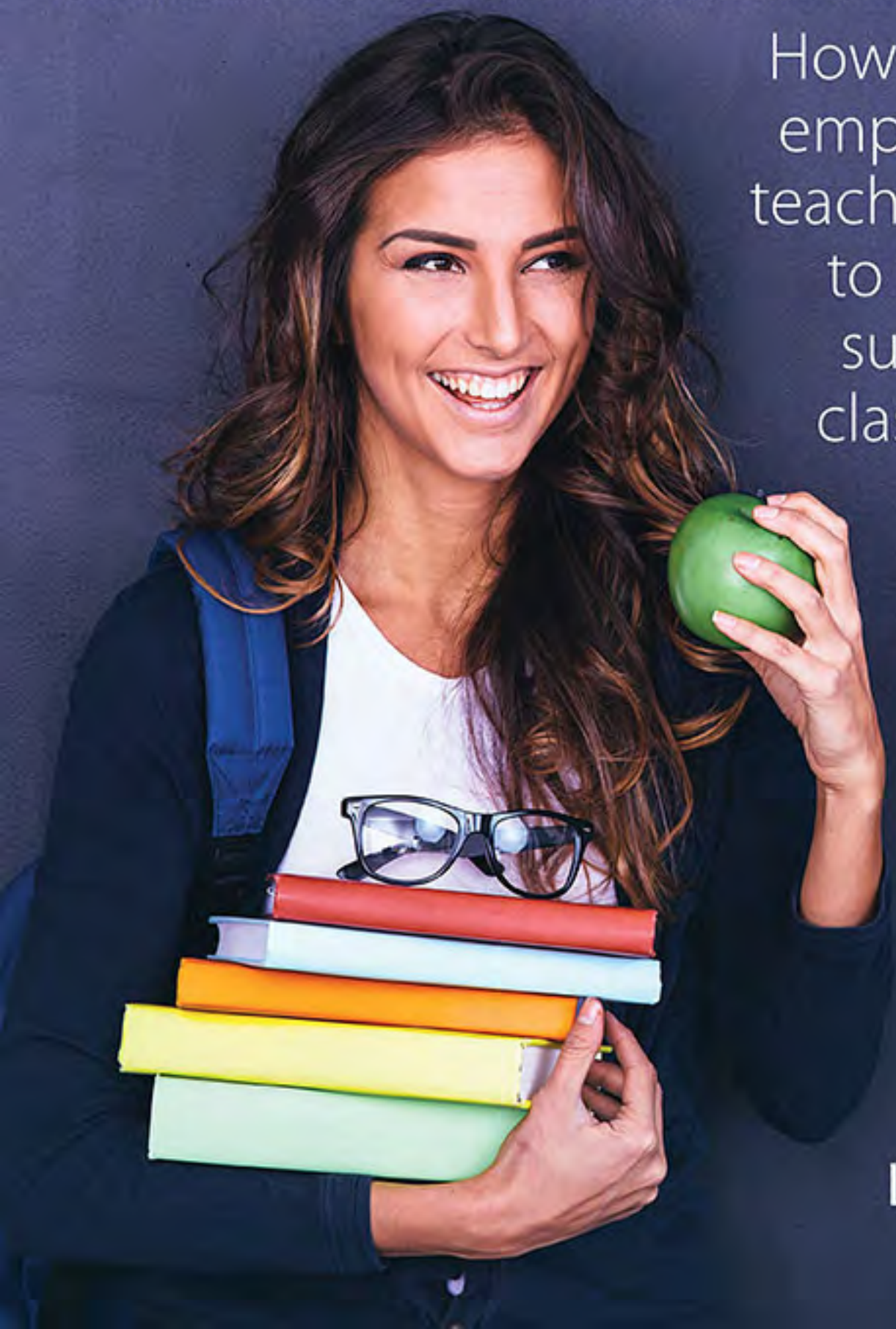


TEACHING WELL

How healthy,
empowered
teachers lead
to thriving,
successful
classrooms



Lisa Bush

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to thriving, successful classrooms

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Pembroke Publishers Limited

To Enrique

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The Need for Change

Listen to Reason

Experienced teacher Dawn Vaessen was fortunate. Years ago, during her first year of teaching, her principal kicked her out of school. You see, Vaessen was under the impression that the later she stayed at school, the better a teacher she was. And so she would often stay in her classroom well into the dark hours of the evening planning, marking, and preparing for the next day. Until an administrator put an end to it.

One afternoon at 4:00 pm her principal walked into the classroom and told Vaessen to go home. She explains, “My first year teaching my principal would say to me, ‘No. You have to leave school. You have to have time for you. You need an escape and you can’t take these kids home with you.’” The principal went on to explain that the next morning Vaessen needed to be back in the classroom and it needed to be *her* standing there. Not an empty vessel. Not a reflection of the students. But a person with her own interests, passions, and identity. That meant having an identity that is separate from school. Vaessen concludes, “She told me to leave school by 4:00 pm. And that is probably the best thing that anyone has done for me in my career.”

