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A Teacher's Guide  
to Today's Classroom

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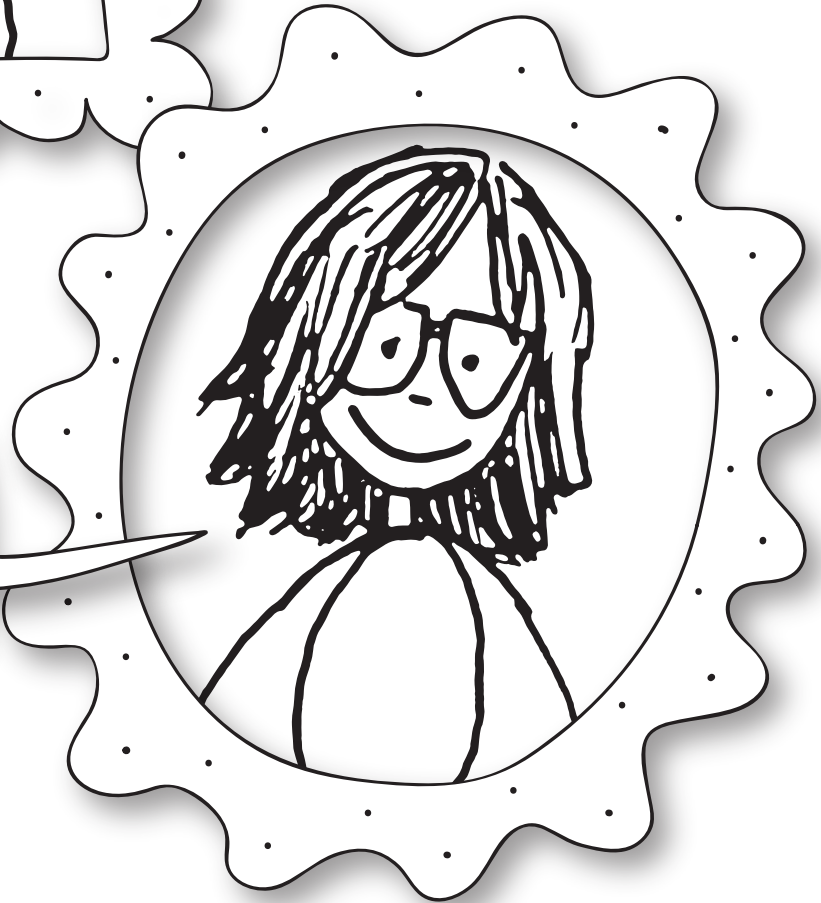
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For my sister, Des,  
and my brothers,  
Conrad and Chris.  
You are good for  
my head and good  
for my heart.

—Christine



For Harry,  
may you be  
as brave  
and true as  
your papa.

—Kristine

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# Introduction



It was a time when  
the unthinkable  
became the thinkable  
and the impossible  
really happened.

—Arundhati Roy,  
*The God of Small Things*



# A Tale of Two Classrooms

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When Kristi was getting ready to enter the teaching profession, she couldn't wait for the first day to arrive. For her, it was a chance to leave a mark, to impact the lives of children in positive ways, a grassroots, ground floor opportunity to make the world better tomorrow than it is today. She envisioned writing letters to the local government, litter and recycling lessons in the nearby park, and an empowered group of children who would stop at nothing to make positive change. Cut to her first year in the classroom: passion and good intentions only go so far when confronted with the day-to-day intricacies of teaching. Chaos reigned in her classroom.

Overwhelmed, overworked, and feeling incapable of translating big dreams into classroom practice, Kristi decided to try a behavior system commonly called a "clip chart." This chart, made colorful and pleasing to the eye, had all the children's names clothespinned to the top. If a child "misbehaved," his name was moved down (and down and down). Perhaps with behavior in order, her class could take on the projects that would save the world.

At first, it seemed to work! The chaos dulled to a simmer and there was hope she might be able to take on the projects she had envisioned. Then one day, a few weeks after Operation Clip Chart, a seven-year-old boy named Thomas walked calmly to the colorful display to move his clip down and instead tore the entire chart to shreds.

The class was stunned silent. And then there was cheering.

Not from the kids who always stayed at the top of the clip chart, but from the kids who struggled with behavior day in and day out.

