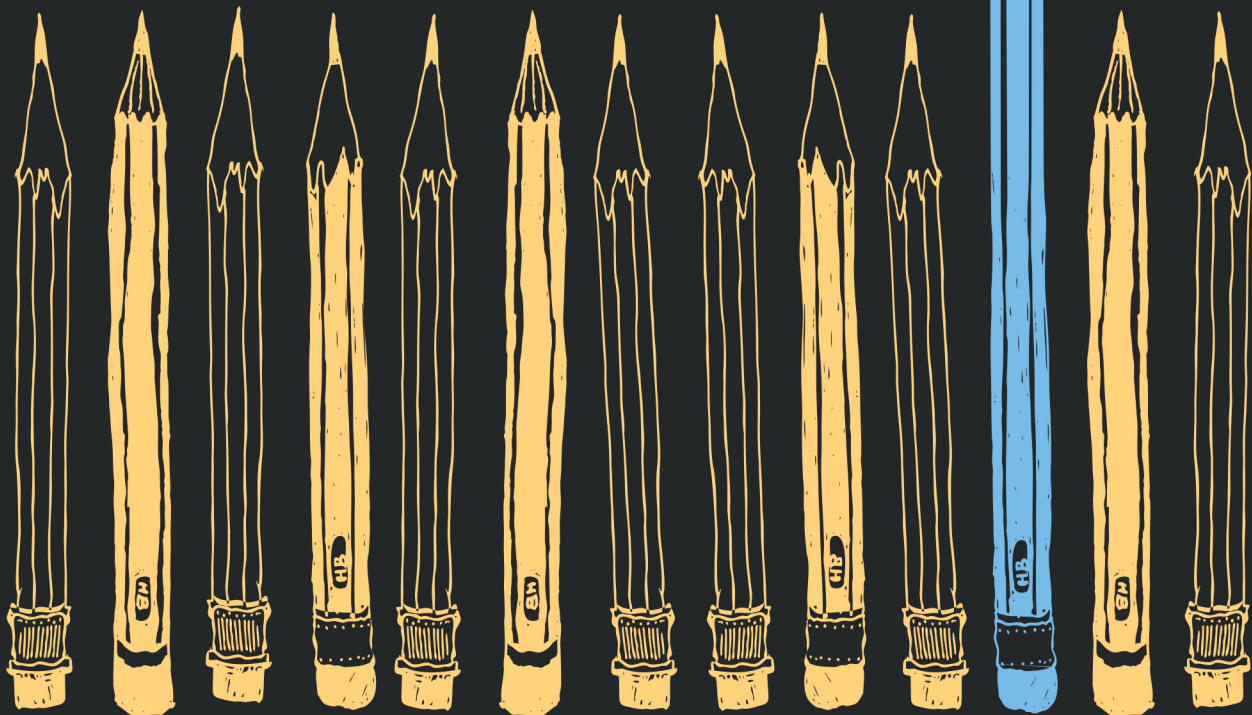


Trevor Muir • John Spencer

# New Teacher Mindset

Practical and Innovative Strategies  
to Be Different from Day One



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John Spencer**

**J** JOSSEY-BASS™  
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*To Sheri Steelman, who shows me that after 50 years in the classroom  
you can still be a new teacher.*

—Trevor

*To my current and past cohort students who continue to bring me hope  
for the future. You are doing amazing work even when it's hard to see  
the immediate results.*

—John



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# Introduction

Let's begin with three stories. See if you can spot yourself in any of them.

We'll start with Hannah.

Hannah's parents wanted her to become an engineer, but since the age of six when Mrs. Reems told her that she would make a great teacher, that's all she ever wanted to do with her life. Math always seemed to come easy for her, leading to good grades, positive affirmation, and a desire to help others experience the same type of success. If she was honest with herself, she never really understood why some of her friends struggled with calculus. It was like a puzzle to figure out, and she couldn't wait to finish college to help her future students learn to solve the puzzle of calculus as well.

