

WHEN TEACHING GETS

TOUGH

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Introduction

For the Teacher

Are there days when you feel overwhelmed by some combination of unruly or poorly motivated students, parents who either give you a hard time or simply aren't to be found, and never-ending classroom distractions? Do you feel frustrated by burdensome meetings that accomplish little but eat up a ton of time? Are you getting tired pleading and scavenging for basic school supplies? Do you ever wonder if anybody notices or even cares how much effort you put out on a daily basis? Is there a knot in your stomach that tenses every time you hear faculty room chatter dominated by toxic colleagues bashing somebody or something? Do you often feel like a battered boxer, struggling to survive an onslaught of excessive paperwork and competing demands? Have you gotten to a point where you are fed up and think about quitting? Or have you emotionally left, but you hang on because you don't know what else to do and you need to pay the bills? If you answered yes to any of these questions, this book is written for you.

In my 35-plus-year career as a teacher and a school psychologist, I have worked with thousands of students from preschool through high school, including those with just about every label

and acronym we have ever invented: LD, ED, BD, SBD, ADD, ADHD, ODD, PDD, and JD. I have sat in on innumerable discussions debating the pros and cons of virtually every literacy and curricula program there is, trying to decide where the dollars would best be spent. I have attended numerous conferences and read extensive research that touts one program or another as a superior way to increase student achievement and reduce behavior problems. In search of the best way to present curriculum, I have explored class size; traditional scheduling, block scheduling and modular scheduling; small-group instruction, large-group instruction, and individualized instruction; and reading labs, writing labs, and math labs. Frankly, what I have found is that with all the emphasis on using supposedly research-based teaching methods, virtually none of these methods really makes much of a difference. Little of what is emphasized actually connects to great teaching and learning. In fact, scholar and author John Goodlad, who looked at 40 years of educational innovations while at UCLA, did not find a single one that increased student achievement.

The only thing that increased student achievement was the effectiveness of the teacher (Goodlad, 1994). And students are most likely to succeed with teachers who know their stuff and can express themselves in an articulate way, convey confidence fearlessly, have a sense of humor, are well-organized, have high expectations, are willing to risk doing things differently when necessary, and realize they are as much performer as instructor. These teachers value listening to and connecting with their students, which enables them to push harder, and they refuse to give up when kids are giving up on themselves.

Teaching is tough. Very diverse classrooms with academically and behaviorally challenging students, limited parent or administrative support, blame for low test scores, and little say in curriculum decisions are but a few of the obstacles we face in being able to do our jobs as well as we possibly can. Virtually every piece of data on stressful occupations puts teaching at or near the top. While

there are many ways to cope with stress, it is becoming increasingly common for teachers to simply get disgusted and leave. Some leave to teach at a different school, others to teach at a different level, and some to work at a different occupation. Perhaps even more of us leave psychologically, counting down the days until the end of the year. Some of us aren't well suited to the many demands and need to leave for our own well-being and the larger good.

It bothers me to lose great and potentially great teachers to the variety of frustrations that when handled differently can change dread to wow! Although there is no singular blueprint for all, there are many things you can do to improve your effectiveness (which is probably fine if you are a great teacher) and more importantly, your outlook (which is probably more negative than it should be). Most of the strategies covered in this book are entirely new, while a few are from prior books I have written. I like to think of this book as one resource that cuts right to the chase and offers excellent but overwhelmed teachers practical strategies that can be used right away to make things better. Each chapter also offers suggestions for administrators to help good teachers who are struggling. The book is purposely light on theory and rich with ways to regain enthusiasm and optimism. The goal is focusing on what works in an easy-to-read, easy-to-implement format to help you reclaim the feeling of satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that all teachers long for and deserve.

