SMALL but MIGHTY

How Everyday Habits Add Up to More Manageable and Confident Teaching

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Introduction: Why Small but Mighty?

"You look so Zen," my colleague said as she walked up to me.

It was a beautiful spring day, one of those rare gifts when the sky is pure blue, the sun shines, and a gentle breeze ruffles budding blossoms. My colleague was headed to her car to grab something she had left behind, and I was using a 15-minute break to get some fresh air, eat an apple, and clear my head.

At her comment, I laughed. "Trust me, I'm not."

"No, really," she insisted. "You always seem to keep calm, even when everyone around us might be losing it. Is that something you do on purpose?"

As I paused to think about her question, I couldn't help but reflect on the hard work it took to keep things in perspective. At that point I was about 20 years into my career and was hitting the highest threshold of stress I'd ever experienced. Multiple factors played into that, but to condense them all, I had too many jobs to complete with not enough time. The term *bandwidth* was not yet in general use to describe any given person's capacity to accomplish something, but mine was stretched incredibly thin. My colleague might have thought that I was handling it all, but I was barely hanging on.

There may be no formal studies to capture the proclivities of people who decide to become educators, but I would guess that most teachers probably lean more toward Type A than Type B personalities. It's hard to be laid-back when so many moving parts are in play at once:

skillful lesson planning (often for multiple classes), effective instruction, thoughtful analysis of and reflection on student progress, and the ability to change course when things aren't working. Add to that the constant demands on time and wellness, and it can become overwhelming to manage a job that is highly unpredictable and changes from moment to moment. Even people who tend to be flexible can wind up succumbing to the multiple stressors that emerge in school buildings.

It's important to keep an eye on the big picture of what matters most, especially when we consider where students need to wind up with their learning and what it will take to accomplish that growth. However, the tiny details of how we get there are just as vital a consideration. In classroom teaching, no detail is insignificant. Skillful teachers are highly attuned to the importance of reflective practice and how it affects their ability to teach similar content each year while making needed adjustments to instructional approaches that maximize student achievement. How is it possible to increase awareness of the small but mighty details that have a big impact on student growth?

When we embrace the details of instruction with an approach that builds capacity over time, both teachers and students reap the benefits of *habits* over *motivation.* Many educators consider intrinsic motivation to be the gold standard for achievement, but it can be transient even in the most devoted people. That is why the small things we do every day by rote become our salvation during a rough patch or when we can't find enough mental energy for inspiration. Students with strong habits produce good results even when they're having a hard time, and the same holds true for adults.

When my colleague observed what she called "Zen" behavior in my outward appearance, I was initially surprised. After all, my internal monologue wasn't nearly as relaxed at that time in my life as I would have wanted it to be. However, upon reflection, I realized that I was in the habit of doing tiny things each day to mitigate that high stress load. Getting outside for just a little bit of time was a big help, as it reminded me of the world beyond cinder block walls. I was insistent about having the first hour of the morning to myself to orient the day, drink my coffee, and get organized before colleagues and students arrived. At the end of the day, I turned off my phone an hour before bed and spent time with

my family. Taken alone, these moves were nearly infinitesimal in their application, but together, they made living a more fulfilled personal and professional life possible.

As nearly every teacher knows, achieving longevity in education is about embracing both the successes and the obstacles we encounter as part of a journey to growth. Teaching is a marathon rife with unpredictability and demand, and without much staying power. According to a *Vox* report, "Beginning teachers have among the highest rates of turnover of any group of teachers. Overall, more than 44 percent of new teachers leave the profession within five years" (Cineas, 2022). To make it in the field of education past the time that so many teachers throw in the towel, it's essential to lean into the details that add up to success.

The upcoming chapters explore a variety of moves and tools that may seem bite-sized and therefore insignificant on their own, but yield great power when implemented systematically and thoughtfully. To get a better sense of why small equals mighty, let's look at some of the theories that demonstrate the subtle influence of habits, brevity, and the wise advice that less is more.

Habit Stacking

In his bestselling book *Atomic Habits,* author James Clear (2018) writes, "It is so easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making small improvements on a daily basis" (p. 15). This appropriately bite-sized statement aptly summarizes the idea behind the practice known as "habit stacking," which involves layering small habits on top of one another, one at a time, to produce enduring results.

