WHEN YOU'RE THE NEW TEACHER

28 STRATEGIES to Align Your Good Intentions with Your Teaching Practices

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Elizabeth Soslau

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Soslau, Elizabeth, author.
Title: When you're the new teacher : 28 strategies to align your good intentions with your teaching practices / Elizabeth Soslau, Ph.D.
Other titles: When you are the new teacher
Description: Huntington Beach : Free Spirit Publishing, an imprint of Teacher Created Materials, Inc, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024009317 (print) | LCCN 2024009318 (ebook) | ISBN 9798885545099 (paperback) | ISBN 9798885545105 (ebook) | ISBN 9798885545112 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Student teachers--Training of--United States--Handbooks, manuals, etc. | First year teachers--Training of--United States--Handbooks, manuals, etc.
Classification: LCC LB2157.U5 S6574 2024 (print) | LCC LB2157.U5 (ebook) | DDC 371.1020973--dc23/eng/20240620
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024009317
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024009318

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Edited by Marjorie Lisovskis
Cover and interior design by Mayfly Book Design

Free Spirit Publishing
An imprint of Teacher Created Materials
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Minneapolis, MN 55442
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freespirit.com

For Harry and Chris, my true loves and biggest cheerleaders

Contents

List of Figures viii
List of Reproducible Pages ix

Introduction 1

Why This Book? 2
Who Is the Book For? 2
Scope and Organization 3
How to Use the Book 4
Author's Perspective: Ideas That Underlie the Book's Strategies 5
Two Common Truths 8

Chapter One: Getting Your House in Order 9

Strategies for School Year Preparation

Strategy 1: Unearth Students' Funds of Knowledge 10
Strategy 2: Discover Community Assets 12
Strategy 3: Identify Family Expectations 15
Strategy 4: Help Students Learn Family Expectations and Set Goals 21

Chapter Two: Collaboration Is Essential 39

Strategies for Building Relationships with Families, Colleagues, and Administrators

Strategy 5: Invite Family Adults to Share Their Expertise with the Class 40
Strategy 6: Guide Students to Reflect on the Family Visits 43
Strategy 7: Use a Four-Step Framework to Navigate Teacher-Family Communications ... 45
Strategy 8: Use Peer Observations to Build Partnerships with Colleagues 48
Strategy 9: Form or Join a Teacher Inquiry Group 52
Strategy 10: Develop Relationships with Administrators 58

Chapter Three: Love and Care in Teaching 69

Strategies for Affirming Student Identity and Belonging

Strategy 11: Recognize the Importance of Demonstrating Love and Care for Students .. 70
Strategy 12: Anchor Your Classroom with Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors .. 71
Strategy 13: Help Students Express and Share Their Identities 73
Strategy 14: Help Students Consider How They See Themselves and How Others See Them 76
Strategy 15: Make All Classroom Spaces Affirming Places 79
Strategy 16: Connect with Journaling and Letter Writing 81
Strategy 17: Set Norms Together to Build a Classroom Community 84
Strategy 18: Have a Shout-Out Box for Student Affirmations 86

Chapter Four: Embracing Opportunities for Growth 95

Strategies for Navigating Challenges, Building Expertise, and Sustaining Joy

Strategy 19: Follow a Recipe for Addressing Problematic Situations with Colleagues 96
Strategy 20: Make Help-Seeking a Key Part of Your Professional Practice 101
Strategy 21: Embolden Yourself to Contribute Expertise 103
Strategy 22: Learn Ways to Manage Stress, Ward Off Burnout, and Find Joy in Teaching 105

Chapter Five: Moving Out and Beyond 115

Strategies for Transitioning to a New Classroom, School, or Role

Strategy 23: Reflect and Plan to Make Goodbyes Meaningful 116
Strategy 24: Expand Your Portfolio 118
Strategy 25: Prepare for New Beginnings 121
Strategy 26: Set Yearlong Aspirations for Curriculum and Learning 122
Strategy 27: Visit and Start Planning for Your New Space 124
Strategy 28: Make Time for Summer Learning 125

A Final Word of Encouragement 131
Acknowledgments 133
Appendix: Expert Perspectives: Foundations for Teaching and Learning 135
References 137
Index 139
Digital Resources 145
About the Author 147