Dawn Vaessen went on to become a master gardener, to write and publish a book on gardening, and to raise two beautiful daughters as a single parent. These are things that would have been nearly impossible to achieve if she had let school consume her.

I, too, was fortunate. My first year of teaching I received advice from an experienced teacher. She told me, “Lisa, there will always be work to do in your classroom. The work for teachers does not end. But at some point, you have to close the door and walk away from your classroom. Leave the work behind. You need to take care of yourself and not let the work consume you.” That uber-wise teacher was also my mother. However, unlike Vaessen, I completely ignored the advice.

In 2001, during my first year teaching Art in an extremely challenging public middle school in the United States, I was working around the clock. I made no

attempt at healthy decompression in my personal life. The consequences were dire. It took months to recover with family support, medication, and professional guidance. I almost left teaching forever. However, in time, I found my way back into the Art classroom with wellness tucked close to my heart. I kept it there until I moved to Canada to work as a Language Arts teacher in a congregated gifted program. In a new country, teaching a new subject in a highly competitive school, I felt the need to prove myself. And in my haste to prove myself as an “excellent” teacher, I let my wellness go again.

From Surviving to Thriving

As far as I can tell, teachers are working around the clock predominantly for two reasons:

1. We are devoted, passionate educators and so we throw ourselves into our work, giving our students and our job 150%—and feel guilty with anything less. We view working long hours as evidence of our devotion to teaching.
2. We have too many expectations put on us (planning, marking, progress reports, parent communication, documentation, preparation for standardized testing, after-school activities), and we don’t know how to reduce our workload. We don’t *want* to work long hours. We don’t care one bit about ego, but we do not see any way around it.

And for many of us, it is a combination of the two.

Teacher Lorelie Haydt recently shared with me the idea that many excellent and devoted teachers put unrealistically high expectations on themselves. Haydt states, “I think teachers have several things that we mistakenly wear as a badge of honor. If I am not at school until all hours of the night working, I am not a good teacher. If I do not go home and worry about my students, I am not a good teacher...I think it is almost an ego thing.”

I laughed when Haydt said this because as a Language Arts teacher I had been collecting every invisible badge of honor possible. I saw late nights marking, working weekends, and putting neatly inked grades in my gradebook as badges of honor. I saw a strictly run classroom with perfectly constructed assignments as badges of honor. I saw being the expert in the classroom, always prepared, always with an answer, as a badge of honor. I saw sacrificing my own physical and mental health and putting my own interests aside all as badges of honor that I could use as proof of my stellar devotion to teaching and to my students. And for a while, it worked.

On a good day, magic happened in my classroom. I felt a bit like a sorceress waving her magic wand in the air and casting my students under a golden spell to create. The hours I spent in the Language Arts classroom were frequently the happiest part of my day.

Although I would like to imagine myself as the unwavering Professor McGonagall keeping Hogwarts meticulously run with my sharp mind and keen wand abilities, it was not the case. I was much more like the well-meaning but overly enthusiastic British cartoon character Nanny Plum, who inadvertently flooded the Sea of Tranquility with jelly from her magical picnic basket. Like Nanny Plum, I had not figured out how to temper my magic spells. And so I would request, “Write an essay!” And POOF! A towering pile of essays would materialize on my desk. I would say, “Write a book reflection!” And POOF! Two boxes of

book reflections would appear. “Create a project!” And POOF! Suddenly every available surface of my classroom was covered by beautifully created and unique projects. All waiting to be assessed. I was drowning under a pile of assignments, and I could not find my way out.

After a particularly challenging school year, in an attempt to justify or possibly quantify my exhaustion, I added up every grade in my gradebook. Seeing as how I detest this type of tedious numeric activity, I can only assume I was procrastinating the writing of my year-end report card comments. After I counted every assignment for every student that I had marked for the year, I was appalled. Guess how many there were? Three-thousand-four-hundred-and-thirty-three assessments for one year.

Yup, that’s 3,433 assessments for *one year!*

A few of the assignments were multiple-choice or basic quizzes, but because I teach Language Arts, the majority of them were far more complex and time intensive to assess. And because many of the classes were part of a congregated gifted program where overachieving tendencies run rampant among students, it was not unusual for me to receive a 17-page *Divergent* fan fiction short story to grade or, on one notable occasion, a 76-page novella about a time travelling knight.

