

# Navigating the First Years

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# Navigating the First Years

## A Toolkit for Classroom Success

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Foreword by Marcia L. Tate

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# FOREWORD



## NAVIGATING THE FIRST YEARS

We truly belong to a sacred society! We are educators and are part of the only profession that impacts every other profession! Every doctor, lawyer, electrician, or cosmetologist comes by way of a teacher; therefore, it would behoove us to recruit and retain as many qualified prospective educators as possible.

Since the authors of this book so effectively use the strategy of storytelling to share their personal and meaningful, though diverse, experiences, I thought I would follow suit. Here is my story!

I knew that I would become a teacher when I was six years old. I used to line my dolls up in my bedroom and teach them for hours. Funny . . . I didn't have a single behavior problem! My Chatty Cathy doll would not even talk unless I pulled her string. (I realize that most beginning teachers today have no idea what a Chatty Cathy doll is.) I went on to major in education and began my career in 1974 with a major school district in Atlanta, Georgia. That would make this my fiftieth year in education and I have loved every minute of it! I started with 34 fourth graders, 20 of whom were boys, and I was mediocre at best. If I had had this resource, I am certain I would have been more successful from the very beginning.

In the Introduction, the authors delineate the positive attributes of an exceptional teacher to which we should all aspire. Then the remainder of the book addresses seven major categories, based on research, that should be an integral part of every beginning teacher's preparation program. The New Teacher Inventory is particularly effective since it enables the reader to assess those characteristics that they already possess and can build upon.

"Creating classrooms free from racism, bias, and judgment is integral to this mission" is a wonderful summary statement for chapter 1. Being a woman of color, I recognize the importance of this chapter and love the footrace analogy that enables readers to discern the difference between equality and equity.

Chapter 2 speaks solely to the numerous educators we have lost due to burnout, especially as a result of the pandemic. In my half-century of experience and over time, I have learned the importance of balancing personal and work life. Chapter 2 provides some definitive ways to do just that!

Beginning teachers can be overwhelmed with all the policies and procedures they must follow. Discussing that content in chapter 3 with a mentor can be invaluable. So can the planning in chapter 4. When that planning is collaborative, it can be far more effective. As a beginning teacher, any lesson plans I made were without the guidance of my more experienced colleagues. There was also no such thing as a mentor or coach to assist me.

The key elements of an effective learning environment are delineated in chapters 5 and 6. Classroom management is not everything, but it can make everything else possible! In fact, I have written a classroom management book that addresses those very same elements—including physical and psychological safety, emotional support, and engagement. After all, your best defense against classroom management challenges is an engaging lesson.

If you wait until you finish that lesson to assess it, you have waited too late! Chapter 7 provides both formative and summative tools for determining if students are truly learning.

You are about to embark on a wonderful journey! Four master educators share their personal stories and those of others to equip you with the tools I did not have 50 years ago when I began my career. Did I eventually become a good teacher? Yes, I did! But why not begin changing the lives of students from day one by adding *Navigating the First Years* to your professional library? It will certainly be in mine so that I can share this crucial information with everyone who needs it. And everyone needs it!

**Dr. Marcia L. Tate**

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



## **From Vince Bustamante:**

The conceptualization and creation of this project would not have been possible without the guidance, conversation, and perspectives of many wonderful people. I am grateful to my coauthors, Sarah, Wayne, and Tim for their skills, diverse perspectives, and unique abilities as they lent their voices to this project. Individually you are all such talented individuals, but collectively we became even stronger. Thank you for joining me on this journey.

A big thank you to everyone at Corwin who supported this project, and helped make this a reality. A special thank you to Monica Eckman for seeing the value in this project, and in me as an author. Without your support, this book would cease to exist. Also thank you to Jessica Allan, and your editorial team for your guidance throughout the writing process. I am so excited for our future projects together. Finally, I express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Marcia Tate for writing a wonderful foreword for this book. Your work has been inspiring to me as an educator and to have you write this for us is truly a dream come true.

This book has been a labor of love and a long-held dream of mine. My commitment to supporting new teachers stems from a desire to ensure they are equipped with the right tools and preparation to thrive in their roles. I believe that adequate support and preparation are essential for cultivating the next generation of exceptional educators. I am truly grateful that this project can serve as a valuable resource in the new teacher toolkit.

Finally, and most importantly thank you to my family. Leah you are a source of support, guidance, perspective, and unconditional love. Thank you for believing in me and for being the foundation of our household, without you none of this is possible. Luca, thank you for giving me the greatest job I could ever ask for, being your dad. I am so excited for you to become a big brother.

### **From Sarah Adomako-Ansah:**

Writing this book has been an incredible journey, not just in terms of research and collaboration, but also as a personal voyage of self-discovery. Throughout this process, I've learned so much about myself—about my resilience, my perspectives, and my capacity for growth. This endeavor has been as much about introspection as it has been about sharing insights with others.

First and foremost, I extend my deepest gratitude to my coauthors, Vince Bustamante, Tim Cusack, and Wayne Davies. Your patience, expertise, dedication, and passion have made this collaboration a truly enriching experience. Thank you for your invaluable insights and commitment to bringing this project to life.

To my parents, Anthony and Elizabeth, thank you for being my first teachers and for instilling in me a love of learning. Your unwavering support and encouragement have been the foundation of my journey, and I am forever grateful for your guidance. Thanks as well, to my siblings Daniel and Samantha, as well as to David, who guides me every step of the way.

A special thanks to the incredible team at Corwin. Your professionalism, dedication, and belief in our work have been instrumental in bringing this book to fruition. Your hard work behind the scenes does not go unnoticed, and we are deeply appreciative of your efforts.

Finally, thank you to the reader for engaging with this work. I hope that this vocation you have chosen is one you truly are passionate about and see longevity in. Here's to education!

### **From Wayne Davies:**

As I reflect on all that has gone into the writing of this book, I want to thank my coauthors, Vince, Sara, and Tim who I am forever grateful to have spent time getting to know and write with, over the past several months and years. You are each wonderfully talented educators who bring vastly, yet complimentary knowledge and experiences to the writing table. Your passion and concern for ensuring emerging teachers are well-resourced and supported is commendable. I look forward to more evening spent on online platforms talking about educational issues with you!

