

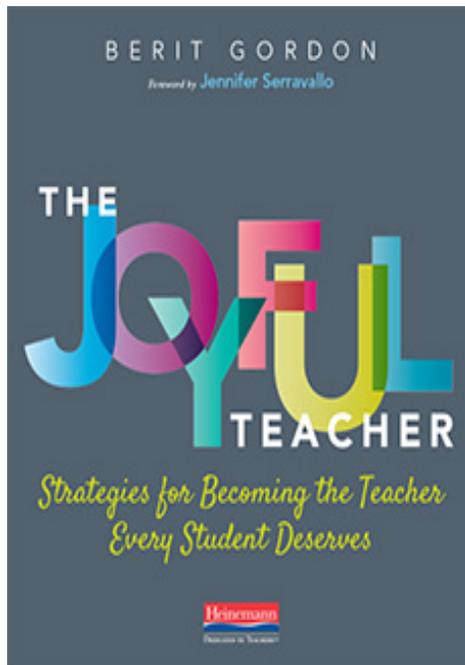
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Review of *The Joyful Teacher: Strategies for Becoming the Teacher Every Student Deserves*

Berit Gordon

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Introduction to Book

I came across educational consultant Berit Gordon's *The Joyful Teacher: Strategies for Becoming the Teacher Every Student Deserves* deep into my COVID quarantine. Its title immediately drew my attention because I think we all need more joy in our lives right now, and, as a teacher educator, I often think about how to support my students, all future teachers, consider their needs as well as their students' needs. In a context in which teachers are asked to support students' myriad needs, Berit's colorful, digestible text stands out in its focus on an adjective attributed to the work of teachers less frequently these days: *joyful*.

The Joyful Teacher's colorful layout and organizational structure will be familiar to readers familiar with Jennifer Serravallo's strategies texts. Serravallo actually writes the foreword to this text. After the foreword and acknowledgements, Gordon provides a helpful introduction that articulates why readers need the book, who the book is for, what is different and familiar about the book, how readers use the book. Gordon articulates the impetus behind her text in her introduction: "I wish for more joy and less struggle in a profession where people put in such tremendous effort and do such essential work" (p. xiv).

Writing the book for the primary audience of K-12 teachers, Gordon shares that instructional coaches and administrators may use this book. As they aim to help all their students, teachers "can rely on this book as a practical guide to self-reflect, set professional learning goals, and find the tools you [they] need to continually grow as a teacher" (p. xv). Later on in the introduction, readers are introduced to the progression of teaching goals, which align with the book's eleven chapters.

Gordon's *The Joyful Teacher* is a practitioner text, digestible and utterly conscious of practicing

teachers' busy lives. Suggesting that readers do not need to read her book chapter-by-chapter, Gordon shares that readers assess their progress on a particular chapter's "What do you notice?" quick self-assessment. Given at the beginning of each chapter, these self-assessments help teachers understand if this chapter is pertinent to their professional growth. Once teachers see results of mostly "sometimes" or "not yet" in response to the brief assessment, they are encouraged to read through the shared strategies, which are written in order of least to most complex. Each strategy has a section titled "Try This," followed by sections that answer the following questions/prompts: "How do I know if this idea will help?," "How do I know if this idea is working?," and "How to try this with others." Within each strategy section, Gordon makes recommendations for other books that provide more insight into the strategy's topic.

In this review, I delve into Gordon's book from the perspective of a literacy teacher educator looking to help the preservice teachers with whom I work, and consider its relevancy to others in similar situations. Going against Gordon's recommendations for how to read her text, I proceeded through the text chapter-by-chapter for the purpose of this review. What follows is a careful review and critique of each of Gordon's chapters, a critique and discussion of the text in its entirety, and a recommendation for whether this book should be incorporated within a literacy methods course.

Chapter Summaries and Critiques Chapter 1: Staying Happy and Healthy in a Demanding Job

Gordon's first chapter begins with startling statistics about how many teachers report experiencing high stress as a result of their work and shares her own classroom experiences with stress. Articulating that teachers who stay happy and healthy actually do a service to their students by modeling self-care,

Gordon then provides teachers with a self-assessment.

