

GOOD YEAR BOOKS

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Foreword by Ann Lieberman

ANYBODY who has been a teacher or a teacher educator will be thrilled to read Ken Klieman's book *Building an Empathy-Based Classroom: A Teacher's Survival Guide*. All readers will wonder why this book wasn't written ages ago. As someone who taught sixth grade with forty-six kids in my first year of teaching over fifty years ago, I can still remember and feel the angst, confusion, excitement, need to control, and nightmares. Where was Ken Klieman when I needed him?

The answer is that years later, he was learning to teach himself and thinking hard about how to answer and solve the myriad questions and conundrums that new teachers find themselves facing—most often with no one there to help.

This is not just a book for first year teachers, but for anyone who considers themselves a learning teacher trying to get a hold of the curriculum, the students, the institutional and changing imperatives, as well as their own sense of self. Klieman gently and sensitively nurtures our intellect, our understanding, and our soul by painstakingly describing the complexities of teaching, as they often occur without warning, sometimes in the midst of the best intentions. And he offers more than a helping hand! After reading the book I realized that only a teacher could have written this kind of a book—a teacher who had lived the many experiences over time—a teacher who could gather his wisdom to reach out to his fellow colleagues—a teacher who continues to learn, and who now mentors others as they face what it means to teach and how to solve the complexities of teaching in a changing educational climate.

Klieman walks us through the life of a teacher, starting with the beginning of school. How do you start your class on the right foot?

How should you organize the activities on day one? How do you make the classroom important, and at the same time let the students know they are important members of this classroom culture and must help in making it work? And he lovingly provides us with numerous ways to answer the questions that inevitably arise during the first day of school (after a no doubt sleepless night).

My favorite chapter is the one on "Giving Praise to Individuals or the Entire Class" in which Klieman mentors us on how to keep the class moving, engaged, and humming. After struggling with trying to differentiate instruction, learning how to participate in staff meetings, dealing with students who need extra help, and understanding and reaching out to parents, we finally feel that we are getting at what it means to teach. And Klieman is there, helping us understand how to think about both innovating and creating norms in the classroom that keep both teacher and students wanting to not only be in class, but to participate fully in a culture in the making.

Three values are constant in the book: Klieman's empathy for novice teachers, mentoring examples that grow out of practice, and his understanding that learning to teach never stops. What makes this book so good is that these values comprise its strong foundation.

The tone is intelligent, friendly, and caring; the examples for each topic are rooted in the real world of teaching practice; and Klieman reminds us that learning to teach is a lifetime affair, and so to always be open to new experiences, new learning, and new personal observations and insights.

By making school and classroom problems accessible, and in some ways solvable, we learn to make teaching a reflective practice. Klieman keeps us from harboring all the struggle of learning to teach as solely a personal problem. Many problems are inevitable, describable, and solvable! And now we have a mentor beside us, nurturing us to think about a variety of options, actions, and attitudes that can help us get better and better. We learn to try things, to take risks, and to not get defeated, but rather to continue to grow, learn, and even flower. This kind of support written by a teacher for teachers was worth waiting for!

Ann Lieberman,
Senior Scholar at Stanford University and
emeritus professor from Teachers College, Columbia University.

How to Use This Book

OVER the past twenty years of teaching middle school, I have been humbled many times because of a lack of foresight. Just like millions of other teachers, I have spent thousands of hours of introspection dissecting the intricacies of school relationships, and school cultures. I never think that I have all of the answers. But I have been able to learn from some true leaders in education about how to infuse more promise, collaboration and action to fulfill our best intentions for our schools.

This book is an attempt to act as an informed mentor for beginning teachers by following the format of the popular “Choose Your Own Adventure” book series. Readers will be able to explore multiple outcomes centered on specific aspects of teaching. It is the “Sim Life” for teachers, in book form.