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spend writing, days that I am away, and times that I am lost in thought, is appreciated more than you will ever know. Kendall and Clyde—your journeys are just beginning and I know you will be great at whatever you choose to do.

Much of this writing was shaped by my years as a teacher and school and district leader. I was blessed to work with incredibly talented staff and students who pushed me to be better and at other times simply assured me I was on the right track. There was also many caregivers and parents that I sat with who truly loved their kids and while there were occasional bumps, always came back to the table to talk about what was best for their children. It is these people, I would encourage teachers to listen to, ask questions of, and then act in the best interests of.

My perspective is also shaped by being a citizen of the Red River Metis Nation who have shown me nothing but unwavering support in my educational pursuits. You have consistently proven that support of education is what will make this world a more just and fairer place for all people, especially those who are Indigenous. Your support has led to this and other projects I am able to contribute toward. I hope I have done you proud and can continue to give back.

To the Corwin family, thank you for your support in writing this book as well as becoming a member of your team, facilitating professional learning in school districts in a variety of locations. Your collegiality and enduring ability to give me the tools and motivation I need, has made a true difference. I am loathe to “name names” as I could fill up this page and still miss someone. Suffice it to say, you know who you are and you have made my life personally and professionally better.

To Marion the librarian, Gayle and Billy Bedard, and the Hughes family and all the other people who helped me thrive and survive during my beginning years of teaching at Lax Kw’alaams and in Prince Rupert, thank you. Your love, support, and patience helped me grab a toehold in a career I have loved and that has given me so much. It is within that spirit that I also acknowledge every emerging teacher who is reading this book, whether you are entering your very first career or you are a person who made a career change or an internationally trained teacher making a location change, that we believe in you! I hope this book resonates with you and provides you with information and ideas that contribute to your success.

#### **From Tim Cusack:**

I begin with an expression of deep gratitude for my talented colleagues Sarah, Vince, and Wayne for the passion and experience they

bring to teacher development. Writing this book with them has been a rich learning experience and meaningful opportunity to contribute to the important work of preparing our early career teachers. As a former school superintendent who went back to university to serve as a dean of education, I am ever mindful of the importance of equipping new teachers to not merely survive those first formative years of teaching but to learn key skills and gain the confidence needed to thrive!

My 30+ years of classroom teaching, school and system leadership reminds me that there is no greater investment than in the education of our children. With my own children now entering the profession, I realize that change and challenge is inevitable in being a teacher today. It is how we equip our new teachers to engage with what their 30+ years brings, that compels me to champion all early career teachers in the hope that they will flourish as educators and remain engaged in the teaching and learning of children. Thus, I am so thankful for this book and the ideas shared by this team of authors.

To the amazing and supportive staff at Corwin Press, thank you! From book pitch to publication, the passion of the Corwin team is evident in each step of the process. Your advocacy for great teaching and learning is inspiring and I am humble to serve as an author and consultant in sharing this important work.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Susan, for her ongoing support and perspectives on great teaching and leading. As well, I thank my sons, Patrick, Nicolas, and Ian for enkindling in me my “why” for teaching. You remind me that I too, as a student of lifelong learning, have much still to learn from each of you. My wish is that this book will help you and all who serve the noble profession of teaching (in its many forms) to flourish and thrive.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Vince Bustamante, Ed.D.**, is a Calgary-based instructional coach, curriculum content developer, and author. Vince specializes in working with teachers, leadership teams, schools, and school districts in implementing high impact strategies and systems. With a strong background in implementation, assessment, and deep learning, he is passionate about understanding and evaluating teachers' impact. Having worked with schools and school districts across North

America and internationally, he brings a wide variety of experience and perspectives when looking at school improvement, pedagogical and leadership development, and implementation of high impact strategies across school environments. Vince's doctoral research focused on the sustainable implementation of professional learning across school districts and the impact of long-term school partnerships.

Vince has co-authored two bestselling books with Corwin Press: *Great Teaching by Design* and *The Assessment Playbook for Distance and Blended Learning*. His other title: *Leader Ready: Four Pathways to Prepare Aspiring School Leaders* is also available from Corwin Press. You can find more information about Vince at: [www.vincebustamante.com](http://www.vincebustamante.com).



**Sarah Adomako-Ansah** is a graduate of the University of Alberta, B Ed (2013). She is a former teacher with the Edmonton Catholic School Division, teaching Grades 3 through 6 from 2013 until 2021. She was the Division's first Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism Consultant in 2023 and provided support to administration, teachers, and students in their journey with this important topic. In 2021, she began her term as the Educator

in Residence at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights, supporting human rights education in Canada, but also creating a program titled “Pass the Mic: Let’s Talk About Racism.” Currently, she has left the classroom and is now the Manager, Education Outreach for the CMHR. In addition, Sarah is the cofounder of the Black Teacher’s Association of Alberta and strives to amplify all voices in schools. Finally, she is the fortunate recipient of both the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal and the Randy Palivoda Award for her efforts in contributing to human rights and diversity in education and leadership.



**Wayne Davies, Ed.D.**, is the Director of Student Teaching at the University of Winnipeg where he also teaches. Prior to this role, he spent 32 years as a teacher and school leader. He has taught and led in many settings including on the Lax Kw’alaams reserve in British Columbia, Canada as well as in rural and urban school divisions in Manitoba. As a principal in Selkirk, Wayne was part of the nationally acclaimed BOSS Guitar Works project which he eventually wrote about in his novel “The Guitar Principal.” In 2014, Wayne was recognized as one of Canada’s top 40 school leaders and is a Distinguished Alumnus at the University of Manitoba for his community work. A citizen of the Red River Métis, Wayne holds an Ed.D in educational leadership from the University of Western Ontario where his work focused on high school graduation rates and the role of culture, student voice, and two-eyed seeing in increasing Indigenous student success.