Readers subsequently progress through ten strategies designed to help teachers set reachable goals that complement what they are already doing. Gordon shares that teachers will continue to become better at their practice but that they should celebrate that which they already do. Gordon promotes the idea that teachers should surround themselves with positive colleagues; leave the situation or speak up, when appropriate, when non-positive ideas are shared; and work to be a model of positivity for others. Gordon suggests teachers schedule self-care and asks teachers to think about how they can clear their calendars of any nonnegotiables that do not promote their emotional or physical health and do not align with their core beliefs.

As a literacy teacher educator, I appreciate that the first chapter of the book was on a topic that can sometimes be an afterthought in our current educational context. Whereas Gordon's ten strategies related to staying happy are not groundbreaking, they provide teachers opportunities to work on improving their own effectiveness and work habits in ways that align with their values, before addressing instructional goals. Elementary and secondary teachers can feel a lot of pressure to help their students become stronger readers and writers, and Gordon's emphasis on taking care of oneself first is an important lesson.

Chapter 2: Classroom Environment

Gordon shares research about the importance of students feeling safe in the classroom. She also discusses the way furniture organization should facilitate independence. Readers are then provided the opportunity to complete a self-assessment about how their classroom looks and feels.

Key to Gordon's classroom environment are strategies geared to help teachers privilege students' ideas and work. She encourages teachers to look at their classrooms from students' eyes and recommends asking students about what is working or not working in the classroom, using this insight to drive changes. Gordon gives ways for teachers to analyze how they can make classrooms more inclusive in myriad ways. She emphasizes helping students see themselves in the classroom by finding ways to showcase their work and making sure students' identities are present on classroom walls. Gordon ends this chapter with recommendations for designing classroom spaces that facilitate collaboration.

This is a perfect chapter for novice teachers who need to *see* what a student-centered classroom looks like and for experienced teachers ready for a change. The reflective thinking Gordon encourages in this chapter will effect meaningful changes in literacy teachers' classroom design and layout. I can see how this chapter will help literacy teachers think about how to create spaces to share student work and for student discussions.

Chapter 3: Management, Part 1: Routines and Rules

Gordon relies on research and anecdotal information to set up her case against systems of management characterized by rewards and punishments. Following strategies within this chapter, Gordon asserts, will actually result in teachers engaging less in what has been traditionally conceived as management. After a self-assessment about how many reminders they give students, time spent on redirecting students, and management philosophies, teachers are introduced to ten strategies.

Strategies walk teachers through creating classroom norms, not rules, and teaching routines to students,

including helping students know how to do particular tasks (e.g., looking in the catch-up binder when absent, how to engage during independent work time, etc.). Gordon emphasizes the importance of a welcoming start to a lesson and ending a lesson in a way that emphasizes curricular goals. She also provides teachers with strategies about how to “call in” behaviors and language that are inappropriate. One of her most meaningful strategies is focused on helping teachers diffuse a situation and then make sure students know how to handle a situation differently in the future.

Classroom management is always something student teachers feel they need to work on. And it is further reiterated by their mentor teachers in almost every student teacher-mentor teacher-university supervisor meeting I have ever had. Gordon’s emphasis on techniques and philosophies that will help literacy teachers and their students operate together in a classroom space that promotes efficiency and long-lasting methods. In direct contrast to different reward systems that can be successful intermittently, Gordon provides teachers sustainable methods of classroom management that privilege classroom community norms and restorative practices.

Chapter 4: Management, Part 2: Relationship Building

Emphasizing the importance of building relationships with students, Gordon underscores research linking teacher-student relationships with student achievement. Sharing that relationships with students should be based on having empathy and really knowing them rather than just being the “fun” teacher, she then provides teachers a checklist that asks teachers to reflect on the relationships they have with students and how they use their knowledge in the classroom.

The strategies shared emphasize getting to know students on many levels. Gordon shares that it is important to know students’ names and *say them correctly*, learn about students’ identities, and find ways to connect with students inside and outside of class. Gordon recommends sharing good gossip [Gordon’s term] about students, taking time to make goals to get to know particular students better, and reaching out early to make connections with students’ caregivers.