After nailing her job interview, Hannah landed her first teaching job. However, when she was given her first teaching assignment, it wasn't for calculus. Heck, it wasn't even geometry. Hannah was assigned five different classes in the same subject: Algebra 1, and not a single one of them was for honors students.

On day one of her teaching career, she asked her class if anyone could define what rational and irrational numbers are. Hannah was met with blank stares. After a few weeks with her classes, she grew used to those blank stares. Her students were apathetic, often misbehaved, and wanted nothing to do with math class. She offered rewards for effort, threatened consequences,

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devised strategic seating charts to split up the troublemakers, gave out many *Ds* and *Fs*, and even raised her voice at her class to let them know she meant business, but all her attempts were met with deaf ears.

After a couple of months of this, Hannah sat in her 2004 Honda Civic and cried her eyes out.

“Why didn’t I just listen to my parents and get an engineering degree?”

Then, one day, Hannah was venting to an assigned mentor teacher, someone who had been working in schools for over 30 years. The seasoned teacher listened intently to Hannah’s honest lament, an outpouring filled with frustration, sadness, and more than anything, self-doubt. With tear-soaked eyes, Hannah cried, “I just don’t know why my students hate me.”

The veteran teacher saw herself 30 years younger sitting before her, and shared wisdom she wished she would have learned earlier. She said, “Oh, Hannah, your students don’t hate you. *They hate math*. You just have to help them understand why they don’t have to.”

“But how can I do that if I can’t even get them to listen to a word I say?” Hannah replied.

“You might just have to teach them a bit *differently* than the way you were taught.”

Next is Miguel’s story.

Miguel was a *C* student back in the day, and that was mostly because his parents would ground him if he received anything less. He was always placed in “regular” classes, received detentions for distracting other students, and had to take remedial math to get into college. Miguel didn’t like school. It wasn’t that school was too hard for him; it was just too boring.

The school day usually started off fine, but by 10 a.m., he’d start to fidget at his desk as the teacher lectured in the front of the room. He’d watch the clock on the wall slowly tick down the minutes until lunch, where he’d be allowed to talk to his friends, but only for 20 minutes before he’d be back

in a desk, either watching the clock again, or most likely in the afternoon, wandering the hallways of the school on bathroom breaks or throwing pencils across the classroom when the teachers weren't looking.

For Miguel, school meant boredom, and that often led to bad grades, detentions, and a sharp distaste for school.

But Miguel did love to write. Something about it was freeing to him, and language arts was the only area of school he thrived. Because he was expected by his parents to go to college, he chose to be an English major, knowing that would be his only way to get through another four years of classroom boredom.

So of course, he laughed in his professor's face when she suggested he could be a great English teacher someday.

"Why would I do that? I hate school!" Miguel replied.

The professor responded, "But, Miguel, I love the way you write. What if you could teach students how to do that as well, except do it in a way that works for them, maybe a little *differently*?"

This set Miguel on a path he never could have imagined for himself. He became a teacher, but he vowed to never let his students feel the same boredom he experienced for so many years. Instead of drab, blank walls, Miguel covered every square inch with posters that had nothing to do with education. Students regularly asked him who the Dave Matthews Band was, and Miguel always responded by blasting it from the classroom speakers. His students cringed, and Miguel did not care. Miguel gave every student a nickname and had special handshakes with all of them. He jumped on tables when he got excited, banned the use of textbooks in his room, made every unit a massive project, every lesson a hands-on experience, and went to work every day with the singular goal of every student loving school.

And after a few years of teaching like this, *Miguel burned out*.

Sustaining that kind of energy for 180 days straight was beyond Miguel's capacity. And in his attempt to make every learning activity fun, students were always expecting stimulation. And on those inevitable days when class was

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*(continued)*

not fun, students were apathetic and disengaged. Miguel found himself losing his temper too often as his class devolved into chaos. He saw a sharp rise in behavior issues, and surprisingly, an even higher rise in students who did not want to attend his class. It turns out, the introverts in his room couldn't handle the noise and distraction that comes with a class that is always fun.

