were pronounced. Miss Johnston, a former grade school teacher, knew how to control children's behavior: A mere look and no child would step out of line. She was genuinely affectionate, enjoyed the children's remarks, and shared her enjoyment with them. But under the love and laughter was an iron will that children knew not to test. (*Note: Throughout the book, names of all persons have been changed.*)

Miss Nuñez was Mexican, with flashing eyes and intensity in carriage and tone of voice. Her vivacity mesmerized children; her enthusiasm enticed them. She conveyed authority in a manner that said, "No nonsense, please, we have important things to do." Her children would never fly around in their smocks. Parents considered her the "best" teacher.

Except for those parents who adored Miss Lindsey: young, attractive, and with abiding faith in the Montessori method. She talked in a zealot's mystical terms. She loved the children; they were wonderful and could do no wrong. Parents revelled in her love for their children. They were unconcerned about children flying around—or perhaps did not notice. There was no parent observation.

The fourth teacher was older. Miss Neal spoke in vague terms as her face glowed at the wonder of being a Montessori teacher. Miss Neal did not know how to manage a class and the children knew it. The Board dismissed her in June. In September I headed to the Montessori Institute to learn what I had watched that year.

Today I know: Miss Johnston and Miss Nuñez were intentional teachers, centered in their beliefs about children, themselves, their teaching, and expectations for what children would achieve. They used their adult authority to keep children's behavior in bounds.

THE EIGHT ESSENTIAL TECHNIQUES

In this book I present eight essential techniques for being an intentional/reflective teacher. Each technique is the subject of its own chapter. The eight techniques are:

1. **Observe yourself teaching:** Differentiate these behaviors—interrupt, interfere, intervene, intend, reflect, mean, transcend.
2. **Communicate precisely:** Master nuances in using the body, eyes, face, hands, and voice.
3. **Use language exuberantly:** Build on children’s love of language by playing with words and hands to express meaning.
4. **Examine your beliefs honestly:** Search for mindless habits and replace them with determined actions.
5. **Choose words strategically:** Understand the impact of words on children.
6. **Manipulate materials purposefully:** Provide diverse materials to stimulate increasingly skillful eye/hand coordination from birth on.
7. **Engage children’s cognition:** Use cognition to mediate disruptive or distracting emotions.
8. **Structure motivating lessons:** Cause children to strengthen both cognitive and socio-emotional skills.

I provide research that affirms the techniques, show each technique in practice in many scenarios, and give readers exercises with which to try the techniques themselves. Throughout there are tips, key points, and summaries. The emphasis is on practice, not theory. This is a how-to book with a focus on the distinction between intentional/reflective and other teaching. You will see nuanced uses of eyes, voice, hands, body, word choices, and the sounds and expressions in language—what I call “micro-actions,” minute glances, slight inflections, subtle gestures, or exact words that express intention precisely. Intention and reflection are shown in many scenarios; those with ineffective teaching are immediately followed by the same lesson taught *with* intention and reflection so that you can make comparisons. Scenarios are all based on my decades-long work in early education—with names changed. Numerous exercises offer techniques to deepen your understanding and, through practice, expand your skill at intentional/reflective teaching.

The last chapter is an assessment to benchmark your degree of intention/reflection prior to reading the book. I suggest that you read the assessment first: You may want to use it as you read each chapter to determine whether your teaching is becoming more intentional and reflective.

THE ESSENCE OF INTENTIONAL/REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Intention refers to *how* we teach, reflection to how we *think about* how we teach. Teaching is *intentional* when your actions (1) are consistent with a belief in children’s competence and (2) convey a sense of purpose and authority. Teaching is *reflective* when you (1) consider what you do before, during, and after doing it and (2) base future actions on your reflection.

Intentional/reflective teaching has enormous impact on children because it is:

- Deliberate and purposeful
- Consistent across all of a teacher's behaviors
- Focused on observing and listening to children
- A model of
 - Thinking that is both analytic and emotional
 - Interactions that recognize children's rights
 - Empathetic values

Intention and reflection are two sides of a coin, intention the *what/how* and reflection the *when/why* of teaching. Reflection without intention is empty; intention without reflection is mindless. Only through the union of intention and reflection can thoughtful teaching arise. My examples of *what* and *how* are inspired by educators in the Municipal Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy; Montessori principles; great teachers I have observed; and select philosophers, educators, psychologists, scientists, and neuroscientists. My examples of *when* and *why* are drawn from my reflections on a lifetime of classroom observation. The *what*, *how*, *when*, and *why* provide structure for the book: Scenarios show *how* teachers behave, *when* they intervene in children's work, *what* they do, and *why* it works.

Intention involves intervening in children's activity with deliberateness, to offer meaning and to build relationships between current experience and what children already know or can imagine in the future. Reflection involves analyzing how intervention can build children's cognitive and socio-emotional capacities. I do not often see this combination of techniques outside Reggio schools in Italy. Reggio-inspired schools in the United States are young by comparison and could benefit from deepening the intentional/reflective aspects of their practice.

