

Acknowledgments

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We also thank the many talented, dedicated, and idealistic people who continue to enter the teaching profession. It is to you that we dedicate this book.

— *Kelley Dawson Salas*
Rita Tenorio
Stephanie Walters
Dale Weiss

Introduction

Why did you become a teacher?

Some of us chose the teaching profession because we love children, and we want to make a difference in the lives of students, and thus improve the world.

Some of us believe that children need a solid education so they can take their rightful place in society, so they in turn can help society become more just.

And many of us carry fond memories of a special teacher who lit the fire of learning within us, and now we want to pass that light along to the next generation.

Little did we know, as we signed up for those first School of Education classes, that the adventure on which we were about to embark would also be fraught with uncertainty, frustration, hours of internal dialogue, and questions that don't always find easy resolution.

If you're a new teacher and you're supposed to teach tomorrow as you read this, chances are you have at least a couple of butterflies in your stomach.

As fellow teachers, we know the feeling well.

And you may be tempted to toss this book aside and "do what I'm supposed to be doing" instead: grading papers, creating classroom assignments, or figuring out how to deal with a particularly challenging student in homeroom.

We know firsthand how that feels too.

We invite you to put the immediate demands of your classroom on hold for a little while and spend some time with this book, contemplating some of the broader questions of why we teach and how teachers can stay committed to being good teachers during those first

hectic years on the job.

It's common for new teachers to question the wisdom of their decision to enter this profession. Many of us find ourselves with little support, minimal time for planning, students who seem to have needs we can't possibly meet, and plummeting school budgets. And it's a fact that the turnover rate is depressingly high among new teachers: 30% quit within their first three years.

But before you despair, flip that statistic around: The majority of new teachers do make it.

We think this book can help you join the ranks of those who stay in teaching. Here you'll find the voices of other teachers — some new to the job, others with wisdom to share that's rooted in decades of classroom time. They offer practical advice for new teachers who know they're committed to kids and the profession, and who have great ideas about where they want to take their teaching, but who need a little help clarifying their vision, translating it to their right-now, day-to-day work in the classroom, and laying a solid foundation to build upon in the years to come.

A Rethinking Schools Vision for New Teachers

But before we go further, we should talk about what we think a successful teacher is. At Rethinking Schools, we subscribe to a definition of “success” that many new teachers don't hear in preservice preparation programs or in their first years on the job.

We are a publishing collective, comprised mostly of active classroom teachers, which has managed to sustain itself for 18 years because we all believe in putting social justice at the heart of our work. We acknowledge the conditions that negatively affect schools and children, including poverty, funding cuts, the pervasive and poisonous effects of racism, and policymakers who aspire publicly to “leave no child behind” yet time and again put up barriers to real reform by pushing shallow schemes that actually hurt schools and children.

We acknowledge these conditions, but we do not throw up our hands in despair and walk away. Instead, we believe that successful teachers must strive, both within their classrooms and in the broader community, to provide a high-quality education for all students.

We believe that successful teachers invite their students' lives, languages, and cultures into the classroom, and that they start building a classroom community on the first day of school. We believe our

students need teachers who are skilled in relating to students and families from diverse backgrounds, and who value the richness that diversity brings.

We believe teachers need to provide an academically rigorous curriculum, which prepares students for the challenges that await them outside the classroom. And we believe a central tenet of this academic rigor is teaching students to analyze the world around them, instead of uncritically receiving the messages pushed upon them by the media, the government, and the other powerful forces that shape our world.

We believe teachers must understand that injustice is a reality today, and that children and adults can and should work together to eradicate it.

And we believe that successful teachers dare to care — about students and their lives, about our communities, and about making a difference. Students need teachers who serve as examples, who foster hope that there is always something one can do to bring about a better world. Teachers should teach for social justice.

Setting Realistic Goals for Yourself

We also know that teaching can be a daunting set of challenges for those just starting out. We remember the uncertainty that new teachers face. We know the self-doubt that comes with feeling you have yet to develop the skills and principles needed to pursue your vision of “good teaching.”

Remember that in any profession, achieving a vision is a long-term process. We must be patient with ourselves, and avoid the cynicism and despair that affect too many of our colleagues and deprive them of the idealism and determination that first led them to teaching.

By no means are we saying new teachers should “learn how to be a regular teacher first, then start teaching for social justice.” Whether your commitment to social activism led you to teaching, or whether your life as a teacher led you to becoming involved in social justice issues, one thing is certain: Both are crucial components of effective teaching. Good teaching and teaching for social justice come from the same place in you. You cannot put the social-justice part of you aside and wait to become a better teacher. You need to do this job from the start with your whole brain, and with all your passion.

This is a lifelong process. The challenge of developing strong curriculum, which you are comfortable with and feel you can adequately

carry out, will be with you every day. And as good teachers teach, they also look for ways to reflect on their commitment to children, and ways to reflect on their commitment to living a life in synch with social justice values. If you establish this from the beginning as a regular part of your work as a teacher, then your classroom practice and your work as a social activist will grow to become one integrated whole.

There will still be days when nothing goes the way you want it to in your classroom. Holding on to a vision of the teacher you want to become will help you get through them.

How to Deal with Your New Job

Teaching is so overwhelming because teachers do a million things at once. We move in many circles: with students in our classrooms, with staff in our buildings, and with parents and members of the community beyond the school walls. We work with activists, community groups, and elected officials to try to improve the policies that affect students and public schools. Being a good teacher means learning how to work effectively in each of these worlds, and how to move between them.

Each chapter of this book offers an orientation to one aspect of this work.

Chapter 1, “Getting Off to a Good Start,” addresses how to survive the first years, how to start reaching out and building a support network, and how to stay sane and take care of yourself.

Chapter 2, “What Am I Going to Teach?” explores some of the options open to new teachers as they create and teach lessons, and offers guidelines for making social justice a focus of your practice from the beginning.

Chapter 3, “Getting to Know the Kids,” discusses how to build a strong classroom community, deal with discipline, and otherwise relate to students. We also raise questions about race, class, and language, discuss the importance of these issues, and suggest ways that teachers can directly address them in the classroom. In order to create an equitable environment for our students, we teachers must recognize and unlearn our own biases. This chapter provides a starting point for that long-term process.

Chapter 4, “Dealing with the World Beyond Your Classroom,” explores the broader concerns of teaching. Successful teachers must learn to develop professional relationships with colleagues, adminis-

trators, and parents, among others. How do we assert our teaching styles, ask for help, or suggest new ideas to colleagues? How do we build relationships with parents: What can we offer them and what can we expect from them? How do we work with administrators, whether they are supportive or critical, effective or ineffective? How can we work in the broader public arena to make schools better? Where else can we turn for information and resources?

Where You Go from Here

Being a good teacher means spending your life teaching, of course, but it also means spending your life thinking about teaching, in a long-term, systemic way. By asking the right questions, by continuously critiquing and improving your practice, and by continuing to examine the work you do in your classroom and how it connects with the larger world, you can achieve your vision and become the teacher you hope to be.

No book can prepare you for all the challenges that your first years as a teacher will hold, and no set of instructions can tell a teacher precisely how to teach for social justice. We hope, however, that this book will raise some questions, provide some encouragement, and offer some advice you’ll find useful as you start establishing yourself in your chosen profession.

We hope this is a book you will keep in your backpack, in your desk, or on your nightstand, to read and reflect upon, to dip into now and then when you need a little inspiration.

And we wish you luck taking on the vital, impossible, life-affirming, frustrating, and absolutely essential job we love.

— *The Editors*