Naturally, Miguel began to wonder if there was *any* way to lead a class successfully. He was living proof that the traditional sit-and-get model does not work for many students. Yet, a class based solely on excitement and enjoyment was not working as well. He was either going to have to discover a *different* way of teaching or do something else with his English degree.

The final story is Katie's.

Katie slowly turns the key, pulls down on the doorknob, and inhales the stale classroom air. There's a vague scent of laminated posters and carpet shampoo. But to Katie, it smells like potential. She stares at an empty wall. It's a blank canvas that will soon have student artwork and anchor charts and collective brainstorms of the epic projects her students will do.

She glances at the barricade of furniture pushed to the far side of the room, and pulling out her trusted gel pen and notebook, she sketches an initial plan for how the space will look. How will she make it adaptable and flexible but also consistent? How will she design spaces that maximize collaboration but honor the need for quiet introspection?

A half hour later, she pulls out the Bluetooth speaker and turns to her mixtape. Well, that's what she calls it. In year one, it was an actual cassette. Now, 27 years later, it's a playlist on a streaming app. It's *in the cloud*, a term she couldn't have imagined using nearly three decades ago when she was in teachers college.

When she started, the school had one computer lab with wired internet. She still used an overhead transparency projector and a mimeograph machine, and the students would go nuts when she wheeled in the TV cart.

This year feels different: a new city and a new grade level. But also, she can feel something bigger: a new generation with new needs and new challenges. An artificial intelligence (AI) revolution changing the way people learn and think and create. Then again, Katie often feels like a new teacher. And that's okay. Because each year, she is a new teacher. She's trying new strategies. She's dreaming up new projects. True, she's a veteran. She's an expert. But she never wants to stop innovating.

Katie has lived through a recession, a pandemic, and a set of policies that pushed standardized testing as the ultimate solution. She is resilient, adaptable, and creative.

"I've got this," she mutters to herself, as she sifts through a box of materials. She has piles of notebooks of new ideas that she wants to try out. She has a new escape-room activity her third graders will love. She has a highlighted journal article about emerging research on how to teach phonics. She still can't wait to meet her new students. That list of names will soon be replaced with 27 unique people whose stories she will get to know over the course of the year.

But despite her experience and the successes she has had, Katie feels nervous and even a little scared. It's the same pit she had in her stomach 27 years ago, and every year since.

*What if these ideas don't work?*

*Do I have the energy and stamina for this anymore?*

*What if I can't figure out the new technology?*

*Am I too old to be relevant to my students?*

*What if they don't like me?*

But she doesn't let those thoughts linger for long. She's been through this before. She will challenge perceptions and prove that a veteran teacher can be innovative. She will be *different* and her students will remember her forever.

Hi, I'm Trevor.

And I'm John.

We were both raised in an education system that impacted us in many ways. It's where we learned how to read, write, calculate, problem-solve, wonder, socialize, get in trouble, get out of trouble, factor polynomials, deal with bullies, sit for very long periods of time, do all the work on group projects, let someone else do all the work on group projects, write essays, create art, fall in love with reading, and lots of other things that probably impacted you as well.

When you spend 13 years doing anything, it tends to have a formative effect. From kindergarten to senior year, we sat in classrooms and had learning experiences that were a key part in forming our identities, our knowledge, our skills, our development—school helped form us. And it probably did the same for you as well.

So let's start there. School is formative. Whether you were a part of the 1 million students who are homeschooled, the 9 million who go to private school, or the 43 million from public schools, the educational experience is deeply influential.

And perhaps the most formative aspect of education is the people who lead it, those who design and guide their students through learning experiences with the intent of it benefiting them now and thereafter.