In education, teachers place a lot of understandable emphasis on finding effective ways to motivate students. Extrinsic motivators such as grades and reward systems do not generally have a profound or lasting impact on performance, and many students are not at all moved by such measures, even in the shorter term. Therefore, the phrase "intrinsic motivation" has come to express a coveted goal in teaching as we search for the key to unlocking a deeper sense of value for learning in our students.

The problem is that even when teachers discover how to access intrinsic drive in students, it can be just as transient as extrinsic motivation. Suppose, for example, that a student is truly interested in becoming a better writer because she wants to be a journalist. Historically, she is high-performing and engaged in class. However, because of various life stressors and obstacles, she has become discouraged and begins to lag in her schoolwork, including her writing assignments. Her teachers observe this change and try to encourage her to recover her drive, but they are otherwise at a loss about what to do.

This kind of situation is precisely where habits outdo motivation and are therefore a far more useful avenue to explore in teaching and learning. As Clear (2018) points out, "You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems" (p. 27). When we continuously rely on motivation to succeed, we are setting ourselves up for failure because it is too unreliable a factor in ultimate success. However, when we build careful habits over time, they become nearly automatic and are therefore much more effective.

To illustrate this idea, consider a parent who wants to instill healthier eating habits in his children. Removing all processed snack foods overnight will likely result in an uprising, and no change will occur. However, a more measured approach could achieve this parent's goals gradually and effectively. Perhaps for one week, he might experiment with putting a fruit and vegetable plate on the table for the kids to snack on as he subtly drags his feet to get dinner on the table. With ready access to a choice of fresh produce, the children are likely to start picking at the plate within that first week. Then, the parent might put healthier snack choices in places within easy sight and reach of smaller bodies and push the less ideal choices a bit further out of the way. The subtle friction that occurs from the change in access would help the children automatically select whatever is more easily available. As the weeks progress, this parent can continue to layer on similar moves to change his children's dietary habits in ways that are as intentional as they are lasting.

In education, a similar approach yields equally desired results. In the earlier example of the writing student who lost her motivation, she might be able to continue producing work if her teacher has implemented daily

writing routines that do not require inspiration or even too much brain power. Instead, the goal behind such habits would be to write anything at all, with editing occurring later. With this "low floor, high ceiling" approach, students begin in accessible places and then move up toward the expected higher standard rather than constantly feeling as though they must do their best immediately and on demand.

With habit stacking, small and mighty overrides big shifts in behavior. Clear (2018) affirms, "Too often, we convince ourselves that massive success requires massive action" (p. 15). Instead, it is the smaller, daily habits that we engage in without much thought that produce desired results. Throughout this book, tools and strategies are shared that embrace this bite-sized approach to reaching the goal of consistent success with students. More than huge moves that are likely to cause disruption rather than meaningful change, the tiny details that influence teaching and learning have far greater importance and impact.

Brevity

Nearly every day, many people feel like they're drowning in a rising tide of too much information. Thanks to the ubiquitous presence of connectivity via smartphones, smartwatches, and other forms of technology, life is dominated by the constant inundation of news, communications, and tasks. It's no wonder that health and wellness experts recommend that people limit time with devices and screens, and it's equally understandable that it's a struggle to let go of the addictive accessibility.

In addition to the mental fatigue that results from constantly being in the loop, teachers deal with another layer of exhaustion: the fact that at work, being in front of students requires mentally or physically (and often both) keeping our brains and bodies set to the "on" switch. That is why, when new district or school initiatives are laid out in front of teaching staff, no matter how helpful or valid they may be, the first reaction is almost always a jaded "Please don't give us another thing to do."

As author and marketing expert Joseph McCormack (2014) writes in *Brief: Make a Bigger Impact by Saying Less,* "The new brutal reality is that people are drowning in information. It floods them everywhere they go" (p. 14). If leaders do not step up and become more aware of this

problem, McCormack argues, they will not be able to help their employees maintain focus on the most important priorities. Therefore, he says, change depends on action: "You have to put it in a smaller package and make it easier to consume and digest. You must boil it down and get to the point quickly, or be forgotten" (p. 22).

For educators, actively practicing brevity can be challenging. So much pressure exists to "cover" a curriculum, creating the false impression that speed is more important than depth of understanding. Furthermore, every school day includes unpredictable situations that have to be quickly processed and handled, ideally in order of urgency and importance. When so much is flying at a person's head at once, figuring out how to get to the point feels like a nice idea that cannot possibly work in reality.