**Timothy P. Cusack, Ed.D.**, has over 32 years of experience as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. Having taught in rural boards in northern and southern Alberta, Tim also has ten years of experience as school leader (K-12) and eight years of experience as a system leader of a large urban board of over 48,000 students in Edmonton. Tim now serves as the Dean of Education of Concordia University of Edmonton (CUE) where he leads a teacher preparation program (After Degree in Education) and a Master of Education in Educational Leadership program. His doctoral research

focuses on new teacher preparation, teacher mentorship, and leadership development. His dissertation (University of Portland 2020), which centered on preparing aspiring school leaders, evolved into his first book with Corwin: *Leader Ready: Four Pathways to Prepare Aspiring School Leaders* (2023).

Tim has worked with school jurisdictions across Canada and the United States in sharing his passion for leadership development and teacher mentorship. He is well known for his commitment to public education and school system improvement. His service to public education has been recognized through the Council of School Leadership Distinguished Leadership Award (2014), The Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medal (2023).

Tim also serves as a Naval Warfare Officer in the Royal Canadian Navy and brings a wealth of leadership experience having served now for over 35 years including tours as both an Executive and Commanding Officer. In addition to his role of Dean at (CUE), Tim is currently the Commanding Officer of HMCS NONSUCH, Edmonton's Naval Reserve Division. His experience in K-12 education, post-secondary leadership, and military leadership adds richness and depth to his work as an educational consultant and author.

More information about Tim may be found at: [www.timothycusack.com](http://www.timothycusack.com)



# 1

# EQUITY AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

Diversity. Equity. Inclusion. Now, more than ever, this is the work we must embrace in our schools. If we are to help students improve critical thinking, literacy, numeracy, and other essential skills—and become the lifelong learners we aspire to develop—then fostering a sense of belonging and safety is foundational. Every student needs to feel valued and secure, both physically and mentally. Creating classrooms free from racism, bias, and judgment is integral to this mission.

What defines a *teacher*? Some might say a teacher sets rules to ensure safety, while others may see them as facilitators of curriculum or mentors beyond academics. To me, a teacher is someone who inspires and motivates students. Teachers create positive environments where students learn fundamental life and academic skills that prepare them for the future.

As a teacher of color, I felt a deep responsibility to embody these values for all my students. Representation mattered greatly—not just for those who looked like me but for every student in the room. I hope I inspired my students to value diversity and equity and instilled in them the belief that every person deserves to feel seen and respected.

Our actions as teachers can make a profound difference, positively or negatively. The work of creating inclusive, equitable classrooms is not easy, and it can feel daunting. Many teachers fear making mistakes that could offend or upset others. However, the stakes are too high to let fear hold us back. If we, as educators with institutional support, feel overwhelmed, imagine the burden placed on young people who are uncertain about their value and security. They need us to lead.

Representation in the classroom extends beyond race. For instance, a book about the famous Canadian soccer player Alphonso Davies isn't just for Black students—it's for anyone who identifies with his journey, whether as a soccer player, a refugee, or a young person striving against the odds. This kind of representation allows students to see themselves and others in meaningful, multifaceted ways. It's a reminder that diversity includes ethnicity, ability, gender, religion, language, and interests.

Equity means fairness, while equality means treating everyone the same. To illustrate, imagine a footrace: Equality is giving everyone the same size-12 shoes, regardless of whether they fit. Equity is ensuring each runner has shoes that fit perfectly. In the classroom, equity might mean providing speech-to-text tools, a translator, a quiet workspace, or a scribe to meet the unique needs of each student. Equity ensures all students have the opportunity to succeed and feel confident in their abilities. By meeting students where they are, we create a classroom community where every child feels valued and capable of achieving their best.

Culturally responsive teaching helps students explore their own heritage while learning about the backgrounds of others. This approach goes beyond race—it considers abilities, languages, body sizes, and other dimensions of diversity to ensure every child feels seen and valued. It's not about division but connection, helping students build empathy and a sense of community.

True, avoiding this work might feel safer, but just as ships are safest in harbor, that's not where they're meant to stay—and neither are you. You became a teacher to make a difference in students' lives. This is your chance. It's the gift and responsibility of teaching: to be a difference maker in the life of a child.

We recognize that DEI work can feel overwhelming, and mistakes are inevitable. However, mistakes made with a good heart and thoughtful

preparation are forgivable. Lean on your mentors, school leaders, colleagues, and resources like this book. Most importantly, listen to your students—they will provide honest feedback and guidance if you pay attention. They want you to succeed because they want to have a teacher who notices and values them for who they are.

Equity in education is not about perfection but progress. It's about creating spaces where every child feels safe, valued, and empowered to thrive. By embracing diversity, practicing cultural responsiveness, and prioritizing equity, you can move the needle in meaningful ways.

Remember, you are not alone in this work. Seek out conversations, reflect on feedback, and continue learning. Ask questions, read widely, and stay curious. The effort you put into fostering equity and inclusion in your classroom will have a lasting impact—not just on your students but on the future they will help shape.

As you embark through the rest of this chapter, we wanted to make sure you had a clear map of the concepts and ideas that will be explored more in depth. As we mentioned previously in the introduction, do not feel pressured to try and apply all of these ideas, rather explore as many of these as you can and apply what piques your interests or needs. Enjoy exploring the following toolbox tactics:

1. Ensuring Everyone Is Heard and Listened To: Building a classroom where everyone feels they belong is critical to student success.
2. Are You “New” Here or Do You “Know” Here?: Understanding and acknowledging your relationship with your context is a key part of your success.
3. Just Say Hello: Getting to know your students is vital to their success and yours.
4. Equitable Access and Opportunity: Creating a learning community where everyone feels they can succeed is paramount to achievement.
5. DEI Burnout: Managing yours and others expectations is vital to your long-term success as a teacher.
6. Getting to Know Your Students: Teaching is about building rapport and mutual understanding, a sure way to be successful in the classroom.