For each of us, this was the catalyst for becoming teachers. We both had educators who inspired a deep love of their subject areas, but an even deeper love of learning. These teachers stood out enough in our memories to leave an imprint—something in the way they connected with us, but also helped us connect with what they taught, that inspired us to want to do the same: to start careers as teachers ourselves.

*How can we be teachers like them?*

However, not all of school was like sitting in Mr. Keating's class in the *Dead Poet's Society*, full of excitement about poetry and confidence to take on the world. Actually, much of school wasn't like that at all. Instead, school was often stale and uninspiring.

We'd sit in rows for seven hours, listen to an adult talk *at* us from the front of the room, and try to remember everything they said long enough to regurgitate it on a test, then repeat.

And starting in about second grade, you even had to go home and do more of that work after those seven hours in school. And if you didn't do it at home, you'd get in trouble when you went back to school, making those 7 hours even more unbearable. Too often, school was about penalties and rewards. It was about

learning information without the slightest clue about how it would ever be used in the “real world.” Of course, there were teachers like Mr. Feeney, who cared about his students as people first, and everything else followed. Or Mrs. Frizzle, who could light a fire in you about their subject area.

But there were also teachers who had been beaten down from years in a profession that demanded too much and paid too little that they lost the joy in their work. And no student wants to be in a classroom led by someone who has lost their passion for teaching.

School was good.

And school was not.

So we each began our paths to becoming educators, at different times and places, but both with the objective to be impactful teachers for our future students, knowing the education system isn't perfectly designed to support this objective. But to do this, we knew we'd have to think *differently* about teaching.

We were filled with hope and optimism that we could do it, that we can lead students toward a deep love for learning, wondering, and creating that they would hold on to long after their time in our classrooms. Dare I say, we were idealistic, ready to become the teachers our students need. So after college, teacher training, student teaching, and countless sleepless nights, we became teachers.

And we quickly learned that there is a stark difference between ideals and reality. We'll dive into this reality throughout the book, but let's sum it up here:

*Teaching is challenging.*

It's complex, messy, and part of a massive system that is often slow to change. As new teachers, it took us both time to learn how to thrive in this system and work with all of the complexity and messiness. To be the kind of teachers we wanted to be, to teach in a culture and climate that is constantly changing, to adapt to new technologies, to push against the education system while also existing and thriving within it, we would have to think *different* and be *different*.

We, along with most who have stepped foot in a classroom, can identify with the three stories at the beginning of this Introduction. We've been in Hannah's shoes, and tried everything under the sun to engage our students, only to come up empty. Like Miguel, we've wanted classrooms to be a boredom-free zone, but also have seen what happens when you try to make school fun and exciting every moment of the day. We understand the excitement of Katie as she approaches day

one of the school year, and the nerves that go along with trying new approaches to teaching. We've realized that sometimes what we've learned just doesn't always work, and we have to discover a different approach.

Now, *different* doesn't always mean bold or flashy. It doesn't mean ditching everything that's been done in education and replacing it with something brand-new. There's power in so many "traditional" teaching practices and wisdom to be gained from seasoned educators. But *different* also doesn't mean resisting change and refusing to adapt while everyone else moves forward.

Different is about embracing what works, but paying attention to new research, being open to new ideas, and being adaptable in an ever-changing world. It means not ignoring the fact that there was a global pandemic, increasing societal and political pressure, or the introduction of AI technology at our fingertips. It's recognizing that the world is changing and adjusting accordingly.

*It's a mindset.*

When you are different from day one, you are willing to take creative risks. You know that every lesson is an experiment. It might not work perfectly at first, but through many tiny iterations, your lessons grow more effective and innovative. As a result, you grow more adaptable in the face of change.

And change is inevitable, especially in the world of education. Because of this, we have to pivot, adapt, innovate, sometimes swim against the current, discover new practices, identify ones that need to be retained despite shifting currents—we need to be a different kind of teacher.