Teachers struggle with all kinds of problems—all at once—and we often feel alone. Sometimes the problems come so thick and fast, that we don’t even have time enough to articulate them. Little has been written about these problems and possibilities of teaching, in part because they need to come from practice. By providing a veteran perspective, all teachers can explore the outcome of their ideas in a quick, entertaining, exploratory format. Since *Building an Empathy-Based Classroom* will enable the reader to pursue the path of their own curiosity throughout the book, it provides a unique, simulated journey of learning through experience that has never been done before in the vast canon of teacher education manuals.

The reality is that none of us will ever be fully loved by every student. Teaching is a slow transformative marathon, for our students and for ourselves. To be a life-long, effective educator is to be someone who is never satisfied with getting by. The process of pursuing perfection is perfection itself. The more we embrace the chaos of being open to constant improvement, the less scary life as a teacher becomes.

A longitudinal perspective is the key element. The overarching focus for the year should be on fostering students’ independence, both socially and academically. Being able to predict outcomes is the measure of mastery. Specifically, the consistency and routine in our classrooms ought to enable our students to perfect their work habits, academic skills, and positive social habits. To empower students to reach their own academic destinies, we need to model, model, and model some more. Hence the first part of a year should be more teacher-directed, with multiple opportunities for student leadership. After a few months of guided practice in academic and social skill development, students should be running the classroom more and more. By the end of the school year, our role should more resemble that of coach than of a teacher.

In short, the key ingredient for any successful educator is self-reflection. With the definition of success being growth in personal, cognitive, and skill development, successful teachers are able to develop connections. Nurturing authentic, maturing relationships lays the groundwork for twenty-first century schools to form the critical thinking, interdependent, world citizens we all need. The foresight outlined in this book develops the trains of thought for teachers to bring out the best in themselves and their communities

In the mindset of nurturing personal responsibility, the format of this book can be accessed in multiple ways depending upon the interest of the reader. Each chapter can be read independently based upon specific topic interests, or one can read the entire book cover to cover to experience a full year in the life of a teacher. Each chapter begins with a generic scenario, written in the second person.

You, the main character, then get to explore how to resolve some of the underlying issues teachers continually face.

Some terms that I use throughout the book may need some additional explanation:

- ▶ **Empathy Break:** This is my attempt to highlight the self-reflection process veteran teachers go through dozens of times each day. The more empathic we are, the better bonds we form, and the more each participant in the education process can thrive.
- ▶ **Backward Planning:** Breaking down instructional processes into a discrete step by step sequence to reach an end goal is vital to making the educational process clear and manageable. In my experience, backward planning is equal in importance to empathy breaks. This is akin to unpacking an idea. Both terms are intended to add clarity to the conscious planning that is required in successful content, skill, and social development.

It is in this spirit of collaboration and striving towards bringing out the best in each school relationship, and each school culture, that I invite you to expand your own Empathy Based Solutions.

1. Welcoming Students to a New School Year

YOU have not slept well over the past week. Some of your veteran colleagues have said they also get anxious before the first day of school. You try to remember how worried you were as a child the night before school, but it is mostly a blur. Right now, nervous anticipation doesn't come close to describing how you feel. It is midnight and you are still lying awake in bed. You go through your mental checklist of what you have prepared for tomorrow . . .

- ▶ Roster
- ▶ Student information sheets
- ▶ Class syllabus
- ▶ Seating chart

What are you missing? You think you have thought through everything, but doubt keeps you awake when you really want to rest.

The day starts normally—well, normally for a teacher. You are up at 6 a.m. and at school by 7:30. You look around your room. Is everything all set? Your problem is that you don't know what you want to do on this first day, and you are overwhelmed with options. You have choices to make, and the students are about stream in.

What is your next move? Here are the options or situations you may have to deal with. You:

1. Jump straight into content—p. 3
2. Offer fun and games—p. 5
3. Deal with a behavior problem—p. 5
4. Administer a test on Day One—p. 7
5. Play “get to know you” games—p. 7
6. Make students earn their way into your room—p. 9
7. Perform a writing assessment on the second day—p. 11
8. After losing all essential resources, you improvise—p. 12
9. Deal with a parent who wants to have a discussion with you—p. 13

Following is a discussion of each option. You can move from one to the next, or you can jump between options at any time.