My critique of the previous three chapters is that they contain content traditionally addressed in stand-alone classroom management courses. Nevertheless, the strengths of this chapter are less in the ideas and more in the explicitness of Gordon’s strategies. So often teachers, especially novice teachers, are told to form relationships with students, and Gordon’s strategies will definitely help with the how.

Chapter 5: Independent Practice

Acknowledging that teachers can often overestimate the amount of time they talk during lessons and acknowledging that it can be difficult to hand over control to students, Gordon shares that those doing the *doing* are those doing the learning. Tying in more contemporary practices such as project-based learning and inquiry circles to independent practice, Gordon asks teachers to reflect on aspects of their practice: how class time is spent, whether students work as hard or harder than teachers during class, and what students are able to get accomplished during students’ independent practice time.

Gordon’s first strategy in this chapter is one that could be difficult for some teachers, who have the best of intentions when it comes to helping their students. She encourages teachers to think about what students are able to do on their own and then giving students opportunities to do this. Gordon complements this strategy with related ones, such as

steadily increasing the amount of time students are able to work independently and providing resources around the classroom that help them during independent work time. Teachers are also advised to consider carefully whether students who receive intervention services - either in the classroom or outside the classroom - have thirty to sixty minutes of independent work time each day. The chapter concludes with a suggestion to give students Wonder Hour, an opportunity to investigate a self-selected question on their own.

Teacher educators and school leaders can often make teachers feel as though they need to support students in such a way that actually may prevent students from maximizing their potential. Gordon's chapter provides literacy teachers with answers to the oft-heard questions: *How can I conduct student writing conferences when I have a classroom of students? What will my students do while I am meeting with a guided reading group?*

Chapter 6: Formative Assessment and Feedback

After sharing a less-than-perfect classroom lesson with ninth graders who did not respond as she was expecting to a What I Know-What I Want to Know-What I Learned [KWL] activity, Gordon reiterates how important trusting relationships are to formative feedback. After sharing research on formative assessment's role in the learning process, she provides teachers with a thought-provoking self-assessment about how formative assessment is going in their classrooms.

Providing explicit strategies, Gordon guides teachers through ways to formally assess students across grade levels and subject areas. She guides teachers from simpler formative assessments, such as asking students to share what they have learned on sticky notes, to more complex formative assessments, such

as facilitating peer conferences and constructing learning progressions with colleagues. Literacy teachers will find resonance with Gordon's ideas about peer conferences and compliment conferences. Using quick writes as a form of assessment will fit perfectly within a literacy curriculum. Teachers familiar with reading and writing workshop and conferences may be able to move beyond this particular chapter. Those literacy teachers who are trying to find ways to incorporate seamlessly formative assessment into their curriculum in many ways would be smart to really engage with this chapter.

Chapter 7: Planning Matters

In the chapter introduction, Gordon provides a startling statistic about how many teachers - at all levels - turn to Google to find lesson plan ideas. Suggesting that this is not the best way to meet students' needs, Gordon provides a rationale for careful planning done with intentionality and based on the students in one's classrooms. Teachers are then asked to complete a self-assessment in which they are asked to think about their planning process and whether their students are able to articulate why they are engaging in particular lessons. Gordon's planning strategies range from encouraging teachers to think from the perspective of their students when planning lessons to planning for a range of types of activities to learning popular culture. More complex strategies include aligning day-to-day activities with summative assessments and what to do when there is evidence that students are not learning.

Literacy methods courses aim to help preservice teachers learn how to plan with the end in mind and plan lessons with their students' abilities and interests in mind. Student teaching gives preservice teachers an opportunity to plan a bit more, but the level of planning in this context is not always

indicative of the type of planning teachers do once they have their own classrooms. I can see Gordon's strategies coming in handy for novice or experienced teachers who have a bit of planning work underneath their belt and can identify some areas of growth in their own practice.

Chapter 8: Teacher-Led Instruction

Focusing on the importance of brief teacher-led instruction, Gordon shares research about the qualities of effective teaching and then provides teachers a chance to self-assess the amount of class time they spend engaged in direct instruction and whether or not students understand instruction's *what* and *why*.

The strategies provided help teachers consider how important it is to really *teach* content in succinct blocks of time, leave time for students to practice what they have learned, and consider each course as if they are gifted courses in order to raise the standards they have for their students.

