



# Introduction

Teaching is challenging work. I have found this to be true whether teaching in the inner city or in the suburbs, whether working with preschoolers or fourth graders. As educators, we need to present interesting and well organized lessons, keep students motivated, help children get along, create a nurturing community, and give them structures for working productively together—all while sharing an often small space with upwards of twenty-five unique individuals all day long.

Teaching is also satisfying work because this effort pays off. When we take steps to create a positive classroom climate, the days generally go smoothly, our class enjoys being together, and children make progress academically and socially.

A reality of teaching, however, is that even in the best of climates, children will sometimes have problems. They'll argue with each other, exclude

classmates, form cliques, “forget” to do homework, refuse to share, refuse to do work, play too roughly, and mishandle each other’s belongings—as all children are wont to do on occasion simply because they are children.

Such problems, although not unusual, can be frustrating roadblocks to joyous learning. They can impede progress for the students immediately involved and for the class as a whole.

This book is about what to do when these sorts of common but learning-disrupting problems come up in the classroom. It offers practical, classroom-tested strategies for addressing different types of difficulties: ones involving individual students, ones involving the whole class, anticipated problems, and problems that have already occurred and have persisted despite the usual array of teacher interventions.

Over the years, I’ve seen these strategies help children of all elementary grades.

- When first graders Randy and Amira got into a yelling fight over who would get to use the blue crayon, they marched off to have a first-grade version of a conflict resolution meeting.
- A second grade class learned ways to be safe on the playground through an age-appropriate role-play about careful ways to play tag.
- Angela, a fourth grader with a history of defying teachers, *finally* began to improve her behavior when she started using an individual written agreement after all other problem-solving methods failed to bring any change.
- After a chaotic day with a substitute teacher, a group of fifth graders used a class meeting to plan how to treat substitute teachers respectfully when their teacher needed to be away in the future.
- Through a problem-solving conference with her teacher, sixth grader Marlina finally created a system for getting homework assignments written down in her assignment book.

You’ll learn about all these strategies from this book. For each strategy, I break down the steps, pull out keys to success, and show instances of the strategy being used in various grades with suitable modifications.

As just one example of an age-appropriate adjustment, the student-to-student conflict resolution protocol described in Chapter Three calls for students to learn to resolve their conflicts independently. The chapter describes how kindergarten teachers can give even their very young students a taste of conflict resolution by teaching the children to express feelings and listen without interrupting, while supervising and helping the children resolve the conflict. Thus these young students learn basic social skills that will prepare them for the full conflict resolution protocol once they are developmentally ready.

The strategies in this book can become an important part of your teaching whether you teach in urban, suburban, or rural schools. They can be used in conjunction with the special education plans for children who need such extra supports, and they work for children who are more typical learners.

These strategies will help you if you're a beginning teacher. They're also tools that you might add to your repertoire if you've been teaching for many years. As Jon Saphier and Robert Gower point out in *The Skillful Teacher*, teaching is a complex endeavor that calls for constant learning on the part of the practitioner (Saphier & Gower, 1997).

## Gaining Skills

I want to emphasize, as Saphier and Gower do in their book title, the word skillful. When you read this book, you'll gain skills. What can help make teaching satisfying, indeed joyful, is skill—the teacher learning practical methods for handling the smooth and routine moments of teaching as well as the bumpy and tricky ones. It is the teacher's skill, not luck or charisma, that makes the most difference to successful teaching.

This is one of the most important lessons I have learned over my career in education. I began teaching elementary school in a third grade classroom in New Haven, Connecticut. I had few skills in classroom management and thus fumbled my way through that first year.

Because I was unsure how to set limits, Delores argued with me about whether or not to do her math work and Jackson refused to write. Since I didn't yet have the skills to build a caring community, Nicole and Shanesha formed a clique and wrote mean stories about the other children. Every

day there was a dispute, a tantrum, or an unkind act that exhausted me and detracted from the children's learning. My principal suggested that I observe a more experienced teacher.

Barbara Lanier's classroom was an oasis of peace. Ms. Lanier stated directions softly and kindly. Her students responded by being cooperative and purposeful. When a problem flared up, she restored order with a few words and a calm gesture or two. When George threatened Mikal, for example, she redirected them into a brief conversation to respectfully resolve their differences.

Not that things were perfect in her room. Not all problems were resolved smoothly and completely. But the overall climate was decidedly one of cooperation, friendliness, and fruitful learning.

As I observed Ms. Lanier's class, I wondered, *How does she achieve this?* I was pretty sure she didn't just have "all the good kids." *What did she do that I didn't do?*

As time went on and I gained more teaching experience, I began to see the answer to that question. Ms. Lanier took steps to create a safe, cooperative, and respectful learning community. She assumed nothing about her fifth graders' knowledge of how to navigate their school environment. Instead, she taught them the routines for each part of the day. She established classroom rules with them to build their sense of ownership, modeled expected behaviors, and gave the children opportunities to practice. She used positive teacher language and responded to misbehavior firmly but respectfully.

