
CLASSROOM HINDSIGHT

What 19 Education Experts Wish They'd Known Their First Year on the Job





Paula Kluth, Ph.D., is one of today's most popular and respected experts on autism and inclusive education. An internationally respected scholar and author, Dr. Kluth has written and co-written several books for Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Kluth.

“This is easy because I think about this question a lot. The thing I wish I had known is that the memories do fade. On the first day of school, my colleague told me, ‘*You should keep a journal so you don’t forget anything!*’ We were starting a new inclusive schooling journey in the district and she could see that there would be many remarkable moments in our future. I kept a journal for about two days before abandoning it and now I would give anything to have a written log of those days. I say this not only because it could help with my work today, but because I know it would have helped me to become a more reflective teacher and, perhaps, a more thoughtful one. This is one reason why I journal, write, and blog today. I now see the relationship between reflection and growth. It is so important for every teacher to have at least one tool for looking back and making sense of their work; that might mean scheduling regular coffee chats with a colleague, getting involved with a professional learning community, or starting a blog. Pick something that is right for you, but do something to keep you moving forward as you look back.

—Paula Kluth, Ph.D.



Dr. Katrina L. Arndt is an Associate Professor of Inclusive Education at St. John Fisher College. She teaches courses in the undergraduate and graduate programs in inclusive pedagogy, collaboration, assessment, classroom management, and diversity issues, and has supervised student teachers and graduate-field placements. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Arndt.

“**D**ear first year teacher: congratulations! To prepare for the joys and challenges ahead, get to know the teachers in your building, especially the veteran colleagues who share your teaching philosophy: there is no better resource for day-to-day advice.

—Katrina Arndt, Ph.D.



Patrick Schwarz, Ph.D., is Professor of Diversity in Learning & Teaching for National-Louis University, Chicago. A dynamic author and motivational speaker, Dr. Schwarz is also Chief Executive Officer of Creative Culture Consulting, LLC. His books have inspired teachers nationwide to reconceptualize inclusion in ways that help all children. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Schwarz.

“I wish I would have known in my first year of teaching that I did not have to please everyone! When one operates ALWAYS on behalf of kids by making them the center of the educational universe, the dream, vision, recommendation, action, and next step become crystal clear. Amen.

—Patrick Schwarz, Ph.D.



Joseph A. Dimino, Ph.D., has had experience as a general education teacher, special education teacher, administrator, behavior consultant, and researcher. He is a coauthor of books addressing reading comprehension and vocabulary instruction and has published in several peer-reviewed journals. He consults nationally in the areas of early literacy, reading comprehension, and vocabulary instruction. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Dimino.

“Teach vocabulary and comprehension as explicitly as you teach phonics. My pre-service training stressed teaching phonics explicitly. However, teaching vocabulary and comprehension using models with think alouds and scaffolded instruction was not addressed. I suspect the reason is that the research we have now regarding the effectiveness of explicit instruction in those areas was not available over four decades ago.

—Joseph A. Dimino, Ph.D.



Julie Causton, Ph.D., is an expert in creating and maintaining inclusive schools. She is an associate professor in the Inclusive Special Education Program at Syracuse University. She teaches courses on inclusion, differentiation, special education law, and collaboration. Dr. Causton also works with schools and districts directly to help to create truly inclusive schools. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Julie Causton.

“Talk less, facilitate more. The students should be working at least as hard as you are! They learn best when the classroom is self-directed, relaxed, and engaging, not teacher-directed. Also, hook them with outrageously fun lesson introductions! Get them prepared and primed to dive into the content alongside you.

—Julie Causton, Ph.D.



Lori A. Howard, Ph.D., teaches special education courses related to collaboration and instruction, teaming, consultation, and individualized education program development in the special education program at the University of Virginia Northern Virginia Center. She has also taught special education curriculum and methods courses at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Howard.

“Take risks and try new ways of doing things. Mistakes will happen. Learn from them.

Sleep = fewer mistakes.

More sleep = better teaching.

—Lori Howard, Ph.D.



Loui Lord Nelson, Ph.D., is a consultant specializing in universal design for learning (UDL). She recently completed a one-year postdoctoral fellowship through Boston College and CAST. Loui began her career as an eighth-grade collaborative teacher in Indiana and then expanded her work to focus on the needs of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the postsecondary setting and the families of those individuals. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Nelson.