So if you're brand-new to this profession, welcome. We're excited to be on this journey with you. And if you've been here a while, remember that you're always a new teacher, whether it's year 1 or 31. Every year will be a new year with a new group of students and a chance to try new strategies and design new systems. Every day will be a new chance to innovate and iterate and make something different. Every day is another day one and a chance to be *different*.



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CHAPTER

1

**Building Relationships  
from Day One**

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It was the first Friday of the first week of my first year as a teacher and I (John) was determined to have students engage in a hands-on learning activity. My students were going to solidify their understanding of the five themes of geography by creating collages that represent each of them. I had spent weeks asking friends and family for old magazines. I hit up every back-to-school sale, and purchased an absurd amount of glue and cardstock and tempera paints.

I showed up two hours early to set out the supplies. I photocopied the detailed instructions that I had reworked over and over again. I stopped for a moment to daydream about what this would look like someday when they made a teacher movie about my story. The students would fall in love with social studies through hands-on learning. They would discover the joy of geography and learn that history wasn't something in the past; it was alive in the present.

*This was going to be epic.*

The first week was a success up to this point. I knew almost every student's name. I talked about sports and video games and music with the students who gathered by my door before class. We were becoming a community, and today I would take it to the next level with a hands-on learning experience. My stomach turned with that mix of excitement and anxiety as I stared at the clock waiting for the morning bell to ring.

As the students streamed in, I could sense their confusion. No warm-up? No bell work? What's with all the paints and magazines?

"Today is going to be different," I told them. I launched into an excited pitch for our mini-project and ended with a quick reminder about classroom rules and consequences. Then, I let them loose.

My first two classes finished early, which meant most students wandered around talking while I frantically looked for places for the paint to dry. In between class periods, I fought back a lingering sense of disappointment. This wasn't epic. It was a collage. It wasn't the stuff of the silver screen super-teachers. It was a craft. But still, students were generally engaged and that was a success for a Friday. I tempered my expectations a bit, but still hoped that one of my classes would live up to my hopes for this project.

In my third class period, a group of students decided to smear paint on their faces. Right after sending them to the restroom, I heard a loud crash and the shattering of glass. I spun around to see a girl crying as she pulled broken shards from her hair.

“Who did this?” I growled.

The class remained silent.

“Just own up to it! Who did this?” I screamed. I know in teacher circles we often say, “I lost my voice” as code for yelling, but this was screaming. I was red in the face. And once I calmed down, I made every student write down who did it. One name emerged over and over again—Jose.

I wasn’t surprised. Teachers had warned me about Jose before school began. So, I wrote the referral and sent him to the office. During lunch, I stopped by the office and Jose insisted that he hadn’t done anything wrong.

“I don’t want to hear it. There are witnesses,” I responded.

But as I headed back to my class, a quiet girl pulled me aside and said, “Mr. Spencer, I need to tell you something.” Tears were streaming down her face.

“Maria, what’s wrong? Did something happen to you?”

“It was me. I knocked down the picture. I was trying to toss glue to a friend and it accidentally hit the picture. It wasn’t Jose.”

She walked with me to the office and I apologized to Jose and his mother, embarrassed by how I handled this situation. This moment shaped the way I thought about discipline forever.

## **Five Truths about Building Effective Relationships**

I share this story as a disclaimer that I don’t have this all figured out. Trevor and I both have cringe-worthy moments when we raised our voices at our classes (code word for yelled) or accidentally shamed them or simply didn’t know how to get a loud and rowdy group to settle down.

In teachers college, we both read books that promised we would have “no classroom management issues” if we followed the directions laid out in the pages. We wrote essays in college describing how we’d incorporate these directions in

our classroom management plan, modeled these methods in front of our professors and other preservice teachers, and memorized the directions as if they were answers on a test.

And then we started teaching and followed the directions to a tee, and quite often, they simply didn't work. At first, we thought it was us. Maybe we weren't consistent enough. Perhaps we hadn't mastered the right techniques. We wondered if we simply weren't talented enough as teachers.