Intention and reflection are *the* forces that make teachers compassionate and cause them to modify their beliefs and actions, as the following story illustrates: In 2007, the renowned Israeli professor and psychologist Reuven Feuerstein (1920–2014) gave a short address to a group of 200 teachers and education leaders in Memphis, Tennessee. He spoke about his life's work improving the functioning of children who were cognitively challenged, and about reconstituting meaningful lives for children and youth who were Holocaust survivors, for others who faced genocide in different countries, for youth who had suffered bullet wounds through the brain, for others with congenital brain defects or other seriously debilitating problems. Audience attention was riveted on this man, who spoke from such diverse and compelling firsthand experiences as escapee, visionary, theorist, practitioner, clinician, and founder/president of a major international center for enhancing learning potential.

Feuerstein related a heart-wrenching story of young Holocaust survivors who had witnessed the extermination of their families, destruction of their homes and countries, and starvation, and who by some miracle repeatedly escaped from imminent threats of death. He described how these youth were rehabilitated in Israel only to face death again as the new state went to war to fight for its right to exist.

A teacher in the audience asked how Feuerstein had the fortitude to persevere in this emotionally draining work and how he knew what to do with youth whose only skills were animalistic behaviors: kill or be killed, steal or starve. "You see," replied Feuerstein, "I had no choice." He continued:

We [the Jewish people] were almost wiped out. So many millions were murdered that every survivor was precious. We had to make sure the youth did more than survive; they had to thrive. Because we *believed* that we could change these children, we made ways to do so. When you believe, you do.

In this book, I draw on Feuerstein's theories and practices—in Chapter 1 to describe effective teacher/child interactions and in Chapter 7 for techniques to help children self-regulate their emotions.

If you believe that competence, curiosity, concentration, empathy, and joy are young children's natural state, you will make sure to teach so that children's apathy, boredom, and misbehavior cease. To teach with intention is to take charge, to be in command of your teaching so that you:

- Modify children's perspective if they are not joyful
- Spur their curiosity if they are apathetic
- Build cognitive function if they lack thinking skills

To teach with reflection is to make yourself aware of precisely what you have done to elicit competence, curiosity, concentration, empathy, and joy. Belief in children's innate and diverse competencies drives teachers' intention and impels them to be reflective.

WHY IS THIS BOOK IMPORTANT?

The current standardization of young children's education hampers development from age 0 to 8; moreover, requiring children to master specific content at predetermined times ultimately may kill motivation. I believe that to keep alive faith in the human spirit, outlier approaches such as Reggio, Montessori, Waldorf, and other "progressive" schools must flourish. I believe that philosophies espoused by Tolstoy, Montessori, Dewey, Vygotsky, Hawkins, Feuerstein, Papert, Postman, Malaguzzi, Gardner, and other progressive educators of their ilk are important to nourish and motivate teachers.

While a majority of schools depend on standardized curricula, there must be alternatives. Reggio practices show the heights that children can achieve in schools that use open-ended time, richly equipped space, and an "emergent curriculum." Reggio schools show sophisticated, aesthetic, competent work, and young children's capacity for complex thinking, collaborative endeavor, and skilled performance beyond what most believe possible. From the field of neuroscience we can draw a mantra for Reggio-type work: "brain-worthy education." But to translate words into practice, the structure and systems of brain-worthy schools must be shown in text and in classrooms. The practices I define as intentional and reflective are most compatible with schools and teachers who want alternatives to standardized education. These teachers prefer to work in schools where schedules do not dominate, the curriculum is not test-driven, and lessons are not formulaic. Some of these teachers have embraced Reggio practices and, in struggling to use the Reggio philosophy, seek guidance in how to put the philosophy into practice. This

book is a resource for such teachers. But there is a wider audience because, regardless of one's philosophy, any teacher can use this book's techniques, scenarios, and exercises to become more effective.

Throughout our culture uncertainty permeates our lives: What is the appropriate role for government? Should the United States intervene in other nations' affairs? Should private citizens bear arms? How can we support the values of Muslims, Jews, Christians, and nonbelievers equally? Should persons of different sexual orientations be permitted to teach young children? How will climate change affect my grandchildren?

Uncertainty raises parents' and teachers' questions about education: What should I expect from an infant/toddler program? How do I know if my school is "good"? What is the optimum amount of time for a 3-year-old to spend in school? When should children learn letters? At what age should children move on from infant/toddler care to a 3/4-year-old program? How do I reconcile the need for play with the pressure for "readiness"? How can one classroom accommodate different languages, diverse cultures, and wide-ranging congenital inheritances?