Her strategies of the think-aloud, incorporation of storytelling, and asking authentic questions will be familiar to literacy teachers and literacy teacher educators. The limit Gordon places on direct teacher instruction will be challenging for some novice and experienced literacy teachers to hold true to.

Chapter 9: Student Talk and Collaboration

Referencing state standards' inclusion of speaking and listening standards and citing research about how talk is key to students' understanding, Gordon articulates why it is important for teachers to frequently facilitate student talk. Questions such as whether students can stay focused on a topic when discussing and whether or not teachers have an answer in mind when they ask students questions appear on the teacher self-assessment.

Teachers at all levels and content areas will appreciate Gordon's explicit strategies for engaging students in discussion. She provides strategies for traditional discussions, such as carousel discussions and Fishbowls, and less-practiced discussion techniques, such as having students write to one another as a form of discussion and creating recording stations out of cardboard boxes and felt for students to compose podcasts.

As a literacy teacher educator, I observe many novice English teachers who begin to realize quickly that their secondary classrooms are not their college English courses. I always tell my English methods students and student teachers that their students are not English majors. It is not that they cannot discuss the literature and their ideas; they just need some discussion structures. And that is just what this chapter provides for teachers.

Chapter 10: Summative Assessment and Grading

Gordon starts out this chapter with a personal account of how challenging *grading* has been for her. She then shares how much grading impacts students' lives and teachers' lives before offering a charge that she knows how to make summative assessment meaningful - while allowing for teachers to sleep at night! Teachers are then asked to complete a self-assessment about several areas, including how much time they spend on giving feedback during the process of an assignment rather than grading at the end and whether or not students have a good understanding of how they will do on an assessment before they submit.

Gordon provides strategies that have been the topic of professional books and conversations, such as not grading homework and giving an incomplete instead of a zero in the gradebook to provide opportunities for students to complete the work and show what they know. Her strategy about creating adapted tests

for equitable grading is one that many teachers may not have incorporated into their practice.

Several strategies in this chapter relate particularly to the literacy classroom. Writing methods courses often emphasize authentic audiences and building rubrics with students while being guided by student work. I particularly appreciated her suggestion for teachers to engage in side-by-side grading. One Friday night of grading my British literature students' research papers only to have a student throw their paper in the trashcan on Monday taught me this lesson early on in my high school English career, and I am so pleased other teachers will be learning this important technique.

Coda

Gordon's coda provides teachers with inspiration to continue their learning by engaging in a book group, having a younger mentor, doing teacher research, and asking constantly what practices will help students the most.

Critique and Conclusion

I would highly recommend this book for teachers who are looking to add joy to their teaching practice while meeting students' needs. Berit Gordon has an authentic voice and has clearly been in several classrooms. The colorful graphics with examples, tech-integration tips, and reading recommendations make this book accessible on multiple levels. Teachers can apply directly Gordon's strategies, be inspired to incorporate more tech tools into their practice, or delve more deeply into a particular topic. This is both a book to pursue in a weekend to find strategies to apply the next week or read thoroughly with a group of colleagues in order to set long-term goals.

As I stated above, one of my goals for reading Gordon's text was to see if it could be incorporated into a literacy methods course. And I think it certainly can. This book can be adapted to all grade levels and provides do-now strategies that could be incorporated into practicum lessons and then later student teaching lessons. Preservice teachers will love the book's visual nature and the emphasis on the *how* that can sometimes elude theoretical methods course readings.

Sure to be a favorite for preservice teachers, this book can also be complemented well with more literacy-specific readings. For example, Atwell's ideas can be introduced where conferencing is discussed, and Calkins's ideas about learning progressions in writing can be shared when Gordon shares ideas about this same topic. Teacher educators will have to select additional readings and texts (e.g., videos, websites, position statements, etc.) that supplement Gordon's general strategies with literacy-focused content.

As more and more teacher preparation programs are incorporating topics of mental health, Gordon's first chapter about teachers taking time for themselves is so important. Depending upon where in the course sequence courses on classroom management and assessment occur, Gordon's chapters could be previews or reminders of content learned. In many ways, the Gordon's integration of topics so often separated out in teacher education programs is what makes Berit Gordon's book one that has the potential to be a favorite for both literacy teacher educators and their students.