Yet I went along with it. At this point in the game, the long working hours were no longer an ego thing (I would have willingly turned in my badges for a better-balanced life). I was working the long hours because I did not know any other way to stay on top of my assessment and planning. Dumbing down my teaching or turning to worksheets or multiple-choice assessments was not an option. I did not want to compromise the creative, individualistic spirit of my classroom. So for years, I made it work. Every Friday I lugged my bag home full of assignments to be marked. I brought home boxes (plural) of journals, independent reading assignments, and stories to mark over winter or spring “break.” I spent late nights and early mornings filled with one of two emotions. 1. Guilt for not marking whatever assignment was currently piled on my desk. Or 2. Frustration when marking my students’ work, which was all too often hastily composed and rushed in order to meet my imposed deadline.

In my quest to simply survive I had given up the things in my life that inspired me, that instilled a sense of passion in me. In my previous life, before studying the works of Jacqueline Woodson or S.E. Hinton with my students, I was studying the works of Alice Neel and Frieda Kahlo in my studio. I was an actively practicing visual artist and Art teacher. When I was an Art teacher I had a home studio. I usually had one or more paintings in progress waiting for me when I returned home for work. Occasionally I would receive a commission or have a small showing of my work.

When I became a Language Arts teacher, the wooden easel gathered dust until I folded it up and placed it, along with my well-worn shoebox full of tubes of paint, in a corner of the basement. I then converted my painting studio into a home office—it seemed a more practical use of space. I also packed up my social life, my time with my husband, and a large chunk of my sanity. I had no time for them either. I was not living a healthy life on any level. In regard to my personal well-being, September through June was a time of survival. The summer was a physical, emotional, and mental recovery period. This dysfunctional relationship between myself, my students’ assignments, and my workload continued until it could continue no more: my husband and I decided to start a family. With a child

Ask Yourself:

- What have I “packed up” from my previous life due to my marking or workload?
- What hobbies or activities would I like to “unpack” and incorporate back into my life?

on the way, I needed a change. As a teacher, and soon-to-be mom, I wanted to do better than survive. I wanted to flourish. I wanted to thrive.

Embrace Change

When I became pregnant with my first child, my energy levels plummeted. I felt that at any moment during the day I could put my face down on my hard, cluttered desk and fall into a drool-worthy sleep under the glare of the classroom's fluorescent lights. Just making it through the school day was an Olympic-level task. Trying to get myself out of bed in the morning was a Herculean task that I felt deserved a medal (for the record, I am still waiting for that medal). Staying up late into the night, trying to keep on top of marking was an impossibility. Heck, getting my shoes on without assistance was an impossibility.

During this time, I became so frustrated with my marking load, I not only wanted to leave teaching, I wanted to leave education altogether. I was too worn out to have any semblance of an ego. I was practically waving my invisible sash with years of badges sewn onto it shouting, *Take this away from me. I don't want it any longer. I want my health. I want to laugh. I want my life back!* I was torn. I could leave a career that I enjoyed or I could change everything I knew about teaching to make it something that could allow me to have a healthy lifestyle and time with my family. I knew both options were difficult, and I am glad to say that I chose the latter: I would change my approach to teaching.

Before we can take the first step toward change we have to admit a few things:

1. I need to change.
2. The way I look at learning needs to change.
3. The way I run my class needs to change.
4. In order to be the most loving, kind, compassionate, and overall brilliant teacher possible, I need a healthy life outside of school.

If we are going to be in the teaching profession for years—or decades—wellness is not a luxury. It is a basic necessity.

And we have to believe it! We have to truly want—and be willing to advocate for—a change in lifestyle. If we are going to be in the teaching profession for years—or decades—wellness is not a luxury. It is a basic necessity.

Psychologist Simone McCreary argues that we need to get rid of the idea that wellness or taking the time to take care of ourselves is indulgent. In a recent conversation, McCreary advocated for the need for wellness stating, “There is plenty of evidence that we do better in our career when we make self-care a priority, even if it feels indulgent at the time. Regular physical activity activates our neuroplasticity, which increases our creativity and focus. Exercise rejuvenates our willpower.”

Goodness knows in the teaching profession, with a class full of vulnerable ears listening to your every remark and testing your reactions, willpower is high up on the list of teachers' priorities. So not only are we more likely to have professional and compassionate commentary with our students when we practice self-care, but by taking time to take care of ourselves, chances are, we will actually get *more* done. McCreary explains that if we have a four-hour morning and we take one hour off to exercise, we might actually get *more* done than working four hours straight. If we are sitting for four hours at our desk, trying our best to be focused, creative, and productive, we might only get two hours' worth of work done because we are spinning our wheels, tired, anxious, or distracted.

Why Wellness?