Eventually, we realized, through our own unique journeys, that there is no instruction manual for classroom management. We are all messy humans in a messy world. Our classrooms will always have tension and conflict and challenges. It's the nature of working with people. That's what makes it hard, but it's also what makes it beautiful.

We came into teaching with a traditional mindset toward classroom management. We had a system of punishments and rewards, and expected every student to follow the rules we set up. We thought if we had clear rules and logical consequences for misbehavior, our classrooms would run smoothly.

And I'm not going to lie, sometimes it worked. Sometimes class was smooth and students did follow our instructions. But then inevitable conflict would arise. A student would have an outburst. There was a fight in the hallway right before class. Some students didn't follow our rules. There was a full moon. (If that doesn't make sense now, teach for a while and you'll get it.)

Or we'd lose our temper on a kid who turned out to be innocent.

And it became apparent that simply having rules, rewards, and penalties was not sufficient. All of the rules and procedures in the world could not negate the fact that teaching is inherently messy. This realization began our journeys to discover a better way to manage our classrooms.

We now view classroom management through a different, and perhaps, more realistic lens: that teaching is relational. Like all relationships, there's no instruction manual or map to guide you down the perfect path.

*Relationships are messy.*

So, instead of offering an instruction manual, we'd like to share some counterintuitive truths about classroom management that we have seen in our own classrooms.

### Truth #1: There's Strength in Humility

Jose didn't even look up when I apologized to him. The principal attempted to get him to acknowledge me, but he turned away and stared at the wall. He had every right to be angry. I hadn't simply made a mistake. I made a snap judgment based on a child's reputation. In my own fear and insecurity, I lashed out at that class and failed to listen to Jose's side of the story.

The next day, I apologized again. Jose's response was, "That's okay. I'm used to this."

"It's not okay and I don't want you to get used to this. I am genuinely sorry," I answered.

For the next week, Jose looked away and avoided eye contact. But subtly something changed. He answered a question. He joined his group discussion. He turned in an assignment. Then, to my surprise, when I invited him to join the cross-country team, he asked if he could call his mom and see if his aunt could babysit his younger sister so he could come to try-outs.

Over the course of the year, Jose emerged as a leader in my class. There were still moments when I gently redirected him and a few times when he got into fights at lunch time or in physical education (PE) class. However, he also thrived in small group settings where he was natural project manager. One day, a teacher across the breezeway dropped a beaker and the glass shattered. He looked up at me and said, "Hey, Mr. Spencer, I swear that wasn't me. No matter how many people write my name on a paper."

While I still cringe at the way I judged Jose, he was able to turn the incident into an inside joke because he had truly forgiven me. This was a reminder that there's strength in humility. I remember being worried that apologizing might be seen as a sign of weakness to students. Would they simply walk all over me afterward? But in my experience, students typically respond with kindness. They view an apology as a sign of strength. This humility is ultimately what allows teachers and students to restore their relationships.

---

*There's strength in  
humility.*



## Truth #2: Classroom Management Is Deeply Relational

Often new teachers are told, “Don’t take student behavior personally.” It’s not you; it’s them. If a student is talking while you’re talking, they might simply want to chat with a neighbor. When a student comes in grumpy and snaps at you, it’s often connected to something on the playground or the lunch room.

While it’s true that we shouldn’t *take* behavior personally, classroom management *is* personal because it connects to relationships. The incident with Jose wasn’t merely a discipline issue. It was a relational one. One student felt that she couldn’t get up and move in my classroom and she was afraid to ask. She threw paint across the room out of a fear of breaking the rules. A group of students blamed one particular student for breaking a picture frame because he had always been labeled as the troublemaker. I lashed out at the entire class and blamed one specific student. These moments were all deeply relational. I had hurt my students by getting angry, shaming a student, and failing to listen. I wasn’t even sure how I would fix things.