However, for the sake of both learning and well-being, taking a pause in all but the most dire situations is a habit that leads to more effective practice. Suppose that on a challenging day with students, a mental to-do list keeps threatening a teacher's inner sense of calm with the despairing thought that nothing can be accomplished within the ideal time frame. In such instances, it is worth taking a few minutes after class to write out the list items that are most worrisome and then put a star next to the ones that are truly urgent. In most cases, it may feel uncomfortable to push many actions on that list to another time, but not impossible. Getting to the point of what needs to be done creates a far more tenable situation. In the rare event that all the items are still somehow urgent, then deeper questions must be asked about how much work is being externally imposed upon the teacher and how much involves a more intrinsic level of choice and a potential need to change behavior.

Ultimately, cutting down the scope of practice on any given day has the opposite effect of what people assume will happen. Rather than making anyone less attentive or aware, applying more focus to fewer tasks creates a heightened level of efficacy. Just as weightlifters benefit more from completing five challenging bicep curls than by pushing too far, injuring themselves and ruining their form by doing 10 repetitions, embracing less to accomplish more holds great value in classrooms, for both teacher pedagogy and student growth.

Less Is More

"I'm never going to get through this," my friend said to me one day as we sat at a table together, grading papers.

"What's that?" I asked him.

In response, he showed me something I'd seen before and been privately concerned about: a to-do list that stretched several notebook pages long, marked up with asterisks and crowded notes in the margin. "It's impossible," he said, stating what was obvious. "I have at least 200 essays sitting on my desk right now that I collected weeks ago, and there are so many other assignments I'm also trying to grade. There's no way to catch up."

I wasn't sure if my colleague was asking for advice or just venting, but his frustration level was high enough that I wanted to help. "How many assignments do you typically give students each week?" I asked.

Without a word, he turned his laptop around so that I could see the student gradebook. As I looked, I thought at first that my eyes were deceiving me. We were only three weeks into the quarter, but there were enough entries on the screen to represent an entire marking period's worth of work. "How many assignments is that?" I asked.

"Let me see," he said, squinting. "Looks like 36 in total. And I've only graded about half of those, maybe a little less. Lots of blank spots in there."

Leaning in, I tried to get a firmer understanding of what was represented in the gradebook. "So you have some quizzes, a bunch of small activities, three essays, and two projects. What are the rest of these? What does 'GMP' stand for?"

"Oh," he said, "that's grammar and mechanics practice. We do those every day, just for a few minutes at the start of class."

"And you grade every single one?"

"That's the idea," he said. "I'm not saying it happens."

"The way I look at it, teaching is overwhelming enough. We don't need to up the ante. In my mind, it's not about the number of assignments we give or how many we grade. It's about how kids are spending their time. Depth over breadth."

"I get that concept," he said, "but I've never understood what it looks like in reality."

Looking at his pile of papers, his to-do list, and the gradebook once more, it dawned on me that to tell my friend to just stop doing so much was never going to be feasible. Instead, he would need to take some baby steps toward getting more out of doing less.

"Do you want suggestions?" I asked. "Or maybe you want me to drop it? Either is fine; I promise I won't be offended."

"No, please," he said, "I'll take any advice."

"Maybe you can start small with just one little action. What gives you the most stress?"

Without hesitation he said, "My grading, definitely."

"OK," I said, "then the priority should be to get it more under control. Can you divide the pile into things that have to be graded without delay and assignments that might be able to wait or that are more expendable?"

"Maybe," he said, "but I would feel bad about that. The kids gave me their work with the expectation that I would grade it."

"Totally get it, but is it possible that trying to get it all done in a rush is doing them a disservice, rather than taking time to grade what's really important with more time and care?"

He tilted his head to one side, considering. "I don't know."

"Generally," I said, "kids aren't so much into us grading a ton of work. It's more that they want quick and clear feedback so that they can do well. We can't assess that way if we're overworked."

"OK, I'm listening. So, how do I grade less?"

"Let's start by making some piles," I said, pointing at the stack.

To make a long story short, my friend and I worked for several months on gradually paring down his grading, from assigning less (a big challenge for someone who was used to partially using grading as a behavior management technique) to being more intentional about which assignments would be given only feedback and which would also include grades. At first it was difficult for him to let go of the habits that were trapping him in a ceaseless treadmill of work, but once he started seeing the benefits of another way, he was sold on the change.