We Need to Practice What We Teach

While it was easy for me to recognize the benefits of sleeping well, eating nutrient-dense food, and staying hydrated, the idea of self-care or filling my bucket was a bit more difficult for me to buy into. For years I labelled self-care as “something nice to do if you have the time, but not mandatory.” For years I ignored the advice of others and considered it a luxury. And when I finally went to a professional to manage my own stress and the stress in our family due to health issues, her response that I needed to go out with a close friend for have dinner or hire a babysitter and spend time with my husband completely baffled me. It again went back to self-care.

So if you are wondering, *How could taking the time to lose myself in a novel every night benefit my teaching? How would signing up for a yoga class or training for a half marathon make me stronger in the classroom? How would carving out the time to write poetry or work in my vegetable garden make me a more valuable co-worker?* I completely get you. I was there too.

Once I started looking for the answers, the results were more varied and more significant than you might expect. The first result being that simply, *We need to practice what we teach.* For example, if we ask our students to create, shouldn't we be creators ourselves? If we ask our students to take risks in the classroom, shouldn't we be willing to take risks in our lives outside the classroom?

Not long after I began to put my wellness as a priority, I came across the book, *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear* by Eat Pray Love author Elizabeth Gilbert. Gilbert explains that it does not matter what our age or what the outcome is, we as people have it intrinsically embedded in us to create. She points out that we have been making art for approximately 40,000 years while agriculture has only been around for 10,000 years. Therefore, humans found it more important to slap paint on cave walls than to have access to a consistent food supply. Yet even though it is engrained genetically in our DNA, that does not make the creation process any less terrifying. Gilbert writes, “Trust me, your fear will always show

up—especially when you’re trying to be inventive or innovative. Your fear will always be triggered by your creativity because creativity asks you to enter into realms of uncertain outcome, and fear *hates* uncertain outcome.”

Taking Risks

We ask our students to create a structure made out of toothpicks and hot glue. *Uncertain outcome.* We ask our students to recite a poem in front of the class. *Uncertain outcome.* We ask our students to compete in a debate. *Uncertain outcome.*

As a teacher, the uncertain outcome for my students is an adrenaline rush. The lack of knowing how my students will resolve the challenge that I have given them is one of the things that keeps me showing up day after day excited to be there. However, the uncertain outcome can be paralyzing for students.

Several years ago, my Grade 7 students were reading their original poems in front of the class. The class was selecting five students to represent them in our annual poetry slam. I was sitting in the back of the room observing. Tony, a quiet, polite student got up to present. He stood in front of the class and looked out at his audience. His expression was remarkably similar to a deer in headlights. He stood deadly still for a long moment, then unexpectedly started to jump up and down. He did a few jumping jacks, jogged in place, and then shook his arms and legs while doing rapid Lamaze-type breathing. Finally, with a relieved smile on his face, he said, “Okay, much better. I’m ready.”

I, along with the entire class, began laughing hysterically at his unexpected poetry warm-up routine. But after reflecting for a moment I was surprised. I found myself thinking, *Really, Tony, what is there to be so nervous about? You are in front of a supportive group. You are just reading a couple of poems. What’s the big deal?*

That very week I was scheduled to read my own poetry at a local bookstore. The audience consisted of my husband, a few close friends, and some other local poets and their guests. I, essentially, was in the exact same situation as Tony—reading a few poems in front of a small supportive group. What was the big deal?

And yet...

When it was my turn to read, I went to the front of the room and looked out at the audience. My stomach dropped. My mouth turned dry. My heart started pounding. I could feel the sweat beading from my pores. I felt hot and cold simultaneously. I wanted to run. Or disappear into a hole in the ground. Seeing as how neither was a viable option, I did what seemed like the most logical thing. I started to jump up and down. I did a few jumping jacks. I jogged in place and then I shook my arms and legs while doing rapid Lamaze-type breathing. Finally, I said, “Okay, much better. I’m ready.”

It was not until I was involved in a creative endeavor myself that I *got* where Tony was coming from. I understood the pressure and anxiety that shows up during the creation process when the outcome is unknown. This is the same creation process that I ask my students to do on a daily basis. To create can be exhilarating. It can be a rush. But it can also be a terrifying experience. If we ask our students to create, shouldn’t we be living a creative life outside of the classroom?

Ask Yourself:

- What is the last thing I asked my students to create?
- When is the last time I created something? What did I create? How did the process make me feel?
- Did the creative process affect the way I taught? If so, how?

Fulfilling Your Dreams

How many times have you encouraged your students to “dream the impossible”? An excellent teacher will instill in students the confidence to articulate their dreams and the knowledge of how to work toward achieving them. She will be able to look her students in the eye and say, “Yes, you can.” But here is the thing—that teacher must also be living a fulfilled life. She must be achieving a dream of her own.

