



# Constructivist Teaching by Heart

## Newsletter, August 2024

*"Putting children at the center of learning."*

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### The Courage to Be a Constructivist

For most of us, being a constructivist teacher or school leader can sometimes require courage. Due to many factors and influences, as a constructivist teacher, we can find ourselves sticking our necks out pretty far at times. I (Krista) have had this feeling many times. When my beliefs are challenged, or I am feeling pressure from others to conform, here is what I do. I tend to revisit why I became a teacher in the first place, and then work for common ground.



Why did you become an educator? We all have a story. Here's what I remember of mine. My dad was a teacher, and from when I was little, I wanted to be a teacher, too. I can remember studying my teachers and their actions throughout my K-12 school years. As an elementary student, I played school at home, emulating those teachers in my mannerisms and my expectations of the "students" who were neighbor kids who liked playing school, too. I can remember what I loved about school and also what I didn't like about school as a young person. I loved teachers who let us do art, and who read to us. I didn't enjoy filling out worksheets or teachers who favored some students over others.



In college, my teacher preparation classes were interesting. Yet, just like before, I had some classes and professors I connected with sharing pedagogy and teaching ideas I wanted to emulate. I loved trying out all of the strategies in the practicums I experienced – a great way to practice all that I was learning about the art and science of teaching. All this while, I was developing my beliefs about what kind of teacher I wanted to be.

As a student teacher, I enjoyed learning about the children's learning strengths and needs and then working to plan lessons that met the curricular standards as well as the students I would be teaching. I loved planning and teaching the whole day, and I was exhausted when I got home at night. Along the way, I found many like-minded teachers-in-training—those who got excited about working with children and trying to figure out what engaged them and where to start with each student.

I took all these experiences and ideas into my first teaching job (reality check!) and subsequent teaching positions. I was soon back in graduate school to work on my master's degree and signing up for professional learning sessions and courses in my school district to keep learning and honing my beliefs and teaching and learning.

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Fast forward to today. At this point in my educational career, over 30+ years, I have spent quite a few years of teaching and learning. Luckily, there is always more to learn and consider in this wonderful profession. Along the way, I have continued to find scores of like-minded educators, like Dana, whom I have relied on to challenge me, have fun discussing our work, including- successes, failures, and teaching experiences- and continue learning together. As education changes, we do too. Yet each of us has a core set of beliefs about how children learn, how we want to interact with children, and what is most essential to prioritize in our limited time together.

It is this belief system that helps me when I feel that I am sticking my neck out to affirm my constructivist teaching practices, such as advocating for a child who needs more time to learn, adding manipulatives, games, and interesting projects to the curriculum, or speaking positively about children or bypassing the worksheets for a more hands-on way of learning the content. Sticking to my reason for becoming a teacher in the first place, plus all I've learned along the way, helps me to have the courage to be a constructivist teacher.

### The Courage to Be Constructivist REFLECTION QUESTION:



**What about you? When have you needed the courage to be a constructivist teacher? What did you do?**



#### *PONDER BOX:*

Quote from page 40, *Constructivist Teaching By Heart*:

*"Constructivists always consider the child's development. Development means comparing each child only to themselves. We use instructional benchmarks as general guides, not markers of success or failure, making sure to monitor the progress and growth of each child."*

*We want to hear from you! Share your comments about this newsletter topic, The Courage to Be a Constructivist, [here](#).*

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## Teaching with High-quality Children's Books

### Theme: COURAGE

These titles, featured in *Constructivist Teaching By Heart: A Child-Centered Approach for Educators, PreK-3*, can help children think about how they can have **courage** when encountering a difficult problem, standing up for their beliefs or trying something new while simultaneously growing in their literacy skills. They also make a great “text set” for educators working on lesson design.



Additional “can’t miss” children’s books for teaching about COURAGE...

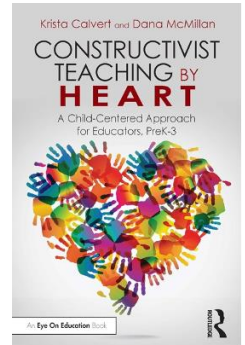


**Teaching Tip!** At the beginning of the year, you can choose four or five courage-themed books and read one each day, building the conversation about courage as you go. While reading aloud, sit in a circle for a better conversation and connect story features to our lives and also to how we might need to have courage at school this year. For each book, discuss the more specific theme, for example with *Long Shot: Never Too Small to Dream BIG*, the courage to keep trying even though many of Chris’ friends and family didn’t believe he could make the team. Identify primary characters and their actions over time. Did they change? How might we (our class) change this year? Teach vocabulary from each story and ask students to use the vocabulary to retell the story sequence. Use the set of texts to build relationships and community in your classroom (or school). In subsequent weeks, continue to revisit the topic and notice when our classmates and teacher exhibit courage.

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## Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

**Q:** What inspired you to write *Constructivist Teaching by Heart*? Can you share any personal experiences that influenced your approach?



**A:** In the past years, we each noticed how our classroom visits and school walkthroughs were changing. We were noticing more worksheets and packets, whole group instruction, and children sitting for most of the day. “Brain breaks” were employed to keep their energy up. We saw teachers using more reward systems to motivate students, and children were “playing” less – less projects, less choice activities, less individual attention. We know if learning feels like play, students are wholeheartedly engaged – but we weren’t seeing as much of that kind of learning.

Together, we discussed the changes we were seeing. More importantly, we felt the shift wasn’t because of teachers but primarily due to changing expectations placed upon them by outside entities. For example, to cover more curriculum at scale rather than differentiate for student learning and positive outcomes on the students’ own timetable. Another example is that kindergarteners were now expected to read and seen as behind when entering first grade as pre-readers.

After many conversations, we decided to meet regularly and write pieces about what we were observing in education. Our focus was to return to the child as the heart of the classroom, centering our focus on each child and their development. We revisited our beliefs such as the person doing the talking is doing the learning, students need varied groupings and structures for learning throughout the day, students need projects and choices, and their progress needs to be compared to themselves, not esoteric benchmarks that may not consider the individuality of the child as a learner. We knew that one-size-fits-all instruction can meet only a small number of students right where they are in their learning needs.

We are constructivists, believing students construct knowledge based on their learning experiences. Constructivist teachers create those learning experiences by understanding where students are in their learning and then designing or adapting lessons to meet the needs of the learners. They use authentic learning experiences in various configurations throughout the learning day, working with the class one at a time, all at once. We wanted to have that conversation on a larger scale. This is why we wrote the book.



Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)