“Two words: *receive* and *discuss*. I would sign up to receive the free digital newsletter and posts that come from the top special and general education professional associations, but I wouldn't stop there. I would also sign up to receive the free digital newsletters and posts for advocacy organizations with tips on how to partner effectively with families and community partners. Finally, I would network with other educators to create my own think-tank to discuss inclusive practices, partnerships, and promising plans. There are plenty of naysayers; surround yourself with the thinkers, doers, and go-getters.

—Loui Lord Nelson, Ph.D.



Elizabeth A. Potts, Ph.D., is an assistant professor and a program director for special education programs at the University of Virginia Northern Virginia Center. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Potts.

“Find your own mentor who teaches a curriculum that overlaps with your students’ needs. It’s not cheating to share resources, it’s smart. Also, invest in clothes with pockets. Pockets are invaluable.

— Elizabeth A. Potts, Ph.D.



Marcia K. Henry, Ph.D., has more than 40 years of experience working in the field of reading and dyslexia as a diagnostician, tutor, teacher, and professor. Dr. Henry received her doctorate in educational psychology from Stanford University. Prior to her retirement in 1995, she was a professor in the Division of Special Education at San Jose State University, where she taught and directed the Center for Educational Research on Dyslexia. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Henry.

“You don’t need to know all the answers. Investigating students’ questions along with them can be both stimulating and informative. And students love it when the teacher says ‘Let’s figure this out together.’

— Marcia K. Henry, Ph.D.



Michael F. Giangreco, Ph.D., has spent nearly 40 years working with children and adults in a variety of capacities, including special education teacher, community residence counselor, camp counselor, school administrator, educational consultant, university teacher, and researcher. He received his doctoral degree from Syracuse University and has been a faculty member at the University of Vermont since 1988. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Giangreco.

“As a first-year special education teacher, I wish I had been versed in Anne Donnellan’s (1984) **Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption**, but that would have necessitated time travel since I started teaching during the 1977-1978 school year. Although it has graced the literature for 30 years, the Criterion of the Least Dangerous Assumption remains one of the most powerful and contemporary concepts to advance opportunities for students with disabilities and encourage better instruction. Donnellan asserted, *‘in the absence of conclusive educational data, educational decisions should be based on assumptions which, if incorrect, will have the least dangerous effect on the student’* (p. 142).

She persuasively argued that certain practices such as: (a) increased interactions with students without disabilities, (b) placement in typical schools and classes, (c) varied instructional arrangements, (d) use of natural materials and cues, and (e) chronologically age-appropriate curricular content, were inherently less dangerous than their counterpoints. Just as importantly, Donnellan proposed a vital instructional stance, *‘Generally, the criterion of the least dangerous assumption holds that there is less danger to students if teachers assume instructional failure is due to instructional inadequacy rather than student deficits’* (1984, p. 147).

—Michael F. Giangreco, Ph.D.

The criterion of the least dangerous assumption. Donnellan, Anne M. Behavioral Disorders, Vol 9(2), Feb 1984, 141-150.



Nancy Dyson has been in education for more than 30 years as both a teacher and the director of a parent cooperative school. She completed her doctoral degree in education at the University of Delaware with a research focus on students struggling with mathematics. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Dyson.

“Your students are individuals with individual ways of thinking. Encourage them to explain their thinking and do your best to be patient to understand them. Use this knowledge to direct your instruction and your students will thank you! Students of all ages appreciate it when they know that their teacher respects their thinking and is making an effort to understand them rather than just insisting on the teacher’s way of thinking.

—Nancy Dyson, Ph.D.



Judith R. Birsh, Ed.D., founded and has directed the Multisensory Teaching of Basic Language Skills Series in the Program in Learning Disabilities of the Department of Curriculum and Teaching since 1985. She is a consultant to public and private schools as well as a certified academic language therapist. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Birsh.

“I surely wish I had known about the structure of the English language and how to teach reading in a systematic, skill development sequence. I would have been a better teacher if I had known how to group children according to their needs. By being familiar with multisensory techniques, I would have been able to reach all those who learn differently and would have had a good time doing it. Being aware of ongoing assessment would have given me clues about progress and how to plan the week’s lessons. Having a good grasp of the foundational skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, handwriting, and composition along with fluency and comprehension and their interconnectedness would have really prepared me for the hard work at hand of teaching literacy.