Poet Langston Hughes was a literary force and prolific writer in the 20th century. My personal favorite work is his poem, *Harlem*. In it, he warns the reader of what happens when a dream is not fulfilled. Hughes cites several possibilities, all with dire outcomes: the dream dries up, it festers, it sags...or it explodes. On a societal level, its allusions to racial tensions in the city of Harlem, as well as in the country and the world, as the dream of racial equality is indefinitely “deferred.” However, this can also resonate on a personal level. When we articulate our dream and actively work toward achieving it, we will be optimistic; we become the best possible versions of ourselves. However, when we set aside our dream day after day because school consumes all aspects of our life...well, it does not end well.

The happiest I have ever been in my life is when I have been simultaneously teaching and creating art. Or simultaneously teaching and writing. I walk into the classroom absolutely excited and thrilled to be there after a long night spent writing. I think to myself, *I spent last night writing—now it’s my students’ turn to give it a try.*

However, when I go months or years without tapping into my own creative dream, in the words of Langston Hughes, I sag. Like a heavy load. I go into workday after day after day not particularly excited to be there. Or I explode. My resentment spews out to my students. I think to myself, “They don’t appreciate me” or “They don’t appreciate my time.”

My Love of Gardening

I am a much better teacher when I am writing and gardening because that is my escape. And I bring that passion to my work. When I write, I write for me. I garden for me and that is my escape. I totally nerd out. I love it. A few years ago I was yelling at my kids for something and my oldest daughter said, “Go out and garden. Because you are a nicer person when you garden.”

—Dawn, Grade 7, 8, and 9 Teacher

Artist, writer, and creativity guru Susan Ariel Rainbow Kennedy (known by her pen name SARK) notes that when people are living their dreams, there is an uplifting and refreshing quality about them. You feel a positive joy in their presence. They create more energy. They “sparkle.” But SARK goes on to note that those who are not tapped into their creative dreams will lag. They will barely have the energy to function day to day and not much to give to others. She writes, “The world will benefit immensely from more people living their dreams. These people will be able to offer solutions and creative thought to long-standing problems and challenges.” Actively living out your creative dreams fuels your creativity and problem-solving ability. And if there are two qualities that every teacher should have an ample supply of it is creativity and problem-solving.

It is difficult at best—and often impossible—for us to inspire our students to follow their dreams if our own dreams have been deferred.

By running a more efficient classroom and creating more time for yourself, you can now tap into your dreams. Start that book. Start focusing on your ideal teaching position. It is difficult at best—and often impossible—for us to inspire our students to follow their dreams if our own dreams have been deferred. Langston Hughes knew what he was talking about.

Finding Your Passion

If I could go back in a time machine to my first year of teaching and bring only one book with me to guide my experience, it would be *Teach Like a Pirate* by Dave Burgess. When I picked up this book a few years ago, I was hooked. In the book, Burgess, like so many educational consultants, talks about having passion in your teaching. Yet unlike many consultants, instead of simply saying, “Be passionate!” and then moving on leaving us all to wonder, *Where in the world do I get this passion from?* Burgess explains it.

Burgess gives several sources that you can draw on as a source of passion: your passion for education, your passion for the content you teach, and finally your personal passion. Burgess, for example, loves magic tricks and origami. Consequently, he finds a way to incorporate them into his high school History class whenever possible. Burgess writes:

Almost every personal passion can be incorporated into the classroom...If you are passionate about playing the guitar, bring it in and play. I know teachers who have an incredible interest in cutting-edge technology. They find ways to incorporate their tech skills into their lessons. Bringing your personal passion to the classroom empowers you to create a more powerful lesson because you are teaching from an area of great strength. And bonus: it also allows your students to see how their unique skill sets and passions can be vital, invaluable, and applicable for their future.

Ask Yourself:

- Are there any subjects that I am truly passionate about?
- How could I incorporate these passions into my classroom lessons in a meaningful way?

When not drowning under a mountain of marking, I am a passionate person. I get super excited about politics, immigration issues, gender issues, early episodes of *Murder She Wrote*, the sound of aspen trees blowing in the wind, rain, caramel macchiatos, writing, painting, and the feeling after a really good workout. When trying to assess 3,433 assignments, the only thing I feel really passionate about is summer.

If you want to bring passion into the classroom, if you want to create magic in your classroom, if you want to live a creative life, put the assignment book away and have at it. We support you. We encourage you. You will be better for it and so will your students.

Wellness Begets Wellness

One piece of advice that I got as a new mother was, “sleep begets sleep.” The idea of letting a newborn skip naps to wear her out does not hold true. Case in point: when travelling to Spain several years ago with my then 9-month-old daughter, she stayed awake for 25 hours straight. Skipping her first naptime (we were probably on our way to the airport) only made her more wired and irritable, which in turn made sleep more difficult to attain, much to the horror of my husband and I and the poor passengers seated around us. Chances are, an infant who has

napped well during the day will sleep better through the night. In turn, wellness begets wellness. Putting mental health, physical health, and personal fulfillment at a priority in your life will benefit your students.