List of Figures

1.1: Fifth Grade Funds of Knowledge Reflection Chart 11
1.2: Concentric Map of Community Assets 13
1.3: Community Asset Planning 14
1.4: Student Feelings Tally 17
1.5: Parent-Reported Student Challenges/Areas of Acceleration and Expected Supports 18
1.6: Family Communication Preferences Chart 19
1.7: Family Follow-Up Letter 20
2.1: Family Expertise Planning Chart 41
2.2: Family Participation Invitation 42
2.3: Inquiry Group Invitation 53
2.4: Summary of a Basic Protocol for a Teacher Inquiry Group 54
2.5: Framing a Problem of Practice 55
3.1: This Is Me 75
3.2: Student Identity Data Chart 80
3.3: Classroom Spaces Inventory 80
3.4: Prompts for Two-Way Journaling 82
3.5: Sample Norms Word Cloud 85
3.6: Sample Seventh Grade Classroom Norms 86
4.1: Points of Collaboration Reflection Questions 106
5.1: Sample Administrator Report Details 119
5.2: Sample Portfolio Tracking Form 120

List of Reproducible Pages

All About Me: Special Skills and Interests 26
Funds of Knowledge Reflection Chart 27
Concentric Map of Community Assets 28
Community Asset Planning 29
Family Expectations Questionnaire 30
Parent-Reported Student Challenges/Areas of Acceleration and Expected Supports 32
Family Communication Preferences Chart 33
My Questions for a Treasured Adult 34
My Goal for School 36
Planning and Reaching My Goal 37
Family Expertise Planning Chart 64
Peer Observation Form 65
Reflection on a Problem of Practice: Questions to Consider 66
What's the Dilemma? Summary and Details about a Problem of Practice 67
This Is Me 88
Who Is the Me That Others See? 89
Student Identity Data 91
Classroom Spaces Inventory 92
Norms Questionnaire 93
Redressing Missed Opportunities 111
Points of Collaboration Reflection Questions 112
My Plan for Joyful Task Completion 113
Peer Report 127
Administrator Report 129
Portfolio Tracking Form 130

Introduction

TEACHER SPOTLIGHT

Starting Out

"When I first started teaching, I was fearful of being majorly unprepared. I was fresh out of my undergraduate program and felt so certain I was nowhere near prepared to start teaching. My biggest fear was being inadequate to teach such young, inquisitive minds. I came to learn that confidence is a big part of teaching. I felt more confident when I asked our instructional team for help, having them come into my room, watch a lesson, and then give me pointers on things to change or tweak. Overall, while my fear was valid, I was able to overcome it and learn more about myself in the process."

• • •

"I couldn't wait to set up my room and get started teaching. Soon after being hired, I found out that I would be teaching first grade. I was terrified because I had no idea what to do with little ones. I got started right away, planning out my classroom and looking up different websites for ideas on how to teach first grade and what to expect. On the first day of school, they all came in with a smile and an excitement for learning. We spent most of the day getting to know each other, exploring the classroom and materials while creating an environment where they felt safe and loved. We all made it through our first day—they didn't want to go home, and I didn't want them to leave either. It was at that moment that I knew I could teach first grade and love it."

• • •

"I was so excited for my first teaching job! I always dreamed of being a teacher, and to finally have my own classroom was a dream come true! It was also a bit surreal that I was now in charge of teaching these 120 students. I was eager to show them how cool math can be and to have them see that they could all be successful in math!"

We each begin our teaching journey with a clear set of aims. We want to teach well so our students thrive. We commit to becoming lifelong learners. We are armed with good intentions. Too often, though, many of us are confronted with the hard realities of schooling: mandated curricula, scripted lesson plans, inauthentic instructional materials, systems that hinder parental collaboration, schedules that hamper our attempts to reflect and improve our teaching . . . the list goes on. What practices can we enact that help us navigate these realities? How do we make good on our good intentions?

As a longtime teacher educator and former public-school teacher, I have a keen sense of what it feels like to want to teach well, yet not feel fully equipped to do so. Over the years, I often craved a resource for self-directed, self-paced professional learning that I could use to improve my practice.

Importantly, as a classroom teacher, I wanted to implement teaching practices that helped me fulfill my intentions to meet my students where they were, to show that I valued their identities and skills, to make their learning meaningful and authentic, and to make what we did in the classroom matter. As a teacher educator, I wanted a practical and empowering resource my teacher candidates could carry with them as they began their careers and as they moved forward, with ideas they could easily digest and implement in their classrooms from the start. I could never find quite the right guidebook, so I decided to write it.

Why This Book?