Moving forward, my goal was to restore the relationship with my students and to improve their relationships with one another. One of the most effective methods of cultivating positive classroom relationships is using the Establish-Maintain-Restore (EMR) process (see Figure 1.1).



**FIGURE 1.1** The EMR method.

Source: Cook, C. R., Coco, S., Zhang, Y., Fiat, A. E., Duong, M. T., Renshaw, T. L., Long, A. C., & Frank, S. (2018). Cultivating positive teacher–student relationships: Preliminary evaluation of the establish–maintain–restore (EMR) method. APA PsycNet. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-47899-002> with “Adapted from Cook et.al. 2018. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-47899-002>.”

This starts with teachers establishing positive relationships with students, maintaining them throughout the year, and after inevitable conflict (because teaching is messy), restoring the relationship with students.

In *Cultivating Positive Teacher-Student Relationships*, researchers conducted a blind study with fourth- and fifth-grade teachers to analyze the connection between student-teacher relationships and positive behavior.<sup>1</sup> They found that teachers who used the Establish-Maintain-Restore process in their classrooms saw “significant improvement in student outcomes” and a sharp drop in disruptive behavior. Another group studied the effect Establish-Maintain-Restore has on student outcomes, including “improvements in academic achievement and engagement and reductions in disruptive behaviors, suspension, and risk of dropping out.”<sup>2</sup> Universally, programs that use EMR saw the largest effects on overall student outcomes.

This makes sense. Students who feel invested in, trusted, and respected by their teachers have a different posture toward being in class. The point of student-teacher relationships is not to *just* be kind and friendly to students, it’s the bedrock for classroom management. When their attitudes are oriented in this way, more time and energy is devoted to academics and less to managing and correcting negative behavior.

### Truth #3: There Are No Good or Bad Students

I (Trevor) once had a student in my class named Dave who I initially perceived as being lazy, and maybe even a little rude. He never raised his hand to speak in class, avoided eye contact when I spoke to him, turned in less than half of his assignments, and I constantly caught him watching YouTube videos on his laptop when he was supposed to be working. I exercised so much patience with Dave, and yet he would still just shrug his shoulders when I asked him why he wasn’t working. It was only a couple of weeks into the school year when I filed a place for Dave in my mind on the “bad kid” list. Of course, I didn’t think he was purely bad, but if I’m being honest, he was easy to classify as difficult and possibly unreachable.

After a couple of months of this, I’d had enough and decided to call home to let his parents know. A woman answered who I thought to be Dave’s mother, and I said to her, “I’m Dave’s teacher, and I’m really struggling to get Dave to participate in class and was hoping you could give me some suggestions.”



She replied, “Hi Mr. Muir, I’m not Dave’s mother, I’m his foster mom. And we’ve been having the same issues since he’s been with us. I’ve actually been meaning to call you hoping you could give me some advice.”

*Oh, I didn’t know Dave was in foster care.*

Dave’s foster mom proceeded to share with me that Dave holds the record at his social work agency for being in the most homes in the shortest amount of time. She told me a little bit about why he was in foster care and some of the horrible things that were done to him and how this has all had a deep impact on the way he interacts with adults, especially men.

This was heartbreaking. I had no idea that Dave wasn’t lazy; he was angry, sad, and hurt. I ended that call without any specific answers as to how to get Dave to engage in my class. However, I gained a deep empathy for the student whom I had improperly labeled.

And when I remember this, I can see that a “bad kid” is often someone in pain. At the same time, I am not surprised when a “good kid” does something bad. Behavior is communication. Sometimes a lazy student is really an insecure student. Sometimes a tired student is really a hungry one. Sometimes a rude, misbehaving student is really an insecure one, and would rather get in trouble than fail at their task. Sometimes a student who says hurtful things to their teacher is actually hurting themselves, and the words they sling are really a reaction to their own pain.