A Teacher's Emotions Are Contagious

We have all at one point in time been *that* teacher:

“Michael, sit down.”

“Kayla, put away your phone or it's mine.”

“Angie, I'm talking. Turn around. When the bell rings I expect everyone in their seats with your books out—excuse me, Anna? You left your BOOK in your LOCKER?!?! Boys and girls, what are you expected to bring into every class? Every. Single. Class?!? Yes, your notebook, a pen, and your book—Sam you left your book at home? AT HOME!? Boys and girls, this is not the type of behavior I expect from you HALFWAY THROUGH THE YEAR.”

I have been that teacher, and I can't remember the exact details of why I decided it was a good idea to start the class sounding angry, resentful, and burnt out, but I can tell you two things. First of all, I was not living a very balanced life that week. I was most likely not sleeping enough, not having enough time to myself, not exercising enough, and working way too many hours. This is not the voice of someone who spent an hour at the gym the day before and got eight hours of sleep. Secondly, I can tell you that by the end of the class my students were also feeling angry, resentful, and burnt out. Thanks to me.

Emotions are contagious. We have the power to make students feel calm, uplifted, and focused (or angry, resentful, and burnt out).

Emotions are contagious. We have the power to make students feel calm, uplifted, and focused (or angry, resentful, and burnt out). It runs even further than that. For three years I was the Art teacher at a Science and Technology magnet school in Marietta, Georgia. And for three years I watched students take on the personality and priorities of their elementary teachers. By the end of the school year, Mrs. G's students would be a little sassy and confident, but they were also a deeply creative and responsive class. Mrs. T's class would be goofy, out in left field. Shoes would be untied and shirts would be untucked, but they were a caring and compassionate group. Mrs. F's class would be punctual, neat, and value order, process, and inquiry. They would be confident and up for any new challenge. The first year I saw this happen I chalked it up to coincidence; the second year I was intrigued by it; the third year I would have bet money that it would go that way. If I were the betting type.

A Teacher's Priorities Are Contagious

As my own priorities shifted to wellness, there was an organic and natural shift in my teaching. We moved more. We went outside more. I started considering the needs of my students. When trying (emphasis on trying) to study the Edo period of Japan and the significance of the Haiku, students were restless. Instead of losing my temper with them, I thought about wellness. How long had they been sitting? How much fresh air had they received today? After watching a brief video on Haiku writing, I moved the class outdoors. We spent the rest of the afternoon outside looking at nature and writing Haikus. When on a beautiful spring day my toughest Language Arts class was just not getting into silent reading, we grabbed our jackets and headed outdoors, spread out on the soccer field and read. Their focus and attention were significantly improved after having a short movement break and fresh air.

The Benefits of Collaboration

Working Together

The saying, “work smarter, not harder” is easy to classify as trite, or cliché. But *man alive* it is true. Several years ago a guidance counsellor at an open campus high school came and talked to our Grade 7, 8, and 9 students about time management. Because students at that high school work independently and at their own pace, all first-year students are required to take a semester-long time management course. The guidance counsellor elaborated: “Our most successful students admit that they spend more time *planning* an assignment than *completing* it.” Her point was that although it is counterintuitive to spend time planning, it saves time in the long run. These students were working smarter, not harder.

At the time I was thinking, *If only my students would take her advice*. Now I think, *If only our teachers would take her advice!*

While collaboration can occur anytime during the year, in order to be most effective, a little upfront planning needs to happen at the start of the school year.

PLANNING FOR THE YEAR

What to Do	Questions to Consider
Establish team members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are members of my team that I could collaborate with this year? • What are their backgrounds and areas of strength? • How would they complement my areas of strength? • What compromises are going to have to be made?
Organize shared planning time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If we are not splitting up our core subjects, do we have shared prep times that could be designated for planning? • Could we have guest teachers come in for half days so that we can work with a consultant to develop our long-range plans together?

Share the accommodations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Could I divide up the task of creating accommodated lessons and assessments among my team? • Could one team member provide accommodated material and assessment for one unit and another team member provide accommodated material and assessment for the next, so that I am not having to create my own accommodations for every unit?
Consider logistics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I am going to teach all Grade 4 Science classes, is this something new to the school that we will have to “sell” to parents and admin? Or is this something that is fairly common? • How will grades be entered for elementary students if they have two, three, or four different teachers for their core subjects? <p>(Note: With most grading systems taking place online, this should be easy to set up; however, make sure you check with your admin or office staff to be sure.)</p>
Set up online collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If my school is very small and there is only one grade-level teacher, are there district groups that I could join to share ideas and resources? <p>(For example, our district offers online professional development groups for all content areas.)</p>
Establish school and district supports.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What supports are available to teachers in my district? • Do I have access to educational assistants, diverse learning teachers, curriculum specialists, or consultants? If so, how can I utilize them to the maximum potential? • Would they be willing to team teach with me or help with planning?