As McCormack (2014) shares, "When you are throwing things out, it may be hard to decide what goes—but keep in mind what people will really care about" (p. 36). Helping my friend manage a grading pile that had gotten far out of hand involved some difficult decisions. However, starting the ball rolling by doing less to achieve more saved his sanity—and perhaps his longevity in teaching. Similarly, teachers who seek to be effective at a demanding job that undergoes constant shifts must become comfortable with agility. Being nimble with instructional practice is an essential step in determining what is serving students and ourselves, and what might need to be jettisoned.

Habit stacking, brevity, and the idea that less is more all add up to one bigger idea: small actions are mighty, and they produce results. In teaching, the details matter. To that end, the coming chapters are filled with strategies for applying small and mighty moves to teaching practice before, during, and after instruction, as well as the spaces in between when well-being and belonging become paramount to long-term success. Every figure and tool is designed for immediate, practical application in the classroom.

To get the most out of this book, listening to your inner teaching voice is paramount. Certain ideas will fit more naturally into your existing practice, whereas others require more of a stretch. Starting with what is more familiar and gradually bridging toward new methods exemplifies the central message of this book: take one tiny aspect of practice, make an equally tiny change, and repeat. Keep going and keep changing. Only then will both you and your students get to experience the joy of what is truly possible in an ideal classroom space.

PART

I

BEFORE INSTRUCTION

Preparing for instruction encompasses so much of a teacher's work. In fact, one might argue that the lion's share of what any instructional expert does occurs outside the classroom. The complexity of what goes into mindset, collaboration, and planning for instruction is intimidating at the outset. Just one little detail has the power to completely change the trajectory of what occurs. However, the beauty of teaching is that once everyone enters the classroom, nothing is set in stone. When teachers have effective lesson planning habits that strengthen instructional outcomes, we can embrace both successes and areas for growth with the knowledge that our most important collaborators—students themselves—are right there with us.

Beliefs and Philosophies

Lyla heads down the hall toward her classroom, dreading the upcoming class period. Students are supposed to be making presentations, but based on how keyed up they've been, she doubts anyone is ready. Bracing herself for a rough hour ahead, Lyla enters the room.

What she encounters over the next several minutes hardly comes as a surprise. Kids filter in both before and after the bell rings, making too much noise and causing disruption as they greet one another with enthusiasm. It takes Lyla almost 10 minutes to quiet everyone down, and even then, students are restless.

"As you know, we're doing our presentations today," she starts.

Before she can say another word, a girl near the front interrupts her. "What? You never told us that!"

Lyla can feel her face growing hot. "I absolutely did," she says, struggling to keep her voice even. "Quite a few times, actually, both verbally and in writing. This should not come as a surprise to anyone."

A cacophony of objections drowns out her voice as the class once more devolves into chaos. As the noise intensifies past an acceptable volume, Lyla happens to make eye contact with one of her more diligent students, a quieter boy who always does his homework. He is sitting at his desk, his materials ready, waiting to see what will happen next. His face mirrors her feelings, the frustration evident.

I bet he wishes he were in a better class, *Lyla thinks with resentment.* I wish I were, too.

The Insidiousness of Belief

Teachers have enormous influence in the classroom, and their perceptions of students (both individually and collectively) can make all the difference in how learning takes place. In 1965, researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted a study to examine the impact of labeling on student performance. They published their findings in an article entitled "Pygmalion in the Classroom" (1968), which examined the results of a social experiment. The study began with the researchers "telling teachers that certain children could be expected to be 'growth spurters,' based on the students' results on the Harvard Test of Inflected Acquisition. In point of fact, the test was nonexistent and those children [so] designated were chosen at random" (p. 16). When the study concluded, the designated students had performed better overall than their peers in the control group, demonstrating that expectation is more powerful than reality. To put it plainly, teachers developed expectations that amounted to such a strong bias that even though the entire narrative of higher achievement was false, the end results reflected the beliefs teachers held about their students.