# TOOLKIT TACTIC 1.1 ENSURING EVERYONE IS HEARD AND LISTENED TO

***Case:** There is a difference between listening to someone and truly listening to someone. Hearing someone ensures that you know what they want or need, but there is a feeling of action that is tied to listening. For example, you may hear a student say, “I like soccer,” and you respond accordingly. As teachers, we take action when we hear sentences like this. Listening to a student who tells you they like soccer may result in you finding an extra soccer ball for the recess bin, including books about soccer in your classroom library, or structuring a physical education class accordingly. Both skills are of importance and it is important to continue to use our judgment to hear and to listen.*

***From Wayne:** Self-admittedly, my first few weeks and months of teaching were not great. I was nervous and wanted to do well. I planned and executed my lessons but nothing seemed to hit all that well with the students. It was not until I finally began to really listen to what my students were telling me through their actions and words that I began to figure out how to truly meet their needs. They wanted more about their own history and community in my social studies lesson. Once I made that connection, things went much better. Listen first, then act.*



## AUTHOR’S CORNER

### Sarah’s Experience

I was lucky to teach in an elementary school for eight years. In those eight years, I taught Grades 3 through 6, and had the ability to teach many students twice, and even, three times. One of those students is named Kenisha.

In my third year of teaching Grade 3, a beautiful, Haitian-Canadian girl walked into my classroom and her eyes lit up at seeing me, a young Ghanaian-Canadian woman, as her homeroom teacher. We connected immediately over things like music, hair products, and cultural snacks. One of the first activities planned for our class was to create a life-size self-portrait to surround the perimeter of our classroom. After working very hard, Kenisha approached me and said, “I’m done, Miss Adomako!” What she handed me was not even close to what she looked like; her depiction of herself was blonde, blue eyed, and had white skin. When I asked her why, she replied, “I want to be pretty, like *them*,” and pointed to a group of young girls who represented what she created. After a quick



pep talk about how beautiful she is in the skin that she is in, and a promise to put her self-portrait next to mine, she redid her portrait to represent her. Those portraits stayed up for the entire year, and were taken down in June and given to students to do what they wished with them.

Three years later, I taught Kenisha again, in Grade 6. It was a pleasure to see her again, a little taller, a little sassier, but the same level of excitement to see a teacher that looked like her. On our first day back, she gave me a hug and reminded me of the self-portrait project, but confided in me that she kept hers in her bedroom with affirmations to constantly remind herself that she is beautiful, smart, and worthy. Moments like this helped remind me of the importance of my presence in the classroom, and continue to remind me why my existence is important in the field of education.

## BUILDING CLASSROOM COMMUNITY

One of the skills that is paramount as a teacher is, not only listening to, but considering all voices. The students in your class have thoughts and opinions and, especially in the beginning days of school, considering their thoughts and ideas will help shape and build an inclusive classroom for all. On the first day in your classroom, it's important to build a classroom community that promotes friendship, inclusivity, and kindness. Additionally, your classroom community should create an atmosphere where students feel both brave and safe. One of my goals as a teacher was to create a space for my students that was comfortable and fun, but also a place that was okay to be incorrect, a place that was okay to have differing opinions and thoughts, and a place in which questioning and inquiry were things that were celebrated. My classroom had a combination of single desks as well as tables. The single desks could be moved into groups and could be solo work stations. Students were encouraged to work together in some situations, but also encouraged to learn to work on their own. Our classroom "rules" were called a *promise* and conversations were had regarding things we could all agree to, things like, keeping the room clean, lifting others up, listening when someone is speaking, and not interfering with the learning of others. Hearing from students on what is important to them regarding their learning space and their relationships with one another helped keep them accountable if and when things, inevitably, went sideways. Redirection was necessary and often; at least once a month, we would review our classroom promise and discuss its importance. Coconstructing this document was key because we took into consideration everything that we agreed as a class was of importance to us and, again, helped to keep everyone accountable.

When shaping your classroom community, ask students what they want to see. Perhaps they want books with protagonists that look like them. Maybe they would like visual aids in math. Have you considered a cozy corner for reading and working? Students will take pride in their work, their space, and in one other, when given the opportunity to share and collaborate. Ultimately, the decisions made for the greater good of the classroom are yours, but it doesn't hurt to consult the students to see how they may be best supported. All of these things will help to shape your classroom community and make it a place that students want to come back day after day.



## QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR MENTOR OR COLLEAGUES

Ultimately, you are the classroom teacher. You have many responsibilities in the run of a day, and it's incredibly important that students feel safe, supported, and cared for in your presence. Do you have questions for your mentor? Here are some things that may be specific to your school board:

- What is the best way to showcase representation in our school community?
- Are there things I should take into consideration when celebrating culture?
- What does our school already do to showcase culture within the curriculum?
- What tools exist for students who require differentiation in their learning?



## SELF-REFLECTION (POST-READING)

How might you connect with students in a culturally responsive way?  
In what ways can you bring more equitable learning opportunities to your classroom?

## TOOLKIT TACTIC 1.2 ARE YOU “NEW” HERE OR DO YOU “KNOW” HERE?

***Case:** A new adventure begins at the start of each school year. Whether this is your first year of teaching or your first year in a different school, there is so much to know. Many considerations like location, demographic, family structures, community members, and more, are important to take into account. It is important to connect with other teachers and school staff in the building to find out the ins and outs of your new school.*

***From Vince:** My first teaching assignment was at an academically focused high school, where students maintained very high expectations of themselves and their teachers. Not knowing this at first, I remember teaching a 12th grade IB class. Over the course of the first week, I realized very quickly that my students were hungry for as much information as possible, and it felt like they were all smarter than me! This forced me to quickly adjust my instruction and ensure I had a firm grasp of my content. My students pushed me just as much as I pushed them!*

## WHAT DO YOU ALREADY KNOW?



### SCHOOL STORIES

#### Mrs. Enright

“Teaching at the same school as my sister has been such a blessing! I had the opportunity to have her as my mentor coming into a new school and I am so grateful that I had her around to help me ease into this new building. I am coming from a very affluent, well-off community to a more inner-city school. She told me immediately that teaching will be different here. I used to assign a lot of things online. She told me that a lot of students at this school don’t have internet access at home or share one Chromebook with three or four other siblings, all with homework. Most families at this school get holiday hampers because money is really tight. Sometimes students come to school and their main priority is to eat. All of these things are so different from what I am used to but I see how much my sister loves this school and all of the students she teaches. They really love her and I hope I fit in here too.”