Reduce the Number of Classes to Plan For

While secondary Language Arts teachers have it tough in regard to grading, elementary teachers can get slammed with planning. Many elementary teachers in our school district plan for Math, Science, Social Studies, Language Arts, French, Art, Health, and Religion. EVERY DAY. My question is, *WHY?!*

Not only do elementary teachers have to plan a jillion core subjects, but they also have to differentiate and accommodate within each subject. Often significantly. Pass the coffee, I get exhausted just thinking about it.

Which would you rather be responsible for planning, teaching, differentiating for, and assessing for 180 days: one core subject? Or four? By partnering up with a member of your team and dividing up the core subjects, you could cut your daily planning time for core subjects in half! If there are four of you in the same grade level, each teacher could teach one core subject and rotate your classes through. This would cut your planning down for core subjects by 75%! Why is everyone not doing this?

Team Teaching

"I found planning for all eight subjects super overwhelming. Especially if you have all new units starting at the same time. If you have a grade-level team member who you can switch a subject with, even for one year, do it. For a year, it allows you to specialize in the subject that you are teaching twice. So I have switched Math and Science. In that year, I focused on all the Math. I did detailed unit plans and spent my time getting resources for that. She did the same with Science. So for the next year, we had those two subjects covered. I find it works best when you have similar teaching styles and are flexible with your schedules. It reduces your workload big time."

—Tara, Grade 5 and 6 Teacher

Ask Yourself:

- Who are the members of my team?
- What is one thing that my team members and I could change to work smarter, not harder?
- What initial steps would we have to take to implement this?

Partner up. At the very least, divide the core subjects amongst yourself and another teacher. In an ideal world, you will have a partner who is a lovely person that you love to interact with and you will get to teach your area of expertise and your area of passion. In reality, compromises will have to be made. I don't care if your other grade-level teacher is green, has three heads, and spits fire when angry. Learn to collaborate. You will end up winning by having to plan a fraction of what you would do on your own.

Collaborate with Your Team

In an elementary school setting, there isn't a lot of prep time. Honestly, my time-saving strategy just comes down to being more collaborative with my Grade 6 team—we pass on so many ideas to each other. We have one meeting each week where we discuss Language Arts: What do we need to cover? What does the unit ahead look like? Who has what resources? What resources need to be found or made? How can we divide up the work?

We often have productive meetings because we are all mothers and we are all busy after school. We typically do not stay long anymore because we get the planning done during our collaborative team meetings. So, to save time, I have had to communicate better with my team.

—Kate, Grade 6 Teacher

Meet the Needs of Your Students

Partnering up does not have to be limited to sharing core classes. If your biggest needs are meeting the needs of a diverse classroom, collaborating with others to meet the needs of your students is beneficial. One particular grade level in our school this year is wildly diverse. There are groups of students who are learning their basic letter sounds while other students are devouring dense chapter books. We have students who do not speak English and students with complex learning and emotional needs. We have students who are refugees and students who have experienced early childhood trauma. We have students who are on the autism spectrum, some who have ADHD, and others with learning disabilities. We also have students who are reading two or more years ahead of their classmates and are frequently bored with the content taught in class. Trying to teach a range of

Instead of this...

Instead of trying to be all things to all people (Language Arts teacher, Math teacher, Science teacher, Art specialist, ELL support, gifted coordinator),

Try this...

Find something that interests you and become an expert in it. By collaborating with your team, make it happen. Love teaching Math? Volunteer to teach it to all classes in your grade. Have experience and knowledge in second-language acquisition? Volunteer to take a group of ELL students for intense literacy intervention during a reading period.

individuals this widely diverse within one contained classroom can be a futile experience.

This wide diversity of students is by no means unique and is, in fact, a snapshot of what is occurring across Canada. This year, teachers in Newfoundland and Labrador are actively speaking out to the press about how our current model of inclusive education is leaving teachers frustrated, angry, and unable to successfully meet the varied needs of their students.

You do not have to meet the needs of your students on your own—collaborate! For example, consider making accommodated lessons and assessment for one topic in Science and sharing it with all of the members of your team. For the next topic, another grade-level teacher makes the accommodated lessons and assessment for all members of the team. Another option is to divide it up by subject area. For example, you create all accommodations and enrichments for Language Arts units, and another grade-level teacher does it for Math units. Exchange all your resources.

