PURSUING GREATNESS

Empowering Teachers to Take Charge of Their Professional Growth

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Tools

Tools *(continued)*

Prologue
Becoming an expert, one problem at a time

More advice for teachers? Seriously? What more can be said that hasn't already been said?

Maybe that's what you're thinking.

Or maybe it's something more like, *I've got 101 problems, but reading your book ain't one.*

Fair enough.

But before you put this book back on the shelf, we want you to know it's *all about* solving your problems.

Don't worry. We're not going to pepper you with a bajillion things you must do to be a good teacher, nor make you feel guilty about all the things you're *not* doing.

Rather, we've written this whole book with you in mind— the challenges we know you face in your classroom. Whatever problem you're facing, other teachers have faced them too . . . and the cleverest ones have *solved* them. So, you can take solace in that.

You can also take solace that you don't need to read this book from cover to cover (unless that's how you roll). Rather, we encourage you to identify a challenge in your classroom—commonly referred to as a "problem of practice"—then read what researchers have figured out about how to solve it, and then do what real people (fellow teachers) have done to address the same challenges in their classrooms.

> **Definition: problem of practice (noun)**
>
> The particular element in your teaching and/or classroom responsibilities that nags at you, confounds you, and provides a challenge that you haven't yet been able to overcome.

Growing your expertise

Before you go flipping ahead through the pages of this book to find your problem of practice, though, we should share one more thing: We've written this book to not only show you how to solve your problems, but also help you understand *why* a particular strategy works, and help you reflect on what happens when you apply best practice in your classroom.

Why is that important? We want to help you embed these strategies deeply in your teaching so they become second nature. We also want to help you be a great teacher (or even greater one) by helping you to self-reflect on what is and isn't working in your classroom so you can keep becoming a better version of yourself. On top of that, we want to help you develop ever more *expertise* as a teacher, which entails developing mental models of *how* things work and *why*, so you're equipped with a whole set of *when–then* statements (*when* X happens, *then* I do Y) that you can use to diagnose and solve problems.

You'll likely find that this process is a little like climbing a mountain, in which cresting one hill brings a higher one into view. In the same way, overcoming one teaching challenge often reveals another. We've constructed this book, in fact, as a series of pathways with one challenge leading to the next. We don't do that to overwhelm you, but to help you develop those mental models for teaching: connecting dots among what otherwise might come across as a bunch of disparate tactics into some big, important ideas—that is, theories of action—that you can employ to lift student learning.

Also, we've constructed these pathways to inspire you, to show you how tackling common classroom problems one after another can bring you to a special place—to the top of the mountain, if you will—where you'll feel creative and innovative as you guide your students toward inquiry-based learning, helping them to stoke their fire inside to learn, and become passionate and persistent learners. A place where they can be deeply *curious*.

Ultimately, that's where we hope this journey, and solving one problem at a time, can lead you: to a place where learning is joyful, for both you and your students.

It'd be hypocritical, of course, to guide you toward inquiry-based learning without letting you engage in inquiry-based learning yourself. And really, that's what this book is all about—letting you take control of *your own* learning as a teacher. That's why we've designed it as something of an interactive quest, so you can select where you want to go next, finding your own opportunity for improvement and growth.

Don't travel alone

We also hope that you'll share this book with your colleagues, because your own learning is more likely to be fruitful and rewarding when you engage in cooperative professional learning (PL). We've known for a long time, of course, that drive-by professional

development (PD) sessions don't really do much for teachers or their students. That's not to say teachers never get better; they do, all the time. In fact, contrary to what you may have heard, most teachers do grow as professionals and get better over the entire course of their careers (Goodwin & Slotnik, 2019).

What's more, education researchers have given us a pretty good handle on the "recipe" for talent development. It includes these ingredients:

1) Theory—learning *what* to do and *why* it's important.

2) Modeling—seeing *how* to do it.

3) Practice—applying a new strategy in an actual classroom setting.

4) Peer coaching—receiving feedback to improve the practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002).

We cannot overstate the impact of this fourth element, *peer coaching*. Without it, we only transfer about 5 percent of what we learn in PD sessions to our classrooms. Basically, we need critical friends to regularly observe our teaching and provide feedback to help us refine our practices and avoid backsliding into old habits. So, you'll find throughout this book questions to pose to your peers when you invite them to observe your classroom. We did that because most people are too nice to point out our shortcomings—unless we purposefully invite them to hit us between the eyes with them. When you say, for example, "I feel like my kids weren't all engaged with that lesson, so how might I have started that lesson better?" it's a lot easier for your peer to say, "Well, now that you mention it, there was one thing. . . ."

We didn't just make this stuff up

A quick word about the pathways themselves. Altogether, this book will help you solve 24 key problems of practice that you're likely to face (or may have already faced) in your classroom. You may wonder, why these 24 problems? (*After all, I have 101.*)

We chose them because they're not only common, they're also critical problems whose solutions will benefit your students most. How do we know that? We've drawn from an extensive review of decades of research that McREL has synthesized over the years and presented in two editions of the popular ASCD publication, *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, & Stone, 2012; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). Later, we added to this knowledge base—synthesizing research on teacher-student relationships, motivation, grading practices, and standards-based education—to create an even more robust view of what teachers do in the classroom, and shared our findings in *The 12 Touchstones of Good Teaching* (Goodwin & Hubbell, 2013). In all this work, we were cognizant of what education researcher John Hattie frequently refers to as the "hinge point" of research effect

sizes; that is, we looked for practices with significant effect sizes—well beyond what we'd expect from ordinary effects for teachers. We used this work as a lens through which to view common classroom problems and focus on the ones most worthy of your attention.