Although the 1965 study uncovers the insidiousness of belief in a way that feels shocking, the results are hardly surprising. It is not human nature to question assumptions that have been held as truths for a long time. Over the years, for example, I have coached many teachers who are hesitant to teach advanced placement courses because they perceive that they (the teachers, not the students) are not skilled enough to handle a course that is seen as highly challenging. Each time I have encountered this hesitation, my response is that the rigor of the class refers to *student e*xperience. Teachers are certified in their content areas and are therefore knowledgeable. However, the perception of the attributes of a so-called "AP teacher" becomes overblown and stereotyped to the point that qualified adults balk at teaching the class. In this case, teachers don't just harbor mistaken beliefs about students; they also apply similar biases to themselves.

The premises that teachers believe to be true about themselves can be damaging, but not as much as the assumptions they may hold about

students. Ideas that are mistakenly seen as innocuous can contain more harmful and perhaps even racist meanings that undermine helping kids learn and grow. Figure 1.1 shares examples of some common words or phrases that crop up frequently in conversations about kids, offers an interpretation of what they actually mean, and presents an alternative.

Many of the phrases in Figure 1.1 are ubiquitous in education. So many kids can think of times when a teacher told them that they weren't

Figure 1.1. Insidious Phrases

Helpful Habit: *Reframe your mindset to create more trusting and equitable outcomes.*		
What People Say	**What People Mean**	**Reframing the Phrase**
"Not working up to full potential"	Any future progress (or lack thereof) is solely the student's responsibility.	"You are still growing in [insert specific area for focus here]."
"Doesn't know enough English"	Language learners are unable to make progress. (Deficit belief)	"Here are some additional words and visuals to help you read this passage."
"Quiet kid"	Nothing can be done to draw out or engage the student.	"How can I make this class a more comfortable experience for everyone?"
"Parents don't care about school."	A specific culture or economic group lacks certain values. (Biased assumption)	"What is the best way to get in touch with your family? What time of day is most convenient for them?"
"Behavior problem"	Misbehavior and lack of compliance are the main or only reasons why some students do poorly in class.	"What support can be provided to this student to increase engagement?"
"Kids can't/won't [fill in the blank]."	There is little to no likelihood that the students in question can make progress.	"Everyone can make progress with effort."
"Not good at"	What students can achieve is fixed and not subject to change.	"Growth is a process."
Referring to students as "high," "low," "quick," "slow"	Students have a fixed capacity for growth.	"This student needs scaffolding or extension with [insert specific skill here]."

working up to "full potential." That may seem to be a well-intentioned observation, but it puts the responsibility for growth squarely with a child who is often confused and does not know what is wrong or what this end goal of "full potential" looks like. In these situations, teachers usually speak to a level of visible apathy, but more is probably happening that they cannot easily see. Either way, even students who purposely undermine their own progress deserve support. We never want to say anything that gives them the subtle impression that their teachers have given up.

Along similar lines, other phrases in Figure 1.1 ("quiet kid" or "behavior problem") represent assumptions about students that are usually not grounded in any objective data. So-called "quiet" kids are probably loud enough at home but uncomfortable in a classroom setting that for whatever reason doesn't validate their needs. A negatively labeled "behavior problem" may be trying to engage but struggles to do so appropriately. Regardless of whether adults internally or externally express damaging labels, kids are observant. They will pick up on what teachers think of them, and they will either raise or lower their performance to meet expectations.

Small but mighty changes to language can make a huge difference. For example, a knee-jerk label for children who struggle to learn might be the word *low,* but instead, thinking precisely about the obstacles each kid encounters will identify a specific area of need that removes a damaging blanket stereotype. Then, instead of saying that a child is "low," the language is more like "This student needs additional scaffolds in vocabulary comprehension to meet the grade-level standard."

Having thoughts that act as roadblocks to student success reflects habitual thinking; it is imperative to interrupt those thoughts and redirect perspectives toward a better path forward. Awareness of inner bias is a good start, but translating good intentions to specific action is the next step. It is so powerful for students to see concrete evidence that teachers believe in their capacity to learn, which can only happen when hidden barriers to productive change are removed.

From Thought to Action: Hidden Barriers

Over time, habits form that become subversive barriers to growth for both teachers and students. For example, a teacher might think that random or "cold" calling is the best way to spot-check what kids know, when in fact the practice acts as a "gotcha" that promotes inequity as only certain kids are called on and singled out for praise or chastisement. Many teachers unwittingly hold fast to habits that perpetuate damaging outcomes, and this behavior is rooted in belief systems that have gone unchallenged for far too long.