And for those times when children had trouble despite being immersed in such a positive climate, she was prepared with a range of problem-solving strategies that fit the situation, strategies like the ones I describe in this book.

I first learned these strategies when I took a *Responsive Classroom*<sup>®</sup> course many years ago. Since then, I've practiced the strategies and discussed them with colleagues. In the course of my career as a teacher in several elementary grades and school settings, I've always kept in mind that I must refine and adapt each strategy to meet the needs of my students.

I share these strategies explicitly in this book so that you won't be like me watching Ms. Lanier: knowing that she was doing *something* but not

quite seeing what it was. The liberal use of examples from real classrooms and the breaking down of each strategy into concrete steps are meant to help you see the skills behind the success—exactly what it is that teachers do to achieve peace and productivity in their classrooms.

## **What Makes These Strategies Work?**

The strategies in this book work because they do the following:

### **Bring out the best in children**

The strategies in this book assume that children want to and can learn, want to treat each other with consideration, and want to be treated by others with consideration. From problem-solving conferences to individual written agreements, these strategies bring out and build on children's positive intentions and abilities. For example, when teachers use language such as "Let's see if we can solve this problem so that we take care of each other," the phrase "so that we take care of each other" builds on children's desire to be cared for and their ability to see that others would like to be cared for as well.

### **Position the teacher and student as collaborators**

In all the strategies, the teacher and students work together to address obstacles to the children's learning. The teacher gathers the children's ideas about what's causing the problem and what can be done about it and combines these ideas with his or her own understandings. With their combined wisdom, the teacher and children then use the problem-solving structures to support the children in behaving more peacefully and productively.

### **Build on relationships: teacher and student, student and student**

For collaborative problem-solving to be successful, the parties involved must have a good relationship. The strategies in this book recognize that fact. As Chapter One explains, if these strategies are to work, the teacher has to create a caring classroom community that nurtures positive teacher-student and student-student relationships. When class members then use the problem-solving strategies to address difficulties that come up, the power of those relationships works to their advantage. The trust and understanding

they've built helps them empathize with each other in the face of a problem and makes them more open to each other's ideas for solving it.

### **Look for the underlying cause of the problem**

Teachers using the problem-solving strategies in this book search for possible causes of a child's problematic behavior. Rather than assuming a cause, they recognize that each child is unique and look for clues about what's causing that particular child's difficulty.

Clues may come from the child's classroom interactions, previous teachers, and school records. They may come from what the teacher knows about the child's family life and from conversations with the child herself. When an accurate cause is identified, problem-solving is naturally more effective.

### **Teach children specific problem-solving skills**

The approach presented in this book puts children at the center of solving their own problems. It also teaches children the skills they need to do this problem-solving well, skills such as listening, empathizing, speaking, and compromising. This explicit focus on skill-building not only helps ensure that the immediate problem-solving experience will be productive and emotionally safe, but also makes the children better problem-solvers in the future.

### **Aim for reasonable improvement, not perfection**

Our students are real human beings who are imperfect, just as we teachers are. Like many things in life, the knotty problems that we work with students to untangle often have no easy fix. Given this truth, the problem-solving strategies in this book don't aim for easy fixes. Instead, they'll help you communicate clearly with your students and help your students communicate clearly with each other. They'll give all class members a format for listening to and perceiving each other's feelings. They'll help you and your students collaborate respectfully.

Some solutions may resolve a problem once and for all; other times, a solution works for a while and then unravels. In any case, you and your students will have taken steps of improvement.

These steps are actually no small thing. They can mean the difference between a recess spent scowling and kicking gravel at other children and

a recess spent playing happily. They can mean the difference between a writing block spent pecking randomly at computer keys and a writing block spent productively composing. Over time, these incremental successes add up to larger growth.

### **Avoid one-size-fits-all**

These strategies provide a framework for teachers and children, but they allow for tailoring to fit individual situations. Because children vary enormously in their concerns and their needs, the questions we ask and the potential solutions we and our students explore must be based on our knowledge of the individual children involved. Observing children carefully, listening to their unique concerns, and paying attention to where they are developmentally are all central to the strategies in this book.

## **The Teachers We Want to Be**

The problem-solving strategies I share in this book have allowed me to become the teacher I wanted to be when I observed Ms. Lanier's classroom. I encourage you, as you read this book, to think about which strategies you might add to your repertoire.

The wonderful thing about our profession is that there is always more to learn, always a new challenge. So go slow. Try one strategy at a time. Don't feel that you need to use every strategy. Think about which ones might work with your students. Seek support and encouragement from colleagues. You'll gradually grow more skillful as you observe students, learn from your colleagues, and gain knowledge from the accumulated wisdom of the teaching profession.

If you're an experienced teacher, use this book to hone your practice. If you're a new teacher, keep this book at hand and return to it again and again to add to your skills. In time, you, too, will be the teacher you want to be.