There are numerous books offering strategies for lesson planning, coordinating lessons to meet curriculum requirements, and organizing the classroom to meet these requirements. The strategies in *When You're the New Teacher* focus on tasks and activities that cut across—and move beyond—planning, instruction, and classroom management. Great teaching requires strong relationships among teachers, colleagues, students, families, and communities. Teachers who engage in relationship building know how to navigate challenges and overcome barriers. They leverage their students' skills and interests as legitimate curricular starting points and create context for deep learning, reflection, and student-centered instruction. This book addresses those critical teaching qualities, offering practical, step-by-step activities to help you know and understand students and families, build effective relationships with coworkers and supervisors, and put love and care at the heart of your teaching.

Who Is the Book For?

New teachers want to become excellent teachers. Excellent teachers are always trying to get better at teaching. This book is meant to help you as a teacher starting out, or wherever you are along your teaching path. It invites you to reflect on the course you

want to set for yourself and to grow professionally from the start and as your career progresses.

- As a teacher candidate or a beginning teacher, you can use the book to prepare for your first year of teaching; to implement activities to get to know students, their families, and the surrounding community; to practice student-centered instructional approaches; and to reflect on your teaching toward the goal of continuous improvement.
- If you are a more experienced teacher moving to a new school, the book can help you get to know your new colleagues and deepen your skill set by thinking through ways to incorporate culturally responsive practices in your daily repertoire and engage more productively with colleagues around complex teaching topics.
- Teacher educators, induction leaders, teacher mentors, student teaching field supervisors, and instructional coaches: this book is for you as well. Use it as a professional learning tool to guide teacher-learners through activities and reflective exercises to improve their practice.

Scope and Organization

Five chapters present twenty-eight strategies to help you prepare, plan, act, and reflect on what you're learning, what's working, what you want to change, and how to go about it.

Chapter 1. Through four interrelated strategies, this chapter walks you through how to learn about students' lived experiences and integrate them into curriculum planning, become familiar with and determine how to make use of community assets, collect information about students' families, and help your students set and attain goals.

Chapter 2. Here you'll find ways to partner with school stakeholders and build relationships to enhance your students' learning experiences and your own. The chapter's six strategies offer activities that will help you plan for building positive relationships with families, colleagues, and administrators; craft ways to engage parents as experts in your classroom; partner with teaching peers to improve your instructional practices; and maintain a strong working relationship with your principal.

Chapter 3. Understanding the role of love and care in the classroom is addressed in chapter 3. Eight strategies include easy-to-follow directions for classroom-based activities to assist you in creating identity-affirming lessons and spaces, strengthening your classroom community, and expressing your respect and care for your students.

Chapter 4. This chapter presents four strategies to navigate challenges while identifying opportunities to develop your collaborative expertise. You will learn how to address

problematic decisions, remarks, or actions of other professionals and colleagues; seek help when you need it; build and contribute your own expertise; grow your tolerance for vulnerability; bring joy to required tasks; and support your emotional well-being.

Chapter 5. Teaching involves a host of transitions. Chapter 5 offers six strategies to use as you move from one teaching situation to another. In addition to learning how to plan to enter or reenter the job market or prepare to move to a different school, you will complete an exit strategy action plan that includes how to thank school stakeholders, how to lovingly say goodbye to students, and ways to request documentation of your own accomplishments.

Throughout the chapters, you will find real-life examples, sample dialogues, and stories from educators and students. At the end of each chapter are forms you can print or download to guide your planning and reflection.

How to Use the Book

When You're the New Teacher is self-paced and meant to be used regularly and year after year. My hope is that you will treasure this book as a personal reflective toolbox that enables you to systematically improve your teaching practice throughout your tenure as a practitioner. Alongside the book, be sure to keep a dedicated notebook or digital file for the journaling and reflective writing that are key to many of the book's activities.

Learning about teaching can be overwhelming, so I encourage you to pace yourself in a way that suits you best. It's fine to focus on the strategies one or two at a time. Use the table of contents as a menu, selecting chapters and strategies that fit your needs at any given time. For example, at the start of a new school year, begin with chapter 1 and find tools to learn about and consider how to incorporate what your students already know into your lessons, unearth families' academic desires, and locate neighborhood resources to connect your classroom with the community. If it is the middle of the school year and the culture and climate of your classroom could use a refresh, you might jump to chapter 3 for activities to build community. If you just found out that you will be moving to a new school, open to chapter 5 to get tips for making a smooth transition. Or perhaps you find yourself in a difficult debate with a colleague about how to approach a controversial classroom topic; chapter 4 gives you conversation protocols to navigate this challenge.

You can also use the book as part of professional learning community with a small group of teachers who wish to explore their instructional decision-making and work collectively to implement ideas from the book to improve their practice. In addition to the classroom activities and teacher reflections in the first three chapters, chapter 4 will be helpful in improving collaboration within and across groups of teachers such as grade groups and small learning communities.

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