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*Behavior is  
communication.*



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A student’s life experience does not excuse poor behavior or make it any less distracting/hurtful, but it does explain it. And one of the most challenging, yet important roles of an educator, is to recognize the fact that students are communicating through their actions and to react accordingly. The reality is, every single behavior in school has an explanation.

This might seem theoretical, but this mindset can help us think differently about discipline. First, it means you are open to the idea that you might not know the whole story. It never hurts to delay judgment and gather facts slowly before choosing a course of action with discipline. In addition, it means you are willing to work with challenging students because you know they are capable of growth. Finally, it’s a daily reminder that you will hold all students to a high standard of behavior while also recognizing that students are going to mess up along the way.

### Truth #4: Classroom Management Is a Learning Opportunity

The traditional, behaviorist view of classroom management holds that students behave based on a system of punishments and rewards. If teachers use the right reinforcements with students, they can maximize ideal behavior while limiting challenging behaviors. We see this approach with schoolwide discipline initiatives like Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and through token rewards systems.

But ultimately, what is the goal of classroom management? You might want to see students learn self-regulation and impulse control. Perhaps you want students to learn how to navigate conflict and solve interpersonal issues. Maybe you're hoping for personal integrity and honesty. Chances are, it's a combination of factors that can be summed up with the idea of "doing the right thing because it's the right thing to do." In other words, we want students to do the right thing, not for a prize, but because of an intrinsic motivation.

This is why it helps to treat discipline issues as learning opportunities. We'll take a deeper dive into this topic in the next chapter, but the big idea is that we can treat discipline issues as opportunities for students to self-reflect, set goals, and grow. Like PBIS and other rewards systems, this growth equates to better behavior, but now the motivation is students developing elemental transformation rather than following a carrot on a stick. We might still need to provide consequences and incentives, but we can approach these interactions with the question, "What do I want this student to learn from this experience?"

### Practical Ideas: Getting to Know Students

As a new teacher, I (Trevor) had my students write "I'm From" poems, an activity where students share their life stories in poetry. For some students, this was a fun way to share about their home-lives and contexts. However, many kids would skip this assignment, and it was often because this activity wasn't trauma-informed. Not every student feels safe sharing their story. While vulnerability has a place in the classroom, it can take months to develop trust as a community, and students should have a sense of control over how much they are sharing. I needed to shift get-to-know-you activities from personal experiences to geeky interests. Starting with

student interests can help build student confidence by sending the message that we are all experts in something. This creates a culture where students are able to learn from one another from day one.

When getting to know your students, perhaps start with impersonal activities, like scavenger hunts, escape rooms, or trivia games. Then begin to move to more personal activities, like interest surveys, show-and-tell, or autobiographical writing assignments.

We tend to do “get-to-know-you” activities at the start of the school year but then move into core content afterward. However, if we integrate more personal get-to-know-you activities throughout the school year, students can more naturally learn about one another as they build trust over time.

### Ten Ways to Get to Know Your Students

The personal connection is critical for both customized learning and classroom leadership. Here are 10 ways to get to know your students better as people:

1. **Sporting events:** Visit sporting events. This will allow you to see both the athletes and the spectators in a different light. It’s also a chance to mingle with families.
2. **Home visits:** I find that when I do home visits, I am reminded that students come from real homes with real families. I see students through a more holistic lens.
3. **Clubs:** Many clubs hold competitions. Sometimes they are sparsely attended. I know, people are crazy enough to think that kids tackling one another is more exciting than a debate competition. Showing up to these can be a real morale booster for students.
4. **Sponsor:** Go beyond simply visiting club competitions and sporting events and volunteer to be the coach or sponsor of one. This allows you to play the role of leader in a realm that is outside the traditional classroom setting.
5. **Pop culture:** Spend a little time (emphasis on *little*) listening to the music, watching the movies, or checking out the TV shows that your students do. It’s not critical that you are up-to-date, but it does give you a picture of how marketers view the youth that you work with.