For the Administrator

Some school districts are currently experimenting with merit pay and other cash incentives to attract and retain their best teachers. Although the jury is still out on its effectiveness, common sense suggests that paying more is a tangible reward that provides obvious benefit to the recipient. Business works on this premise all the time. Yet even if all school districts paid their best teachers more money, there is ample research in the behavioral sciences literature

that has shown money alone to be an insufficient incentive for sustaining top-notch performance. Favorable working conditions, appropriate challenge, support from colleagues, and recognition from above for a job well done are practices generally seen in organizations that are able to get and keep their best employees. As you well know, excellent teachers are a treasure that not only benefits your students but also makes your job easier. Great teachers are hard to come by, and it is obviously in the interest of every administrator committed to high achievement and happiness to do whatever is necessary to keep the best teachers satisfied, energized, and enthusiastic.

Researchers from around the country have attempted to examine every variable in schools that makes a difference in the achievement of students. Why is it that some teachers can regularly raise their students' test scores for children of the same race, class, and ability level while other teachers get below average results every year? Why do some teachers derive much better results than others who use the same reading or math program? How is it that some teachers can work magic with their students while others who teach the same kids struggle mightily? In an article in the *New York Times Sunday* magazine, Elizabeth Green (2010) shares data on the impact of effective teachers. Eric Hanushek, a Stanford economist, found that while the top 5 percent of teachers were able to impart a year and a half worth of gains in learning in one school year as assessed by standardized tests, the weakest 5 percent had students show only a half year of advancement each year. William Sanders, a statistician studying Tennessee teachers, found that a student with a weak teacher for three straight years, on average scores 50 percentile points behind a similar student with a strong teacher for those years. Zavatsky (2010) found that attracting and retaining effective teachers was one of five factors associated with significantly raised achievement and a narrowing of the achievement gap in urban schools. Clearly, these studies present severe limitations in exclusively linking teacher effectiveness to student performance on

standardized tests. But in every school that has employed me or to which I consult, virtually every administrator, parent, student, and teacher can quickly identify the best teachers (these aren't always the ones that have the kids with the highest test performance) on request. These are virtually always the teachers that are able to get the best each student can give while considering a host of variables that impact learning.

Over the years, I have been privileged to observe what some of our best teachers do. In my other books, I have shared motivation and classroom management practices these teachers use to achieve success with difficult students. In this book, I share what teachers (and you) can do for themselves when some combination of difficult students, lack of adequate resources, and too little appreciation gets them down. Although this manuscript is written primarily as a self-help tool, your support as an administrator or resource person can be invaluable. For many excellent but stressed teachers, you can help by sharing some of the problem-solving strategies for such common issues as managing difficult students and challenging parents, differentiating instruction for classes filled with diverse learners while maintaining high standards for all, and finding alternatives when faced with inadequate materials. Most of the time, affirmation and appreciation for a job well done is all a good teacher really needs. Who better than you to provide this? You will find many suggestions throughout the book that you can use to make your teachers feel noticed, appreciated, and supported.

CHAPTER ONE

The Big Picture: Attitudes and Strategies

If you want your life to be a magnificent story, then begin by realizing that you are the author and every day you have the opportunity to write a new page.

Mark Houlahan

I was recently consulting at an inner-city middle school and was asked to visit Ms. R's class, which was identified as one of the toughest. Apparently, the day before, she was practically reduced to tears due to their noncompliant behavior. Expecting the worst, I was surprised to find the students relatively well behaved. Many were involved in the interesting video of tornadoes that began the day's lesson, and then were very animated when the metaphor of an angry mother representing a tornado was presented by Ms. R. Kids talked openly about their relationships with their mothers, some expressing lots of love, others telling about how they boss their mothers around, while still others talked about preferring to be swept up by a real tornado rather than facing an angry mom.

About 35 minutes into the 45-minute period, Ms. R somehow connected the lesson to how she was feeling right then and expressed her delight at their positive behavior throughout the

day's class. She told them that she actually felt like crying at the joy she was feeling. She then told them how different yesterday was, being very open about how upset she felt and how, as she left school the day before, she wondered why she even bothered to teach. As she went on with this for a few minutes, you could hear a pin drop in the classroom. Every single student was completely mesmerized by what they were hearing. A few minutes after she finished, some of her more difficult students began to revert back to their irritating behaviors.