A strong relationship exists between intentional/reflective teaching, value-laden questions, and one's beliefs about childrearing and schooling. This book shows how teachers' beliefs impact children's attitudes, and how teachers' actions shape children's behavior. Teachers mold children's:

- Self-confidence
- Belief in their own competence
- Capacity for empathy
- Respect shown (or not shown) for others
- Ability to regulate behavior
- Disposition to persevere
- Skill in collaboration
- Propensity to remain curious

Teachers drive children's passion for finding out about living creatures, natural objects, the earth in their schoolyard, the stars in the heavens. Teachers influence the beliefs young children espouse, the interests they pursue, and the values they live.

I believe that the inner peace we want children to feel and their ability, ultimately, to fulfill their potential are shaped minute by minute, year by year, by behaviors that children observe—and ultimately adopt and emulate. In other words, teachers *are* what children will become. The forces of intention and reflection underpin humanistic values and cause them to thrive. Through their every act and word, intentional/reflective teachers instill in children a penchant toward purposeful action and a tendency toward thoughtfulness and collaboration, capabilities with which children will address whatever challenges they meet in the future. We become what we behold (2 Corinthians 3:18). Because we live in an era when the most pervasive form of education is authoritarian and standardized, I hope this book empowers teachers to form their own judgments and trust their own beliefs about children's innate drive to learn.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Brief descriptions of the chapters follow.

Chapter 1: “What IS Intentional Teaching?” I begin by explaining words that define intentional/reflective teaching. I analyze whether teaching in the scenarios I show is or is not intentional/reflective. And I provide exercises teachers can use to practice intentional/reflective techniques.

By chapter’s end readers should be familiar with the nature of intentional/reflective teaching and able to recognize whether their own teaching is intentional and reflective.

Chapter 2: Micro-Actions of Intentional/Reflective Teaching. I show intention and reflection in the micro-actions of body, eyes, and face, and how to:

1. Convey purpose and feelings with slight movements
2. Look in numerous ways—scan, study, glare
3. Express meaning and emotion with subtle facial expressions
4. Use numerous micro-actions

By chapter’s end readers should be able to:

1. Observe themselves teaching
2. Identify intentional/reflective techniques of body, eyes, and face
3. Use techniques with increasing intention and reflection

Chapter 3: The Voice and Hand in Intentional/Reflective Teaching. The chapter begins by exploring two aspects of speech—vocalization and word meanings—in overviews of (1) the vocal system and (2) English as a “combinatorial” system of phonemes and morphemes. Many exercises include games to encourage children to speak articulately, to use sound to emphasize meaning, and to choose words that best express thoughts.

I present micro-actions of the hands by studying their use in American Sign Language. And I recap an H. G. Wells story as a parable about how deprivation of one sense—vision—impacts both human capacities and an entire culture.

By chapter’s end readers should be able to (1) reflect critically on their teaching to exploit the vocal system’s capacities and (2) assess their use of voice and hand as intentional teaching tools.

Chapter 4: The Influence of Belief on Teachers. I describe specific forces that influence beliefs—families’ culture, where we live, the zeitgeist, marketers, politicians, educators, current research, the news. The chapter contains scenarios, case histories, research, historic incidents, and summaries of investigative reporting, and shows how these forces influence beliefs.

By chapter’s end teachers should be more reflective in:

1. Determining what they believe about children
2. Knowing whether what they do is based on habit
3. Identifying relationships among beliefs, actions, and intentions

Chapter 5: Choosing Words That Speak with Intention. This chapter is about intention and reflection in word choice and about listening mindfully—that is, with focus and presence. I dissect word choices, show scenarios where word choices influence children’s responses, and suggest techniques for intentional/reflective use of words. I portray techniques in mindfulness through useful exercises with children age 2 and older.

By chapter’s end, readers should intentionally:

1. Choose statements, phrase questions, and form responses
2. Use specific mindful techniques with children
3. Help children themselves use mindful techniques

Chapter 6: Intentionally and Reflectively Connecting Hand/Eye. The hand/eye connection, vital to developing higher-level thinking, may be relegated to workbook exercises and dried-out markers. Contrasting scarce materials with a rich array, I show how intentional use of materials impacts brain development.

By chapter’s end readers should be able to:

1. Equip classrooms with rich materials
2. Be intentional in introducing materials
3. Involve children with increasingly complex materials
4. Explain these activities’ importance to parents

Chapter 7: Behavior, Intention, and Reflection. I explore teachers’ vital role in children’s learning social and emotional intelligence, drawing on work by:

1. Jerome Kagan on temperament
2. Stanley Greenspan on challenging children
3. Reuven Feuerstein on guiding children from emotional to cognitive responses

In five scenarios I contrast ineffective and effective ways to handle common classroom occurrences. Each negative scenario is immediately contrasted with an intentional/reflective alternative.

By chapter’s end readers should:

1. Understand some dynamics of personality
2. See the relation between cognitive and emotional behavior
3. Have examples of techniques to help children reflect on and alter their behavior