In short, we want to help you solve the right problems. Sure, keeping your classroom plants alive may be a problem, but it's not an important one. Besides, if you saw our plants, you'd know we can't help you there.

So, what we aim to provide in this book is clarity about the most important problems you can solve in your classroom along with a sequence for solving them.

Our why

If we might be permitted to speak from the heart for a moment, we'd like to add this: We don't expect you to read this book just because of what we've written in these pages or how we've put it together. We believe both are strengths, but what's even more important to us is our *why*—the single, big compelling idea that drew all of us together to craft this labor of love.

It's an idea that is often ignored in conversations about teacher development: *curiosity*. We believe all students should have the opportunity to be curious—not just in a temporary or distractive way, but to become curious people whose lives are animated and enriched by questioning, exploring, and learning about others. As we've written elsewhere, curiosity has many powerful benefits—helping us become better students, demonstrate better job performance, experience better relationships, feel more fulfilled in life, become better leaders, and, believe it or not, live longer.

Creating classrooms where curiosity can flourish, though, requires teachers who have mastered the fundamentals and routines of teaching so well, and have so effectively internalized a broad repertoire of expert mental models about teaching, that they're able to focus less on *teaching* and more on student *learning*.

Hopefully at this point, some curiosity may have begun stirring inside you, making you want to read more to figure out how tackling one challenge after another can help you and your students experience a different kind of classroom. That's the other big idea animating this book: *teacher curiosity*. We want to help you make your classroom more rewarding and joyful, not just for your students, but for you. We hope that as you read this book, you'll experience curiosity and begin to wonder, *What if* I tried these ideas in my classroom? Would it really work?

Personalizing learning one step at a time, from the inside out

Finally, we don't believe expertise comes about through top-down direction or scripted programs. That's why this book offers neither. Rather, it's designed to inspire and guide you to follow your own journey of professional growth—and to help you work with your colleagues to do the same so that ultimately, together, you can create dynamic, personalized learning environments for students. It's worth noting that schools that have successfully created these environments say that it wasn't done with a snap of the fingers or by implementing a program. Rather, it was a messier, more organic process akin to *innovating together*. People in these schools describe their efforts as "failing forward" in rapid, iterative cycles—operating with an experimental mindset that says mistakes are OK, but errors (repeated mistakes) should be avoided (Halverson et al., 2015). These efforts almost always start with small, incremental steps, laying a foundation with the basics and then building on that foundation, together, to develop more expert practice and innovation:

❖ Often, as a first order of business, they translate standards-based curriculum into learning progressions.

❖ Next, they work together to develop the ability to quickly size up and support student learning.

❖ Then, through trial and error, they become more comfortable with loosening their grip on instruction and handing the reins over to students—understanding that it's far easier to differentiate *learning* than instruction.

Use this book as a guide for personalizing your professional learning—not as a step-by-step process like those migraine-inducing instructions for ready-to-assemble furniture, but rather as more of a road map to help you reflect, with your colleagues, where you are on your journey. In doing so, we hope this book makes a unique contribution to conversations about personalized learning by recognizing that it isn't something we wake up one morning and decide to do. Like all good things, it takes time—the culmination of a variety of teaching practices delivered with such mastery, precision, and creativity that students can take ownership and control of their own learning. With sustained commitment to professional reflection and collegial feedback, you can get there.

So, if you're ready to begin (or continue) your journey, we are, too. ✳

Chapter 1

Leaning into your teaching

Think about the best teacher you've ever seen in action—a person who models excellence in the profession, their classroom a beacon of learning. Students are engaged, lessons provide rigorous challenges, and there's palpable synergy between students and teacher. Teaching and learning pass over, under, around, and through each other, with students instructing the teacher about learning—what causes confusion, what examples are meaningful—and the teacher inspiring, facilitating, and guiding students' growth.

As you consider this individual, ask yourself these questions: What top three characteristics would you use to describe this excellence in the classroom? What sets this teacher apart from other educators? What distinguishes this teacher as "excellent?" Perhaps you'd use the words passionate, organized, or well-planned. Or maybe warm and caring, patient, and funny. What about "sets high expectations" or "has a deep knowledge of content?" How about "is flexible," "strong in classroom management," or "develops a strong rapport with students?"

If we pause for a moment to gain our bearings, we realize our list can't be limited to just three descriptors; instead we could easily fill a whole book listing the qualities, characteristics, and attributes that describe this educator extraordinaire.

Another pause reveals a subsequent truth: Put two of these "excellent" teachers side by side and they would look undeniably different. While they may resemble each other in some general ways, the specific characteristics we use to describe one may very well not describe the other at all.

For years, the secret to great teaching has seemed more like alchemy than science, with research only complicating the matter. Take a quick glance at the studies on teacher quality over the past several decades and you'll have a long list of lists—each report offering its own rendition of what it takes to be categorized as "excellent." Combine all the characteristics