—Judith R. Birsh, Ed.D., CALT, QI



Dr. Whitney H. Rapp is an Associate Professor of Inclusive Education at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, New York, where she teaches courses on inclusive education pedagogy, assessment, classroom management, and diversity issues. Prior to her experience in teacher education programs, Whitney taught many different grade levels in a variety of settings, from fully inclusive classrooms to residential special education schools. All of these experiences reinforced her belief that all children can learn and that all children should learn together in inclusive settings. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Rapp.

“Something will happen every single school day that challenges you and makes you think on your feet. A lesson will not go as planned, something will spill, students will act up, a parent will question you. If you expect this, it will not throw you when it happens. Remember, it’s supposed to happen this way. If it were easy, it would be boring. Plan for as much as you can, and when it happens, embrace it as an opportunity to overcome a challenge and become a better teacher.

—Whitney H. Rapp, Ph.D.



Debra Leach, Ed.D., BCBA, is Assistant Professor of Special Education at Winthrop University and a Board Certified Behavior Analyst. She previously served as a public school teacher, as an early intervention provider, and as Associate Director for the Florida Atlantic University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Leach.

“**D**uring my first years in the classroom, I wish I would have known that there is a huge difference between parenting and teaching. I didn’t truly understand this until I became a parent myself. My role as a teacher should be to support parents in meeting their priorities for their children, not get them to support me in fulfilling my teaching demands. As a teacher, I should listen to parents and do all that I can to address their concerns and help them meet the needs of their children.

—Deb Leach, Ph.D.



Susan E. Craig, Ph.D., has devoted her professional career to teaching both children and adults. Working on site with many school districts throughout the country, Dr. Craig supports teaching and administrative staff in creating inclusive, trauma-sensitive schools. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Craig.

“Children do well when they can. The question to ask when faced with problem behavior is not “why did you do that?” but rather “what happened to you that makes you act this way?”

If you do it well, teaching is a physically and emotionally exhausting job. Take care of yourself. Remember to put your own oxygen mask on first before trying to help others.

—Susan E. Craig, Ph.D.



Lynn Cannon, M.Ed., is a special education coordinator at the Ivymount School, where she is responsible for helping to develop and oversee the social learning and academic curriculum for the lower and middle school students. [Click here](#) for more information about Ms. Cannon.

“Celebrate the successes and not the things you wish you could change or do differently. There will always be times when a lesson or an interaction does not play out the way you would have hoped. Learn from it, make plans to attack it differently in the future, and move on! Spend your time and energy focusing on what went well—these moments will always outweigh the challenges.

—Lynn Cannon, M.Ed.



Dr. Linda H. Mason has a joint appointment in the Department of Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education and the Children, Youth, and Families Consortium at The Pennsylvania State University. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Mason.

“It would have been most helpful for me to understand that teaching is simply a learning progression—in other words, I did not need to ‘know it all!’ My teaching then, as it is today, is always reflective of my openness to explore new ideas and knowledge.

—Linda H. Mason, Ph.D.



Rachel Janney, Ph.D., has worked with children and adults with disabilities in a number of capacities, including special education teacher, camp counselor, educational consultant, and researcher. [Click here](#) for more information about Dr. Janney.

“You became an educator for the right reasons: to help, to teach, to advocate for, and to serve children and youth with disabilities. No matter what challenges you encounter—prejudice against your students, the irrational workings of the public education system—remember to keep your eyes on the prize.

—Rachel Janney, Ph.D.



Gary Barber, B.H., P.G.C.E, M.A., is Assistant Director of the Junior School at St. Michael's University School, where he also teaches physical education and coaches several extra-curricular sports teams. [Click here](#) for more information about Mr. Barber.

“I wish that I’d had a deeper understanding of the many different learning styles that children can bring to the classroom. I had finished my teacher training in a very traditional college, one that espoused a one-size-fits-all approach to classroom management and pedagogy. It took only a few days in my first teaching position to realize how ill-prepared I was for the incredible range of interests, learning styles, emotional/physical/social needs that the students brought to each class. I quickly learned that adjusting the pace of learning, and assessing the daily needs of the individual and the class, were essential skills that I needed to develop to support my students. I also realized that role included being part social worker, part counselor, a mentor, a friend, and a teacher. It was a blend that took some time to get used to.

—Gary Barber, B.H., P.G.C.E, M.A.

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