Despite coming from a community that is different from what she knows, Mrs. Enright took the time to find out from another teacher, in this case, her sister, what her new (to her) school will be like. Getting to know the community you will work in, the demographic, and some of the soft needs of the community, like food scarcity, potential poverty, hygiene, lack of access to resources, and more, is very important. Coming into a situation such as this is great to know ahead of time in order to prepare. You may decide to print more so as to eliminate the use of devices constantly in the classroom. You may start a breakfast or snack program or find donations in order to provide food for students. As we know, students who are hungry can't learn. Knowing information like this ahead of time is great to know so that you can ask administrators or other teachers for the best ways to support the students in your class. On the flip side, you may be entering a school that is the opposite of a situation like this. Perhaps all of your students have every device known to man and can afford to bring the most elaborate lunches and snacks to school. These things don't necessarily mean that you need to change your teaching practice drastically. At the end of the day, when students come to school, they are all responsible for learning curricular outcomes, learning soft skills like kindness and empathy, and learning to work collaboratively with others. This may not have anything to do with demographics, but as the teacher, it is your job to ensure that every child feels like they can do anything when they are in your room; some just may need a snack first.

## WHAT DO YOU NEED TO LEARN?

Oftentimes, in the first few days of school without students, there are meetings and onboarding professional development opportunities. These benefit new and returning teachers and school staff alike. If you are a teacher that is new, you will learn an overwhelming amount of information regarding the area that you now teach in. If you are not paired with a mentor teacher at this time, don't be shy to ask for one. Teachers that have been at the school longer than you have will know better about how to support some of the more intricate needs of the students that are there. Specific school staff, like the administrative support or educational assistants, will know particular information regarding certain students or families in your classroom. It's important for you to know these things, if they pertain to you as their homeroom, language, or option teacher, so that you can find ways to support students who may require more accommodations.

You may teach at a school with cultural or religious significance. If you are not from that community, it doesn't hurt to learn a bit about the culture or religion of the students of the community. It's easy to learn the "rules" regarding going to a mosque, for example, but learning some of the intimate details, like the significance of certain prayers, or foods eaten during certain times of year, will prove to be incredibly meaningful to the students you serve. Better yet, asking the students if they would like to share that information with you is very special. Students love any opportunity to relate to their teacher and reverse roles. Allowing students to be the teacher in things that make up their identity is just another way to demonstrate culturally responsive pedagogy. You cannot possibly be the expert in every realm; allow students to share the things they may be the expert in.

## SEEK OUT COMMUNITY

Schools are becoming more diverse, year after year. There are students making their homes in North America who may be coming from countries around the world. All of these students come to us with language, celebrations, food, cultural dress, songs, and faith; they may also come with generational trauma, war, crime, and poverty. As mentioned earlier, you cannot possibly be the expert in all of these things.

Parents, grandparents, cultural elders, and community helpers are always looking for a way to connect with student learning opportunities. Currently, in Canada, the nation is undergoing a time of reconciliation regarding Indigenous heritage and identity. As a nation, citizens are learning and becoming more aware of the injustices that have happened toward Indigenous peoples for hundreds of years. I am someone who's ancestry is from Ghana in West Africa; I do not have Indigenous roots. It's of the utmost importance, however, to teach students about the things in the country's history that aren't written in the textbook to bring the truth to light. I could do a lot of research on my own, but I find that I often lean on Indigenous learning groups and invite Indigenous Elders and community speakers into the classroom. The lessons taught are authentic and meaningful coming from someone of the community. Students can ask questions that perhaps I cannot answer; that's definitely okay.

Inviting community into the classroom is a wonderful way to connect students with other cultural leaders and teachers who may look like them. The lessons that they may bring into the classroom can always be tied to curricular outcomes, however, sometimes it's important for students to just listen and learn, not for a report card mark.

## HOW WILL YOU INTERACT WITH THE COMMUNITY?

As an educator, you have the unique opportunity to make a meaningful impact not only within the walls of your classroom but also in the broader community. Take advantage of this opportunity by actively engaging with students, families, and community partners. Think about attending local events such as community sporting events, festivals, or cultural gatherings. This quickly demonstrates your interest in the community goes beyond “the job” at the school and shows your personal investment in becoming part of the community. It will also provide opportunities to meet students and their families in a relaxed atmosphere where you can all get to know each other a bit better. However, just do not forget you are always a teacher and discussing students or colleagues or indulging in questionable behaviors is never defensible, even if you view it as being off the clock.

You can also consider volunteering your time and expertise to support local initiatives such as food drives, tutoring programs, or community clean-up efforts. By demonstrating your commitment to serving others, you not only enrich the educational experience for your students but also inspire them to become active and engaged citizens.



### QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR MENTOR OR COLLEAGUES

Consider asking the following things to a mentor or your administrator. It's never too late to learn something new about your new school community; however, take the time to know the community around you and talk to other school staff to see what they may do in situations that arise:

- What cultures are represented in the school?
- Are there any situations regarding any of the students or the families in my classroom?
- What can you tell me about the demographics of this area?
- What supports (mental health, hygiene, nutritional, cultural, etc.) exist for the students in this school?
- What gifts and skills do you bring to the school?
- How can I be of better service to the families in this school community?



## SELF-REFLECTION (POST-READING)

Who can you turn to for support in your new school community?

What is the demographic of the school you are teaching in? Do the students and families you serve require extra support?

What is something you need to learn about to better serve the students in your new school community?