Inner biases may control far too much of what people project externally, but people have the power to change with increased self-awareness. To receive the maximum benefits of reflection, it is important to recognize certain pervasive myths that have long been held up as norms but that are nonetheless unacceptable to continue perpetuating. Figure 1.2

Figure 1.2. Flipping the Myth

Helpful Habit: *Change perspective on long-held deficit-mindset beliefs.*	
The Myth	**The Flip**
Kids are bored and don't want to do anything.	All students have interests and want to leave their mark on the world.
Those who can't, teach.	Teaching is highly complex work that requires skill, insight, and intelligence.
Disadvantaged or "highly impacted" students don't prioritize learning.	Every student we teach wants to do well and be successful.
Kids won't learn unless they are entertained.	Engagement and entertainment are not the same. Engaged students will learn.
Teaching is a calling. You either have it or you don't.	Success in teaching is not a fixed point. Everyone can learn and grow.
Language learners do not have the necessary foundation for literacy.	Students who are developing fluency have knowledge to inform literacy.
We are fighting a losing battle with technology.	Education technology can be helpful if used appropriately and with discernment.
School isn't for everyone.	All students can achieve high academic outcomes if they are validated.

provides examples of beliefs that appear regularly in discussions around teaching and learning, and it provides a "flip" to reframe harmful tenets into far more nuanced, helpful ideas.

The myths presented in Figure 1.2 are not always ill-intentioned, though some are more overtly offensive than others ("Those who can't, teach" comes to mind). Some ideas might even be seen as helpful to children. For example, someone saying that "school isn't for everyone" could wish to express that not everyone gets excited about academic subjects and that teachers should try to tap into all student interests, scholarly or not. However, that idea is too often provided as an easy out for students who are not making progress. When adults say that not everyone benefits from a formal education, they are sending a clear message to kids: *My teacher thinks I'm not smart enough to do well in school.* More often than not, these damaging messages are sent disproportionately to students of color.

Instead, translating thought to action produces far more desirable results. For example, the conviction that all students have interests of their own connects directly to targeted planning for instruction that involves all learners. Suppose a class is reading a book that is not necessarily a favorite with all students, such as John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath.* A teacher who prepares for instruction with the lens of uncovering connections that spur interest can pull from related topics that come out of the Dust Bowl period, such as climate change, extreme poverty, or societal exclusion, to get at concepts that connect more obviously to relevant student experience. Even if students cannot see themselves in the characters that course materials present, the teacher can allow them to explore alternate stories in shorter texts or media from related content that is more appealing.

To "habit stack" a mindset that is grounded in removing barriers to success, consider implementing these small steps, one by one:

1. Think about promoting equity in the classroom by exploring varied modalities for encouraging student participation (such as writing ideas on sticky notes and putting them on the walls for everyone to look at) in addition to the more traditionally requested vocal contributions.
2. Pick a strategy that best fits your current teaching style and will work most seamlessly into current instructional planning.

3. Select one day to experiment with the strategy.
4. After the lesson, reflect upon how student involvement changed or stayed constant.
5. Determine next steps, such as how to gather concrete data that will show the effect of consistent action over time.

In essence, when teachers do not accept the fundamentally flawed fallacy that students are "bored" with their learning but believe that students can engage if the circumstances allow for added involvement, the results are powerful as thoughts translate to visible differences in teaching and learning. Even better, the instructional changes that take place when flawed norms are disrupted need not be huge. Rather, it is the smaller, incremental moves to discover who students are that make the most impact.

Counteracting Complacency

Whose job is it to ensure that broken practices are challenged and then undone? Students fall victim to systems that adults perpetuate, and it is not a child's job to fix a damaged norm. Rather, teachers must challenge their own processes and practices to achieve better results.

To that end, the self-assessment "Toolbox Timesaver" featured in Figure 1.3 provides a details-driven method for looking at areas of complacency in order to reflect and take action. The process of determining where teachers can become "unstuck" acts as a funnel of sorts. An individual might check five or six boxes in the self-assessment but then must gradually narrow the focus of growth to one single goal. Furthermore, the idea behind this tool is not to make huge, sweeping changes to practice. Rather, by selecting a small, actionable next step, the teacher who completes this process is far more likely to build successful habits.