Option 1. Jump Straight into Content

YOU decide that you will get to know your students through actual practice. Let them come in. You're ready. Anyway, according to the pacing guide, who has the time to get to know their students? You have too many content standards to cover. You have already done your backward planning for the year, and there isn't a day to waste. Let's jump straight into it.

The bell rings. Students have assembled in front of your classroom door. Immediately you see Maria playfully knock over one of her friends as all of the students jostle for position lining up. Do you say anything? *No*. Your choice is to jump into content, with no time to spare.

You step aside as the students enter quietly. Yes, you have a seating chart, so you have assigned seats, and you have a book waiting at each seat for each student. You know this is rare, but after pleading

with the administration, asking your colleagues for extras, and searching in the forgotten corners of the school, you now have a full set of class books.

You stand in front of the room, and a quiet hush descends. This is your moment. This is the reason you have had trouble sleeping during the past week. You remember what your grandfather told you: “You can only meet someone once.” What will be the first true words you say to the class to solidify your position of authority as a teacher? The wording comes to you almost as fast as you can wrap your mouth around it: “Open your books. We’re ready to work.”

Wow, that sounded great. Forward looking. High expectations. All business. The problem is that you might be ready to work, but the students aren’t. They still have unresolved questions.

First, humans are social animals. As infants, we all quickly realize that there is more in the unknown world for us than in the known world. We need a social safety net, a net that includes each other, to figure out our world. The students in your class are not going to be able to work until they know all about the setting in which they will be working.

Second, humans are still animals. We need to be trained to do anything. Inherent in our training is repetition and high expectations for growth.

You quickly realize your mistake. You are facing students who are not trained and do not yet know the social environment in your classroom. Trouble is not far behind.

⋮ “What page should we be on again?” a voice blurts out from the back of the room.

⋮ “I don’t have a book. Who stole my book? Excuse me, teacher, I need a book.”

⋮ “Anybody have a pencil? I need a pencil. Anybody?”

A cacophony of voices pushes you back against the wall. What have you started? Within seconds, every child is talking, either to the next child or across the room.

The class period cannot go by fast enough for you as you scramble to pull them back to the lesson. During the rest of your time with this class, you find yourself explaining the instructions over and over again. It takes a considerable amount of energy to quell your ever-rising frustration.

The next day more than 90 percent of your students have attempted the assignment. They want to start off the year on a positive note and create a good first impression. Unfortunately, few have demonstrated competency—and it was a standard from the previous year. You remember talking with last year’s teachers during staff orientation time, and you know these children received solid instruction. What was the problem?

A realization screams in your head—you must invest and focus on personal relationships. Children start off the school year with three essential questions:

- ▶ Who are you?
- ▶ Who are they?
- ▶ What do you really want from me? (In other words, how can I meet your expectations?)

The more quickly you answer these questions, the lower the emotional barriers—otherwise known as students’ *affective filters*—will be for your students and the more prosperous everyone can be.

→ WHAT IS YOUR NEXT MOVE?—P. 3

Option 2. Offer Fun and Games

YOU have been so excited about starting your school year that you feel as though your skin is a paper-thin layer holding your being together. The problem is that your skin *is* paper-thin. You want your students to like your class, but secretly you want them to like you. You have decided to start your school year investing time in making them feel comfortable in your room.

You ask your students to come in and sit anywhere they want. Early in the day, a stunned silence meets this offer. By midday, you find it difficult to get their attention and you are already talking over them. You ignore this first clue of students dismissing your authority—talking over you—and stick with your plan.

“I call this game ‘Crossing the Line,’” you announce. “If what I call out is true for you, please take one step forward.” You have seen this game played countless times. The leader calls out some benign statements at the beginning of the game and then goes into more personal ones. A prime example is starting with, “I ate breakfast” and then moving up to “I have problems with my parents.” Just like stand-up comedy, timing is everything.