## TOOLKIT TACTIC 1.3 JUST SAY HELLO

**Case:** *You are a difference maker. Read that again. Yes, you. Just like those awesome teachers that inspired you to take up the challenge. Your approach to the day and how you greet the students will communicate to them a great many things. The first impression will happen every day—use it wisely!*

**From Sarah:** *There is power within connection. Saying hello is a simple yet powerful gesture that helps teachers build positive relationships with their students. My third-grade teacher, Mrs. Gwen Davies, made it her mission to give us all a resounding hello and good morning each day. It was often paired with a chapter out of a Roald Dahl novel; my favourite was The BFG. By doing this, she set a welcoming tone, fostered a sense of belonging for us, and created an environment that showed us that she cared about us. A friendly greeting can brighten a student's day and even enhance their motivation to learn; I know it did for me. Thank you, Mrs. Davies, for a year of hellos, good mornings, and character voices as we settled in for a busy day of learning.*

Every day, students will arrive at school in a variety of states. Some will have had breakfast, been told multiple times they are loved, and told to have a good day by the person or people who take care of them. Some will not. Some will have had tougher mornings. Some will have had no one there to greet them when they got themselves out of bed and perhaps also had to get their siblings up and out the door too. Some will have been told they are no good or be under immense pressure to perform at a level that makes their stomach churn, invoking a state of anxiety that many of us are unable to fathom. Some will be worried that you will notice they are still wearing the same shirt from

yesterday. Some will dread every step of the walk to school, concerned that the lunch their caregiver or parents made for them will smell a bit too much or be made fun of by their classmates. Some will worry that their accent sounds funny or that their name is just too hard for you to pronounce and instead you will go with the “English version.” Some will dread special days that highlight only too clearly that their family does not fit the “norm” although we are not sure anyone knows what that looks like today. Others will be thinking about the excuse they will give when the next field trip rolls around and they know they cannot come up with the cash so a sick day will have to suffice.

Now maybe you can see these groups of students in your mind’s eye. The visualizations you construct will be based on many things: your own and other’s experiences, your knowledge of the world through media, your biases and assumptions.

Thus, the first part of this strategy is to put those preconceived ideas aside. Most of them will be wrong and if for some reason they are correct, they will be of little use to you. They will limit your ability to be what the students need—for you to be present and as unconditionally welcoming as possible as they enter the learning space for another day of engagement. These assumptions will also limit your ability to see the students for who they are—a group of children simply bringing their best selves every day. Yes, you will have photocopying to do. You will also have last-second prepping and marking to sneak in. These are things that will always be there for you. However, each morning you will have just one chance to greet your students—to be a difference maker—to set the tone for the day ahead. To say hello and communicate to them they each matter, that they are safe and they belong. It will be up to you how boisterous or animated you want to be and how much the students can handle. You will also have learned what practices are acceptable and appropriate based on your students’ backgrounds. But if you can do your best to be there to say hello, greet them by name, and welcome them to the learning space you will have gone a long way to helping them succeed, where kids can come, engage, be themselves, and safely and confidently share who they are.



## SELF-REFLECTION (POST-READING)

When you come upon a student in the hallway, do you just walk past, or do you acknowledge them or do you wait for them to make the first



move? Does it matter? If they are not in your class, so what? What if you say hello and they do not respond?

## TOOLBOX TACTIC 1.4 EQUITABLE ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

***Case:** It is important that all students have the resources and opportunities they need to succeed. And while schools will offer some levels of programming and resources for students it is incumbent on you as the classroom teacher to learn your students and their needs. However, caregivers and parents are relying on you to make good decisions with their children and to read the situation and stay within the community parameters when it comes to cost and risk. Thus, the actions you take must ensure a level of equity is maintained in your learning space and that all students feel part of the team.*

***From Tim:** I remember taking my students to the local arena for skating lessons. One student who was wheelchair bound would stay back at the school and do some alternate assignment while we were away. This stuck with me. How would I feel if I was relegated to the sidelines like that? With discussion and persistence, my principal and the student's parents supported me in bringing the student to the rink and getting them on the ice. I learned that with equity you don't need to see it to believe it, rather when you believe in it, you will see it.*

Equity in access to resources and opportunities is foundational to DEI. This involves recognizing and addressing systemic barriers that may affect certain groups of students such as inclusive practices in the classroom, resource allocation and keeping a very careful eye on discipline practices to ensure they are equitable.

Implementing classroom strategies that accommodate diverse needs, such as flexible seating arrangements, varied instructional materials, and accessible technology is important to the success of your students. But how do you do that? A great first step, if you are unsure, is talking to your mentor or a divisional consultant if one is available. A valuable tool in this pursuit is stepping outside of yourself and trying to gain the perspective of each student. Walking to the back of the classroom and sitting at the desk farthest away from you, can you read what you wrote on the board? Have you talked to student services in your school so you know who might need extra support or even a closer seat?

As you begin the year, think about the equitable distribution of resources, such as technology, books, and other learning aids in your classroom. Asking yourself if you have ensured all students have what they need to succeed is critical. Being aware that this will most likely change each day and as the year goes on, depending on what and who you are teaching is also important. And knowing that your time with each student is a valuable resource is also a sign that you are understanding your importance in the learning environment.

A further important point for you as an emerging teacher to consider is how and to who you apply discipline. No doubt as a new teacher, you will experience frustration as you learn the art of classroom management. The students will most likely test you as well, trying to figure you out, especially considering the fact you are new to them. Thus, being very aware of who and how you are applying discipline to is important. Again, we circle back to earlier points made in this chapter about understanding your biases and to a large extent you own triggers.

## FIELD TRIPPING: 360 DEGREES OF PLANNING

Field trips represent valuable learning opportunities that not only enhance but directly facilitate student learning. However, venturing outside the school requires careful and comprehensive planning. As a teacher and field trip organizer, you must consider all aspects and start preparations early. A 360-degree approach addresses educational objectives and the socioeconomic, cognitive, and other needs of students and their families. This holistic strategy ensures that all students can fully participate and benefit from the experience.

### CONNECTING TO LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Firstly, aligning the educational goals of the field trip with classroom outcomes and standards is crucial for gaining support from school leadership and parents, especially if you request funds. Whether it's a day trip to see a local food bank in operation, engaging with scientific exhibits, or an overnight trip to a regional music fest, the trip must enhance classroom learning and provide hands-on, experiential opportunities. Another consideration is the impact of your trip on your colleagues and how taking the students might impact on their lesson planning. Good communication is key to strong relationships with your colleagues.

## SOCIOECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS

When considering potential destinations, be mindful of the socioeconomic backgrounds of your students. Field trips can be costly, and asking students to request money from their parents should be approached sensitively. Making assumptions about families' financial capabilities can be disastrous to your credibility as a teacher. Explore cost-effective alternatives, such as applying for grants, partnering with community organizations, fundraising, or seeking support from the parent association. Consider transportation logistics and look for the most cost-effective way to get the job done. Inform parents early so they have time to budget, and be prepared to discuss financial assistance for those who need it.