As she drove home that night, Kristi felt desolate. In that one move, Thomas had laid bare the real workings of the clip chart. Kristi knew this practice was common—in fact, some of us might use it today. On that drive home, she recognized the nagging feeling (that you might recognize as well) she'd had all along that the crestfallen look on a child's face as she moved her clip down in plain view of her classmates couldn't be what building a classroom community was all about. It had seemed to work, but work for whom? Whose life did it make better? Yes, it was calmer, but why? Not because she had taught great lessons of respect and community skills, but because, all glossing over aside, she publicly embarrassed kids who acted out of step. What if they didn't even know what boundaries they'd overstepped? Could there be another way? Right then she decided: it wasn't projects that would change the world, it was teaching how to be an engaged and responsible member of a community. None of her preservice classes had prepared her to *teach* such a thing, just to demand it. Hence, a decades-long inquiry project was born into the question, how do we create a cohesive and nurturing classroom community, filled with kind, empathic, engaged citizens?

Meanwhile, years later and states apart, Christine thought she was on top of her reading teaching game. She had created an extraordinarily neat and tidy grid depicting which students she would meet with, when. She had lessons planned down to the minute and a list of standards that she could check off as she went. She had a binder of running records for each student and data on top of data on top of data. Her many guided reading groups were providing her students with scaffolded support every step of the way. It was a well-oiled machine. But the problem was, *Christine* was the center of that machine.



One day, Christine was in a professional meeting in the room next door to her classroom. Her students were supposed to be independently reading and she popped back into her room quickly to grab a file. As she looked around the room to admire her industrious readers, it dawned on her: no one was reading. Not one kid. Some students were staring out the window, others were shopping for books, a couple were doodling in their reader's notebooks and one, she learned later, had been in the bathroom for about twelve minutes.

Without Christine at the center of the reading workshop, her students weren't actually interested in reading. Instead of building for independence, teaching for purpose, and creating opportunities for authentic learning, Christine had taught them how to be compliant cogs in a reading machine. There was no joy. No purpose. No intrinsic motivation.

That day marked a powerful shift in Christine's thinking and teaching. She started to reexamine her role and the role of her students. For years she's been thinking and studying how to foster independence, authenticity, and joy in every element of her students' learning.

## Finding a Path from the Worst of Times to the Best of Times

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Here is the thing: clip charts work, and so does doing nine million highly scaffolded reading groups—for a time. And these systems primarily work *for the teacher*. As we taught, we realized that so much (too much) of the profession is focused on the ways teachers can make students successful, but not how we give children the tools to build their own success day after day after day. Things started to feel *not right* as mandate after mandate came into our classrooms.

Does it matter if our children meet benchmarks or line up quietly if it comes at the expense of engaged, active, curious learning? Passivity makes for easy management—and terrible citizenship. How do we make the classroom more like the world? How do we teach skills like independence, critical thinking, and responsibility? How do we help our students learn in a way that honors their passion and curiosity, yet ensures that they *also* meet the benchmarks they need for success? What would happen in a classroom where children do not have an assigned spot for everything they do? These are the questions we took on in our classrooms, and in the classrooms of our friends and colleagues. We read books and blogs, we read studies and research about the brain and learning, we played in our rooms, we sat with our failures, and we rose to teach again.

Our collective of teachers, armed with studies and professional texts and days and years in the classroom, began to believe that it is the decisions we make even before the first days of school—from how we set up our rooms to how we build community to how we prioritize curiosity and joy—that will determine whether we, and our children, will thrive, not just as students and teachers, but as wholly engaged and alive human beings.

# So Where Are We Now?

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Kristi has a classroom that (mostly) hums with collaboration and camaraderie. The children in her room have strategies for solving problems, sharing materials, asking for help, and negotiating solutions. Her children regularly talk about empathy and work to make the community and the world kinder. She doesn't yell, nor move clips. Her children have free reign of materials and seats and ideas, yet the chaos is controlled and driven by curiosity and learning. Gone are the rewards, the stickers, the threats, and in their place is a world built on trust and hope and care. It takes work and commitment, patience and time, but from the first moment of the first day, Kristi is teaching the skills of being a member of a community.

As for Christine, students in her classroom are agents of their own learning. From day one, her students make decisions, set goals, build their skills, and fill their toolboxes with strategies that they can use when they need to. Every day she tries to give her students more choice over little things like what book to read and big things like what to study during a class inquiry. Christine is no longer at the center of her classroom's activity; instead she is on the periphery—dipping in and out, coaching students, and making little adjustments along the way. In her classroom, learning is social: joy, play, and collaboration are at the center of every part of her day. Nothing is perfect, but everyone feels empowered to learn and grow.