During first period, no one moves.

In second period, no one can stop laughing. You immediately realize the truth behind the old poker line—If you look around the table and you don’t know who the rube is, then you are the rube.

In third period, you get some positive reactions, but students offer mixed reactions during the rest of the day.

After lunch, you realize that you threw a party for which your students were not emotionally ready. *Guarded* is the only word that describes how they reacted throughout the day. They don’t know you, and when they met you, you were wearing the joker’s hat.

Teachers are in the business of selling the importance of school—investing in the future by building in social and academic skills now. To get there, you need to sell seriousness and personal relationships. To do well, students need a serious attitude toward their work; in short, they need to care. You may have made traction on personal relationships, but at what expense? Do they take your class seriously? Maybe. Maybe not. The problem is that you don’t know.

Crossing the line—it’s a terrific idea, but it is a little too soon. Balance is the key. Everything needs to be earned, including fun and games.

→ WHAT IS YOUR NEXT MOVE?—P. 3

Option 3. Deal with a Behavior Problem

WELCOMING your class, you decide to have them line up outside of your classroom. You saw another teacher do this and it looked impressive. That other teacher’s students seemed attentive and even enthusiastic. You are skeptical about trying it yourself, because you know things are rarely what they seem from far away, but you decide to try it anyway. You ask students to line up before they enter your room. Your mistake is that you only got a snapshot of what your colleague was doing. Without knowing her full game plan, you find yourself taking a metaphorical exam after reading only half of the book.

You see the problem a mile away. The students who line up furthest from you started to smash into each other’s shoulders. What starts off as benign jostling quickly intensifies into a simulation of alpha rams trying to shatter each others’ skulls. In the ten seconds it takes you to recognize the problem and get there, two boys’ backpacks are down and glares are on.

Voices ring throughout the hallway, “Fight. Fight. Fight. Fight. . . .” Students circle around the two boys. You push your way through. Your voice and body thrust themselves into the ensuing chaos. “Stop it!” you scream.

“Make me,” the larger boy responds, never taking his eyes off the one he's picked as an antagonist. You stand there, aghast. Is this really the first impression your new students want to make?

You command both boys to come with you. Another teacher pops her head out of her class to see about the commotion. You ask her to watch your class as you escort the boys to the main office.

While you are filling out the discipline referrals at the main office, your brain screams out, “What happened?!” “What should I have done differently?”

That night, you replay this sequence through your head dozens, if not hundreds, of times. Proximity. You were too far away. Lining them up wasn't the problem. You suddenly remember the old adage, “Either you work the room or the room works you.”

Empathy Break

What is the first day like, from the students' perspective? One way to describe it is that each is a gut-wrenching bundle of nerves. All children want to belong, but few know how.

Your solution comes into focus: Be social with your students. As they walk up, greet them. Shake each child's hand. As you stand in the hallway, talk with them. Be genuine with them as you make eye contact.

Soon, you find yourself saying such things as:

- “Hey, nice new shoes.”
- “You excited about being back?”
- “This is going to be a fun year.”
- “You put a lot of time in getting ready for school today—it shows.”
- “What is your schedule? Oh, I heard Ms. Patel is fantastic.”

Soon, you are talking with random students you don't know who aren't even on your class roster. You can have a lot of mini-conversations during the three-minute passing period. Be mindful that children are always watching you. When you talk to them in the hallway, they see someone who is approachable, present, aware of their surroundings, and there.

Essentially, model the behavior you want students to exhibit on a daily basis. Keep your conversation light, school-focused, and optimistic. (It is the first day, after all). In the same way that nature abhors a vacuum, human beings abhor social groupings in which there is an absence of leadership. The importance of modeling what you want out of the people with whom you work cannot be understated.

→ WHAT IS YOUR NEXT MOVE?—P. 3