## LOOKING AFTER COGNITIVE AND PHYSICAL NEEDS

Collaborate with student services to assess the cognitive and physical needs of your students. Ensure the destination is accessible and that students of all abilities can participate. Plan for differentiated instruction and provide materials at varying levels. For students with specific cognitive needs, prepare guides or pre-trip materials to help them understand and anticipate the experience. Remember, leaving a student behind is not an option; you are the teacher to all students and must include everyone in the trip. Imagine watching all your colleagues leave for a professional development opportunity and you were told you had to stay behind. Not a great feeling and one that you do not want to be remembered for causing.

## NUTS AND BOLTS

Finally, plan every detail. Create an itemized agenda with phone numbers, maps, contact information for students, and other essentials. Ensure tickets are purchased, tour entry times are confirmed, and conduct a walk-through of the locations if possible. The complexity and duration of the trip will dictate the extent of your planning. A local park study for a Grade 4 biology class will require different planning than a five-day high school civics bus trip to the national capital. Always prioritize safety by consulting and adhering to school, district, and other relevant policies and procedures.

## ENGAGING FAMILIES

Involve families in the planning process, helping them secure funds and building enthusiasm to encourage reluctant students. Inform them well

in advance about the trip, its objectives, and the benefits for their children. Invite family members to participate as chaperones, clarifying the requirements and selection process if more volunteers apply than needed. This could include helping with preparations or bringing specific knowledge to enhance the experience.

## PREPARING THE STUDENTS

Some students may become anxious as the trip approaches. Prepare them emotionally and socially by discussing behavior expectations. Provide pre-trip information and activities that build excitement and context, such as photos, websites, and videos. These resources can reduce the unknown for students and build anticipation. For overnight trips, additional preparation may be necessary to help students feel comfortable being away from home.

By adopting a 360-degree planning approach, you can ensure that field trips are enriching, inclusive, and accessible for all students. This comprehensive strategy not only meets educational goals but also addresses the diverse needs of students and their families, creating a positive and memorable learning experience.

## TOOLBOX TACTIC 1.5 DEI BURNOUT

***Case:** This toolbox tactic will resonate most with people who cross multiple intersections; ethnicity, gender, ability, or disability. However, this toolbox tactic is important for all teachers to consider.*

***From Sarah:** Burnout related to DEI work happens often with folks from equity-deserving communities. The ability to help and support the learning for people who aren't marginalized is necessary, but the teaching shouldn't fall solely on their shoulders. Something for all of us to consider is that months of recognition, for example, Black History Month in February, should be a month of celebration, not a burden for folks who celebrate. DEI burnout often affects those most committed to creating inclusive environments, especially individuals from marginalized groups who may already face systemic challenges. Share the responsibility; continue to learn.*

There is a joke that circulated online in 2020 that went something like, "If you are a person of color, queer, or have a disability of any kind, you might as well put 'DEI Consultant' on your resume, because you'll be treated like one." Unknowingly, this became reality for many teachers that fit in one or more of these categories, myself included. Suddenly,

I was hearing from teachers across the province about how they are being asked major queries and questions regarding racism, homophobia, and ableism. They were being asked to champion causes for simply being a part of a community. They were being assigned things like cultural events, clubs, and pride celebrations because these things may be a part of their identity. As I'm sure you can see, this is problematic. The question that may follow is "Why?"

Oftentimes, people who are white are looking for permission or support in displaying allyship to people from equity-deserving groups. There are several things that can be done to ensure that people from equity-deserving groups stay in the roles that they are in, are comfortable in those roles, and aren't given roles or tasks that feed stereotypes:

- *Do the learning unprompted:* Folks who are in an equity-deserving intersection are looking to be seen as learners, not the expert and spokesperson for their group. There are many books, articles, and podcasts that can be consumed on why Reconciliation is important to Canadians, or why you shouldn't touch a Black person's hair, spontaneously and without asking. There are many resources that exist to support the learning of folks looking to do better for those around them. Through simple Google searches or many equity-based social media accounts as a guide, you can tap into a world of resources and commentary on how to continuously include, uplift, and support people who may look and act differently than you. This includes our students—some students will enter the classroom trying out different names or identities. The ability to uplift and support students in their own learning about themselves and their culture is a part of our responsibility that shouldn't be taken lightly.
- *Take on some of the load:* Instead of asking the people of color in your staff meeting to lead a schoolwide multicultural day event or a daily lunch club exclusive to girls, for example, ask how you can take some of that load from them. By simply asking, "What can I do to support you?" or, "How can I make this task less work for you?" Simple things like offering to host a club in your classroom, co-leading an activity, or jumping on a committee for a group that you may not be a part of is an incredible way to demonstrate allyship and not add to the burnout that your colleagues may be facing.
- *Collaborate with others:* After doing some learning about different groups, take the lead! It may seem as though you are taking over, but, on the contrary. Allyship to equity-deserving groups is a great way to aid in lightening the load for others. Students of color need to

see teachers who look like them in spaces like this; additionally, students of color need to see teachers who do not look like them championing them, their culture, and their interests. One of the things I strived to do was learn to say, “Hello,” in the languages of each of my students. Even though I am not Cree, Ukrainian, or Filipino, learning how to say that simple greeting was a great way to encourage and model collaboration and acceptance to my students. Additionally, reaching out to community members on how they can collaborate to bring culture to students is a truly authentic and meaningful way to help support the growth, learning, and positive response toward diversity in schools.

If you’re looking for a sign to start, here it is. Learning different ways to support your colleagues in equity-deserving groups is the most wonderful way to show allyship. People of color, queer people, and people with different abilities aren’t looking for you to yell from the rooftops; on the contrary, they are simply looking for more people to join them in creating more inclusive and accepting spaces to learn about one another.