Sharing your allocated time with an education assistant or resource teacher will help as well. For example, if the resource teacher is scheduled to work with a handful of students in your class on enrichment projects once a week, instead of working only with your students, see if she would work with all students at your grade level who need enrichment. And likewise, when she is scheduled to go into another grade-level class to help with Math skills later that week, see if she can take the two or three students in your class as well who need Math support. We have tried this model with success in our school—teachers get more support as do the students.

Finally, when making class lists, work carefully with all members of your team to ensure that students are grouped in a way that they will receive the greatest support. For example, if you have two students who are coded “gifted” in Grade 2 and require enrichment and a personalized learning plan, place the two students in the same class. Or if you have three students in Grade 8 who are ELL Level 1 and whose primary language is Spanish, it might be beneficial to have them in the same class. That way when a teacher is researching materials in Spanish or putting together ELL materials, she is meeting the needs of multiple students.

Not only does working smarter, not harder benefit you, it also benefits your students. By working with your team, you are able to meet the increasingly complex social, emotional, and cognitive needs of your students. When we try to do everything in isolation on our own, we exhaust ourselves, and our students’ needs are often not being met.

Find a Partner/Mentor

If you are a middle school or high school teacher, your school’s schedule might not allow for you to reduce the number of core classes to plan for or to blend your classes based on students’ needs. If this is the case, find a partner or mentor in the same grade and subject area that you teach. At the start of the year, request for shared planning time. My first year of teaching Language Arts, I partnered with Ed Yu, who was new to teaching. We were both teaching Grade 7 and 8 Language Arts. We spent evenings and weekends coming up with a long-range plan and planning the scope and sequence of our program. It was a truly collaborative effort. Some days when Yu was full of ideas, he would talk, and I would just listen and type. Other times when I was on a roll with an idea, he would transcribe.

Some weeks, when implementing our newly created units, Yu was a few classes ahead of me, and others I was ahead of him. We essentially were each other's guinea pigs. It was not uncommon for one of us to rush into each other's classrooms after trying a new lesson with a warning, "Oh my gosh, it was a disaster! We have to change this!" or a note of triumph, "The kids loved it!"

Having someone to collaborate with, to bounce ideas off of, and to learn from saved huge amounts of time. If I had tried to plan a Grade 7 and 8 program on my own, I would have been frustrated and exhausted. I would have felt isolated. With Yu, planning was an enjoyable time where I was learning from his perspective and building a close co-worker and friend relationship. At the very least, share your ideas with each other.

Studies show that if teachers have mentors, their retention rates in the teaching profession are much higher than for teachers who don't have mentors. Yu and I must have intuitively known that on some level as we became mentors to each other. Only I am not sure who was mentoring whom. I think it changed on a moment to moment basis—sometimes he was challenging my faulty ideas and making recommendations. Other times it was me doing it. Regardless, having someone you can collaborate with is a necessity.

Talk It Out

Collaborating in general just reduces your workload. You can sit down and say, "Okay, let's figure out an approach to this novel study." And you are both researching certain activities to do for it. Start one document. Work jointly on it. Take half an hour one week and hammer it out together. Your unit is now set up now for both of you. You have a direction and you have someone to talk it out with. Having someone to bounce ideas off of makes planning so much more efficient. And you get better ideas because you are collaborating with another like-minded professional. You are brainstorming and pulling from each other's strengths, which results in great lessons. And you did not have to spend hours digging online to find them.

—Tara, Grade 5 and 6 Teacher

Create Interdisciplinary Projects

When planning with your team, consider trying interdisciplinary projects. This could look different depending on your team and the desired outcome. If you teach multiple subjects, creating interdisciplinary projects that students work on in multiple subject areas could save you planning time and give students more time to focus on one project with multiple outcomes. For example, in one of my Grade 8 classes, students wrote an essay on the development of technology since the Renaissance. I used the essay for both a Language Arts grade (assessing the mastery of the writing) and a Social Studies grade (assessing the explanation of the content for understanding). By creating a unit that gives them marks in multiple subjects, students are able to spend more time on that project than they would if they had to create a Language Arts project and a separate Social Studies project.

Another way of integrating content involves creating cross-curricular projects with members of your team. When I was an elementary Art teacher in the United States, I would often brainstorm ideas with our music specialist, Kevin Sanders. We would come up with conceptual art and music themes based on ideas such

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How can teachers balance the needs of busy, sometimes overwhelming classrooms with the needs of their own health and well-being? This remarkable book shows you how embracing a healthy lifestyle is not only beneficial for teachers, but for students, classrooms, and schools.

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- optimize your time with useful management techniques to use both inside and outside the classroom

This highly readable book will give you the courage and knowledge you need to make wellness a pillar in your life so you can be the motivated and engaged teacher your students need.



Chelsea Broda

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