Attitudes Are as Important as Strategies

The point of this story is that attitudes are at least as important as strategies when you are in difficult situations. Perhaps the two most important attitudes for teachers are:

1. Live each day as if there is no tomorrow
2. Understand that change is a roller-coaster ride

I observe many committed teachers lose their enthusiasm for teaching because they don't take it one day at a time. If you have a particularly difficult class or you are surrounded by too many toxic colleagues, it is easy to get discouraged and depressed if you start thinking about the many tomorrows that are ahead. Nobody in the midst of stress wants to think about how there are still six months left to the school year or 25 years to go until retirement. Teachers need every ounce of positive energy and enthusiasm they can muster. If things are tough, you might begin to think about other life options for yourself or apply for other jobs. Keep the door open to change, but approach each day as if there is no tomorrow. Only then will you have the grounding to live in the moment without being emotionally scarred with what happened yesterday. Take a second and look around. Volunteer with Special Olympics or Big Brothers/Big Sisters. Get outside your own little world and realize that while things are difficult right now, overall you have your

summers off, never work weekends or holidays, have a very nice pension, and are blessed to have a career where you can drastically influence and change lives every day. As columnist Leonard Pitts Jr. writes (2011), “Get done what you came here to do, give the gifts you meant to give, do the good you’re able to do, say what you need to say, now, today, because everything you see is temporary, the clock is ticking and the alarm could go off any second.” Teach with BEEP—belief, energy, emotion, and passion every single day, as if it were your last on this beautiful Earth. Finally, realize that changing behaviors is almost always very difficult. It is a roller coaster ride of ups, downs, loops, and corkscrews. For the teacher, it is like being on the roller coaster blindfolded. Rarely do we know when the twists and turns will come. Virtually all people, including you and your kids, revisit old behaviors as they are acquiring new ones. It is quite likely that Ms. R’s kids who started acting out after hearing her touching story were saying, “Don’t expect me to be good always just because I’ve been good today. I’m not ready to be good always.”

FISH!

The wonderful and highly effective FISH! program that guides employees at the Pike Market in Seattle, Washington, emphasizes four primary attitudes when treating customers and coworkers. Unlike any other store that sells fish, this one is special. For me, spending time in a store that sells fish would not normally be a priority. Yet this market is a fun place to be. Although it looks and smells like a fish market, it feels more like a playground for adults. Customers not only come to buy fish, but also see the market as a fun place to hang out. As described in the book *FISH! Tales* (Lundin, Christensen, Paul, & Strand, 2002), the fish philosophy is all about how employees should treat customers: *choose your attitude, play, make their day, and be present*. I believe these same attitudes are at the core of successful and satisfied teachers. The best teachers view their students as the most important customers they have.

Although most of the book is about strategies, we begin with attitudes since attitudes are the fuel that makes the engine go.

1. Play

Employees at Pike are encouraged, and in fact required, to have fun with each other and with their customers. It is not uncommon for employees to be cracking tasteful jokes and playfully tossing fish to customers and each other. They make time to play, bringing energy and fun along with commitment to the job.

At the Longaberger Company, a maker of handcrafted baskets and other home products in Newark, Ohio, there is an unwritten policy that employees are to take up to 25 percent of each work day having fun. If this practice was implemented in school, at least one and a half hours every day would be primarily about fun. When I interviewed a few employees to confirm this practice, one of them told me that when management tells employees that that they are having too much fun, it is not uncommon for an employee to answer, "I'm just getting in my 25 percent." Morale seems very upbeat there. Children do not question whether they should have fun; they just do it. Yet, if you ask one of your friends to do something just for fun, you are likely to hear, "I wish I could, but I'm too busy." Like an elite athlete who is not only talented in what he does but also loves doing it, satisfied teachers find ways to enjoy what they are doing and will often create their own fun. Look for ways to inject fun into as many things as you can while you teach. Laugh with your kids. Enjoy their quirky ups and downs. Revel in their youth, dreams, and naiveté.

2. Make their day

Employees are expected to take good care of their customers so they will want to come back. Within reason, employees do whatever they can to please the customer. Naturally, there are