## TOOLBOX TACTIC 1.6 GETTING TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS

***Case:** We know that our students and colleagues come from increasingly diverse backgrounds. Being able to understand, respect, and effectively interact with your students is important. Recognizing and appreciating students’ cultural differences and building this knowledge into your classroom and teaching practices will be helpful. Asking questions and doing research will be necessary for you to build your abilities to support all students in a respectful manner.*

***From Vince:** There is school culture, and there is my role in the school culture. In many ways, there always will be an intersection between the culture of the school and the cultures that exist within the culture of the school. It was so important for me to learn about all the unique and wonderfully diverse cultures of my students to make sure I was cognizant of the intersectionality that existed between my students as people and the building that serves them.*

You may not be in a new community but nevertheless the students that enter your classroom are each new to you, just as you and your many colleagues are. They may live in the same neighborhood, play for the same community teams, and have many of the same experiences with their families but there will always be a level of

uniqueness to each and every student's story. They will need to feel seen, understood, appreciated and welcomed, inclusive of their diverse backgrounds. Your ability to do this will help determine your effectiveness as their teacher.

Cultural competence involves recognizing, respecting, and valuing differences in culture, language, and the rich experiences students and their families come from. It is vital that you recognize and deal with any biases or preconceived ideas that may have previously influenced your thinking especially when it comes to how students learn and behave. As you will learn, navigating and celebrating these differences is crucial to your success.

- 1. Self-awareness:** Do you know who you are as a teacher? Start by reflecting on your own cultural identities and biases. Understanding how your own personal experiences and education shape your perceptions and interactions with students is important. This can be disconcerting as you confront your beliefs, but as you will see, it will be a valuable activity.
- 2. Active Learning:** What do you know about the community you are working in? How about the students? Do not rely simply on personal observations. Find a person you can trust and ask questions. Start with simpler, straightforward questions and as you build community, move to more complex questions that help give you insight on how to best support your students. Many of your students would love to give you a tour of the neighborhood, a history lesson in the community, or tell you many other details. Other activities could involve reading, attending workshops, or engaging with community resources and leaders.
- 3. Building Relationships:** Are you open to getting to know your students and their community? Getting to know the parents and caregivers of your students begins with you. Make the first move! At "Meet the Staff Night," will you stand against the wall with other staff or walk over to parents and engage them in conversation? Making meaningful connections with students and their families will help you later on. And if you have done your homework and understand and recognize some community cultural norms, your actions will be further appreciated.

It is important to remember that developing cultural competence, just like any competence, is an incremental process that you must take ownership over. Think of it as a continuum and that while not everyone is at or even beginning at the same place, we can all do things that make



us more capable, more understanding, more fluent in working with all of our students. Thus, even if you feel like you are at the beginning of this process, you can create a classroom environment where all students feel seen and valued, setting the stage for successful learning.



## AUTHOR'S CORNER

### A Moment in Practice for Wayne

When I (Wayne) began my career, I was in an isolated Indigenous community on the northwest shore of British Columbia, Canada, almost two thousand miles from home. I was new to the community and to teaching. I was also new to living in an Indigenous community. I recognized I had much to learn not just about my teaching but also about the Tsimshian people that lived there. Luckily, I made friends with a local family who took me under their wing. They introduced me to community members and had me to their home many times. They got me a spot on a team in the local basketball league, took me salmon and halibut fishing, and I even went to a community feast as their guest.

When we first met, it was all about the niceties. I met their children and extended family. As time went on, we exchanged observations about the world and many of my preconceived notions were dispelled while others of a more factual variety grew in their place. When I was confused, I asked questions and they helped me by being preemptive in some of the advice they gave. They exploded stereotypes and gave me credibility in the community that allowed me to flourish as a teacher. Now, over three decades later we still are close; we still communicate over the thousands of miles that now separates us since I eventually returned home.

## TRY IT: A CONVERSATION

As you begin to find your feet on your new staff, try and get to know another teacher or staff member who grew up in the area. Try to foster a relationship that allows you to work with them to understand the community and most importantly, the students and their families. Be open and honest that you are trying to understand the community so you can better support students. Ask questions but remember this is not an interrogation, it is a conversation over time. Start small and work up to the complex. Here are some examples of deeper questions that you can work up to:



- What are a few things a new teacher could benefit from knowing about the history of this community and how it impacts this school and the students and families it serves, that might not be readily apparent?
- What do you think are the key cultural characteristics of our student population and the greater community?
- What are some community dynamics, events, or traditions that are particularly important to our students and their families?
- What is the history of the relationship between the school (or education in general) and parents and families?
- What advice can you give me on entering this community especially in the capacity of a new teacher?

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Bringing diversity and equity into your classroom can only shed a positive light on the students that you serve. Thus, as this chapter draws to a close, it is important to reflect on the strategies and approaches discussed. Building a classroom community starts with ensuring every voice is heard and valued, fostering an environment where everyone feels a sense of belonging. By asking questions of your fellow community members and self-reflecting, you will gain insights needed to navigate your classroom and all those who are working and learning within it.

For you to understand the nuances of being “new” versus “knowing” your space is critical to establishing meaningful connections with your students, their families and your peers. By leveraging what you already know and looking for opportunities to learn, you can demonstrate to the community around you that you are interested in meeting them where they are. This means you must get past “your plan” and ask others what they need and then incorporate those thoughts and feelings into “our plan.”

Planning with specific purpose, whether for a lesson or a field trip across town, needs careful attention to a variety of factors such as socioeconomic, physical, cultural, or cognitive, in addition to ensuring alignment with the content standards. To make this process easier, engaging with families, preparing students, and knowing who you are and your limits is vital to everyone’s success. While all of this may be new to you; that is okay. A successful teacher’s learning is ongoing. As we learn better ways to support our students, it is our job as teachers

and school staff to help them with those challenges. This cooperative work will only strengthen the bonds we create with our students. At the end of the day, beginning by building a solid foundation of relationships grounded in respect for all members of the learning community in terms of who they are and the perspectives they bring will make you a better teacher.

At the end of each chapter, we have included what we are calling an “implementation tracker.” This tool is for you to simply keep track of the tactics that we have shared, and enable you to be mindful of how you might implement them in your practice. It’s also worth noting that perhaps not all of these will pertain to your classroom context, so use the tracker to reflect upon which tactics were more impactful for you.

# IMPLEMENTATION TRACKER

Attempted toolbox tactic:	
Successes:	Roadblocks:
What should I change to be more successful next time?	

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