# Come Along with Us

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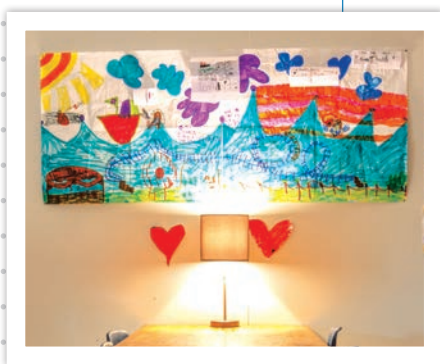
This book is a place to start creating the classroom of your dreams. A classroom that is research based, child centered, and in step with the world today. A classroom that exemplifies the collaboration, flexibility, agency, and problem-solving that people need to be successful in the coming decades. A classroom where critical thinking, thoughtful reflection, and curious inquiry sit side by side with reading, writing, and math. But here's a caveat: we're not going to promise that you'll ever achieve classroom nirvana—we know there's no such thing as perfection. And we are the first to admit that this is hard, messy work. There will be missteps and mishaps, but just like your students, you will learn from your mistakes and grow. Know that there is a community out there ready to celebrate and commiserate and think and question with you every step of the way. This book is just a first step, a launching pad to what is possible. To help you along the way, we've included lots of our favorite books, people to follow on Twitter, interviews with experts, and videos of the two of us teaching.

# This book is divided into four main parts

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**1 Teaching Is Heart Work** grounds us in the art and the heart of teaching. The first part of the book will help us tap into our most flourishing, empathetic, playful, flexible, and reflective selves so that we can be the teachers our children deserve. We'll look at the research and the reasons behind cultivating our best selves first. This section is the work that happens before we meet children on the first day and keeps our teaching souls fulfilled. It tints the pages and sections that follow it, and the atmosphere beyond.



**2 The Physical Environment** and **3 The Emotional Environment** are guides to building classrooms of empathetic, joyful learners. In these sections, we will explore how both the physical classroom environment (from the nuts and bolts of how to set up your room to different options for flexible seating) and the emotional classroom environment (from teaching social skills to handling really tricky moments) set the foundation for your classroom culture and some of your students' most important learning. We'll pull from new research and diverse fields to get beyond the idea of classroom management to the idea of building a community of citizens. This section will be handy as you invent and reinvent your classroom space or delve deeper into building a powerful classroom community.



**4 Building Curriculum** will help you understand how to study the work and habits of your students and let those observations drive your instruction. You'll find practical tips such as how to make a checklist and quickly assess student work to the justification behind many different teaching structures. We'll look across educational theorists to cull together the must-knows for a teacher building a classroom of cutting-edge practice. This section is best used once you are up and running with students to assess and reassess your teaching moves and potential next steps.



**The appendixes**, the final section of the book, is a toolkit filled with templates, additional resources, sample letters, and quick guides to turn to.



Though the book does not need to be read in any particular order, each section builds on the ideas previously explored. For example, messages about classroom community and social skills begin with classroom design. Impactful, intimate teaching requires a productive and respectful community. However, where you start might depend on what you need:

Are you looking to infuse or reclaim a spirit of joy and possibility into your teaching? Do you wish your students were happier and more playful?

*Start in Section 1.*

Looking to create a beautiful classroom space that fosters collaboration, independence, and curiosity? Are you curious about the intersection between environment and behavior? *Start in Section 2.*

Do you want to create a classroom community free of rewards and threats? Do you see a need for your children to learn social skills but aren't sure how to go about it? *Start in Section 3.*

Do you find that you use the same teaching structures (guided reading for example) again and again and again? Are you interested in finding ways to engage students in learning that isn't always teacher driven? Are you curious about how to make your teaching more responsive, even if the curriculum is set?

*Start in Section 4.*

Do you love stuff? Let's be honest, we all do. The goodies are in the back.

*Start in the appendixes.*

The world has changed, and it demands thoughtful, engaged citizens. Technology and global connectivity require collaboration and critical thinking. It is our responsibility and honor to create classrooms where students learn skills beyond the rote, that extend to their very ways of interacting with, and perhaps changing, the world. Classrooms where children learn how to make decisions, engage in thoughtful discourse, reflect, and resolve to never stop growing. So let's call on our optimism and our drive for a better world and see what we can accomplish together.

It's time to get started.