When completing Figure 1.3, the idea is for teachers to focus thinking on small, doable changes to counteract complacency. Some actions require long-range planning for adaptive change, and attempts to accomplish them quickly are frustrating; but shorter "Band-Aid solutions" are possible for some goals and can make a significant difference

Figure 1.3. Toolbox Timesaver: Am I Stuck? Self-Assessment and Action Plan

Helpful Habit: *Zoom in on where your practice could use the most adjustment.*

Directions: Use the following checklist to determine where you might be "stuck" in your practice or perspective.

- □ *Classroom management*—Am I concerned about student behavior?
- □ *Student engagement*—Do students show interest in my class?
- □ *Collaborative planning*—Is my practice enriched by collaborating with others?
- □ *Ideas and inspiration*—Do I feel excitement and creativity when I plan instruction?
- □ *Grading and feedback*—Am I able to provide timely responses to students?
- □ *Workload*—Are my structures for managing workload effective?
- □ *Connections with colleagues*—Do I have a community of colleagues to rely upon?
- □ *Professional learning*—Am I given the opportunity to learn about what interests me?
- □ *General satisfaction*—Do I find fulfillment from being a teacher?

Reflection

1. Of the items you checked, pick two or three that most interfere with your putting beliefs into action. _____
2. Think about the items you selected. Which one bothers you the most or interferes with your professional life to the highest degree? _____ _____
3. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being the highest), how much control do you feel you have over the one thing you selected as being the biggest problem? _____

Action

In the following table, identify what you can do immediately to take action and what might take more time. Use the example as a guide.

Example: Classroom management

Do Now	**Wait**
• Ask for help from a colleague who has strong management skills. • Create a different seating arrangement for challenging classes. • Observe a class that is well-managed. • Set up an incentive system for behavior.	• Look for a summer course or PD on classroom management. • Gather articles/books to read. • Make a plan for the first week of school next year that targets potential management minefields. • Try to find a colleague who can act as a coach. • Think about classroom setup.
Do Now • • • •	**Wait** • • • •

as little habits are stacked on top of one another. For example, a teacher who wants to focus on workload can stack the following habits:

1. Make a list of every task that must be completed on the following day.
2. Rank the tasks in terms of priority by marking them *A, B,* and *C*. An *A* is urgent, a *B* is not critical yet but will become so, and a *C* is more of a long-term goal.
3. Look carefully at the *A* items. Think about how many of them are truly urgent, as well as which tasks might be the most dreaded and therefore difficult to manage.
4. Determine the best approach for managing the *A* workload and experiment with this approach.
5. Revisit this process again a week later to analyze what worked, what did not, and how the other categories (*B* and *C*) might be misconstrued, out of your control, or getting in the way of progress.
6. Think about how to make workload items consistently transparent and manageable, given the limitations related to personal and professional schedules.

Ultimately, although external factors can limit student progress, it is the job of teachers to determine what they can influence, control, and change for the better. By increasing awareness of some of the more accepted systems that are not serving students or even teachers' own professional growth, creating more functional methods is well within reach. Part of evolving as an educator requires a continued questioning of the beliefs and philosophies that inspired us to enter the profession, as well as making a profound commitment to ensuring that intention becomes action.

A New Way Forward

Lyla is excited. After the fiasco several weeks ago when students weren't ready to make their presentations, she went home and did some serious thinking. She might have been angry at first that nearly the entire class didn't seem to care about being prepared, but when she cooled off, it occurred to her that part of the issue might be stemming from the way she designs her instruction.

With that in mind, Lyla found one of the department veterans sitting alone at lunch the next day and decided to take advantage of the opportunity. "Can I talk to you?"

"Of course," Ronnie said, making space for Lyla.

Lyla explained what had happened in class and how frustrated she had become. Ronnie asked, "What would you change about your teaching if you could?"

"I've never thought about that," Lyla said, a little surprised. "But I should have. Classroom management, probably. The kids always get the better of me and disrupt everything."

"Anything else?"

"Well, I guess if I had more control of the class, I'd want the kids to be more engaged. Then they probably wouldn't act out as much."

Ronnie nodded. "That makes sense. So then if you had to pick something to do that gave you the most bang for your buck, what would it be?"

After a moment of thought, Lyla had an idea. "I gave the kids presentation topics and guidelines and never really provided any kind of choice. Would it help if I did it differently next time to give them more say?"

