

## Finding the Courage to Teach Past the Fear of 'Getting in Trouble'

By Justin Minkel

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*"A lot hinges on the fact that, in most circumstances, people are not allowed to hit you with a mallet. They put up all kinds of visible and invisible signs that say, 'Do not do this,' in the hope that it'll work, but if it doesn't, then they shrug, because there is, really, no real mallet at all."* —Terry Pratchett, *Unseen Academicals* [← Back to Story](#)

I have always been a teacher who fears the mallet. I worry about "getting in trouble," a phrase that seems more appropriate for children than adults, which I nevertheless hear from fellow teachers with alarming frequency.

Seventeen years since I started teaching, I still get nervous when my principal walks into my room with a clipboard or laptop for an unscheduled observation.

Why?

I love my principal. I know she's not out to get me. Yet the anxiety—sweaty palms, a tight throat, a sudden awareness of how incredibly messy my classroom is—has not faded with time.

Most teachers I know share this phobia, including those with years of teaching experience, a supportive principal, and a well-established reputation as a skilled professional.

Where does that fear come from? Is it the bizarre national fixation on policies to "monitor" and "compel" teachers to do their jobs—rather than simply hiring people you trust and supplying them with what they need? Is it this past decade and a half dominated by standardized tests and grim measures to ensure "accountability"? Or is it the logical conclusion to that era: an ingrained tendency to judge children, teachers, and entire communities based on deficits rather than strengths?

I haven't untangled the source of the anxiety and timidity, for me personally, or our profession as a whole. What I do know is that most of us are not nearly as brave in our classrooms as we could be.

Our students display daily courage. They deal with all kinds of things they shouldn't have to—hunger, homelessness, abuse, and neglect—with a courageous grace.

Yet we, their teachers, often implement policies we *know* will sabotage their best interests.

Lots of test prep. Too few minutes to play outside. In many districts, a focus on "grade-level texts" that has struggling readers and English-language learners wading through incomprehensible print.

A few weeks ago, my English-language learners took a computerized test. Some kids were done in 25 minutes, while the stragglers took over an hour. It was clearly stated in the instructions that students who finished early were not allowed to read a book, draw a picture, or write a story. They were to remain still and silent at their desks until every single child had finished the test.

That's insane.

These kids are 7 or 8 years old. I read the instructions, shook my head in disbelief, and decided not to follow them. As my 2nd graders finished the test one by one, I had them go and read silently at the rug. Without a single exception, they were as quiet as little monks and nuns at prayer, fully engrossed in their books about meerkats, Fly Guy, and Elephant and Piggie.

This peaceable period lasted about four minutes, until our instructional facilitator came rushing in to tell me they needed to go back to their desks to sit silently until every child had finished testing. No books or crayons allowed. I complied—I love my instructional facilitator, and she was doing her job. But I also found out who to contact at our state department of education to make my case for changing the rule.

### **A Challenge for Teachers**

I'm not a rebel or a rabble-rouser. I spend more time reaching compromise than seeking confrontation. I'd rather work to gradually change the system from within than lob stones at it from a distance.

Still, there are times when it seems the people who craft education policy must harbor a deep dislike of children. Sometimes it seems they have never actually met a child, let alone taken the time to understand their world.

We who teach, who have gained a deep understanding of children and their needs, need to speak and act when we see their world damaged.

So for any of you who, like me, tend to err on the side of timidity, I have a challenge. For all those who marvel at our students' courage yet struggle to display it ourselves, let's conduct an experiment these next few weeks of school. Let's find out whether our fears of "getting in trouble" are real or fabricated.

I dare you.



On a beautiful day when the breeze feels like a blessing, take the kids out for a second recess. Stick a note on your door, so people will know where to find you, but go do it, simply because it's beautiful out there and these are children. They need more time to play outside.

Go ahead and do that project that isn't a precise fit with "the standards," because you know those standards, treated as holy writ graven in stone, were cobbled together by a bunch of haggard professors drinking bad coffee out of Styrofoam cups in a Holiday Express conference room. Trust that after this many years in the profession, and this many months with your class, you know they need the things your project will teach them.

Forego all test prep the week before that impending state test. Have the children build things, do science experiments, and go outside to write stories instead.

Teach your class to play chess. It will take a week out of the district math unit, but you know the game helps kids with spatial thinking and even their reading development. You also know they'll love it. I dare you to resist the impulse to "ask forgiveness instead of permission." Instead go down to your principal's office, tell him you plan to teach the students to play chess this week, and explain why.

I dare you to take one week when you toss out everything you're accustomed to doing in your classroom, so you can figure out what deserves to be put back in.

Go five days without having your students touch pencil to paper. Watch what happens when they wrap their hands around clay, paint, or wood instead.

I dare us all to stop worrying about *looking* good to our principal, to parents, to visitors from the school board. I dare us to try instead to actually *become* good for the children in our care.

Those children may not have any power over us. They may not wear fancy suits or carry around clipboards. But they are the true purpose of the entire enterprise of education. If we listen to that quiet voice within us, we know that to be true.

Let's find out what happens.

Will we get fired? Will we get a written reprimand that goes on our permanent record? Will we get the stink-eye from our principal for the rest of the year?

Or will we keep our jobs, because the teacher shortage is real, and it's *really* real in high-poverty schools? Will it turn out there is no permanent record, and even if there were, nobody "above" us in the hierarchy has the time or inclination to write up that reprimand? Will we find unlikely allies, including administrators who prove their own courage and commitment to the children in our care?

When you share your intention to take a break from the unit to teach the kids chess, will your principal simply shrug and say, "OK, whatever," before turning back to his computer? Or will he maybe even surprise you, by smiling and confiding, "I loved to play chess when I was a kid."

Will our students do just fine at filling in those rows of bubbles on the test, despite—maybe even because of—that time they spent engineering a parachute for a gummy bear, and testing it from the top of the playground slide?

Will it turn out that no one even noticed that we took the kids outside for that extra 20 minutes of recess? Or that they did notice, and admired us for it?

Sometimes there is no mallet, except the one in our minds. That doesn't mean the mallet is easily erased. It looms large and weighs heavy, out of all proportion to reality. It's like that monster in your closet when you were little—it didn't exist, and you kind of knew it didn't, but that didn't make it any less terrifying.

Once we know the fear is in our heads, though, we can rid ourselves of it. Lob that menacing mallet way out into the middle of a lake. Realize the absurdity of being an adult, let alone a member of the profession that makes all others possible, who frets about "getting in trouble."

Once we do that, we can get on with the courageous work that teaching, at its best, must be. We owe that bravery to the children we teach. We owe it to the profession we help each day to build. We also owe it to ourselves, for that reckoning when we come to the last of our years as a teacher and ask what difference it made, in the end, that we taught at all.

*Photos provided by the author.*



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