"It could," Ronnie said, "but nothing happens overnight. Figure out what kids can have more leeway with and what is nonnegotiable. And be honest about your own mistakes and wanting them to be interested in class. Maybe come up with some steps, like getting their ideas before designing your next project and then asking them for help in very specific ways."

Lyla promised to think about it, and she spent a lot of time crafting a different process for the presentations in the next unit. In the following weeks, although her class continued to be disruptive at times and she would need to keep figuring that part out, students had been much more excited overall to prepare for this project. Now she knows that they will be making stronger presentations because of the consistent work that groups have done together and because she has seen the drafts and steps that students created for her approval before moving forward. Lyla knows that she still has a long way to go as a teacher, but at least she's a little bit closer to where she wants to be.

As conventional wisdom goes, the first step to making a change is realizing that a current state of being isn't working as well as it could. For example, Lyla has learned that building better habits gets her closer

to her professional goals. Although people may be inclined to think that dramatic steps are necessary to begin the process of evolving, incremental shifts are usually far more effective and well received than seismic, more noticeable action.

Being a teacher is challenging work, and it can be tempting to give way to all-or-nothing thinking patterns that place individuals into broad categories or to make sweeping generalizations about teaching and learning in a state of frustration. To check that urge, it helps to realign beliefs in a reasonable, moderate way to ensure that good intentions equal responsive action. The brainstorming process shown in Figure 1.4 provides a quick but profound way for teachers to revisit their reason for teaching, otherwise known as their "It." By narrowing down their initial reason for entering education to one word, the focus required to identify an "It" is far more streamlined.

Narrowing down an education philosophy to one tiny detail—in this case, the "It" of our beliefs—helps us focus on what matters. In Figure 1.4, the final step of the process advises teachers to post their "It" in a place where it cannot be forgotten. The rationale for that is based on the inner workings of human nature. Although people may have excellent intentions, it can be hard to hold themselves accountable for matching an internal desire to an external response. Suppose that a teacher narrows down her one word and writes "Hope" on a sheet of paper. The meaning might not be clear to any outside observer, but this individual knows that her "It" is grounded in the optimistic vision that future generations

Figure 1.4. Brainstorming My "It"

Helpful Habit: *Remember the reason you got into teaching and the impact you wish to have.*

Most of us have an "It"—a reason we decided to become educators. Over time, it may become harder to identify just one thing that acts as a top priority. To focus your thinking, use the following brainstorming process:

1. Why did you get into education initially? Have your reasons for staying in the profession remained the same or evolved over time?
2. Keeping in mind your response to the first question, make a list of one-word reasons that being a teacher matters to you.
3. If you had to share just one of those words with someone else who did not know much about your work, which would you pick, and why?
4. Using a blank sheet of paper, write the one word you selected in large letters at the top. If desired, place some bullet points underneath that express the gist of your "It."
5. If desired, post your "It" in a workspace that you can easily see.

will lead the world to a better state. As such, this teacher moves through the following habits to give her actions more transparent meaning:

1. She puts her word on the wall to be more mindful of how she can express this "It" to her students through instructional methodology and to consider where she might be falling short.
2. Once a week, the teacher writes down one item that has given her hope over the last several days.
3. The teacher builds her "one item" list for several months so that it becomes a cumulative collection related to her "It."
4. Each semester, the teacher resolves to reexamine this word, change it if necessary, or continue keeping it at the forefront of her focus for another few months.

On the worst days, the actions that stem from the word *hope* can remind her that she has a larger purpose. On better days, it can inspire her to keep working toward an endeavor that she cares about deeply.

Changing a mindset can be a difficult process, especially if beliefs are deeply embedded into consciousness beyond full awareness. However, getting into the habit of challenging assumptions that have always been held up as irrevocable truths is a key step in undoing much of the damage that affects everyone in a school building when systems that enforce inequitable norms are allowed to flourish. Instead, taking small but powerful steps to dismantle a dysfunctional status-quo mindset can build habits that make way for a far more open path forward.

Tiny Teaching Tips: Beliefs and Philosophies

"When a colleague says something that exposes a deficit mindset belief, I like to ask a question rather than confront it with a statement. If I challenge them to repeat what they said or elaborate, they rarely double down. And if they do, then I feel comfortable being more direct."

—5th grade teacher

"On some very good day, make a list of reasons you love teaching. Hang it behind your desk. On another day, you'll need to read it."

—Ryan Love, high school English teacher

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