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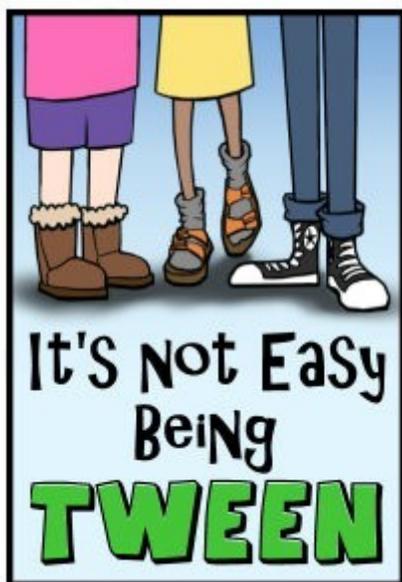
 IT'S NOT EASY BEING TWEEN / SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
 

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## My New Year Challenge: The Kind Classroom

BY [CHERYL MIZERNY](#) · 08/13/2017

### A MiddleWeb Blog



The beginning of every school year reminds me of New Year's Day.

A fresh start. The chance to make resolutions and challenge yourself to do something difficult or address something you've been wanting to change.

In short—to do better.

This year my classroom resolution comes from several sources and has cemented in my mind as “the year to cultivate a culture of kindness.” I want us to become The Kind Classroom.

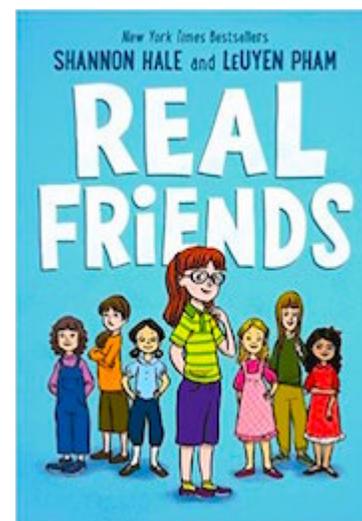
### Looking for empathy in fiction and nonfiction

My first source of inspiration was reading Debbie Silver and Dedra Stafford's new book, *Teaching Kids to Thrive: Essential Skills for Success*. In it there is a section on Tapping into Empathy. In my classroom, empathy has always been the yearly theme, and I gear all of our work toward that end. The book reminded me of just how important this work is, especially during the vulnerable middle school years.

In early May, I read the new graphic novel *Real Friends* by Shannon Hale and illustrator LeUyen Pham and immediately knew my students would gravitate toward it. The story revolves around two girls navigating the social waters of middle school, including growth and change, wanting to be part of the popular group, and learning what it takes to be a real friend. This is going to be my first read aloud at the beginning of the school year and will serve as a source of rich discussion and reflection.

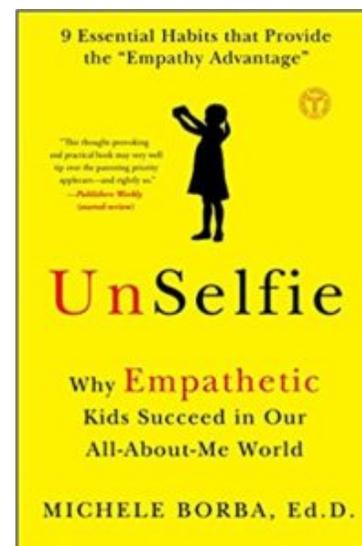
### Michele Borba on practicing kindness

Every year my administration chooses a book as a summer faculty read. These generally represent a vision we can focus on during the year, and we discuss these texts during our meetings prior to school. This year, they chose *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World* by Michele Borba.



One chapter in the book is called “Empathetic Children Practice Kindness.” The author lists “The Top Five Things to Know about Practicing Kindness.” All of these resonated with me, but especially #3: *Kindness can be strengthened like a muscle, but regular workouts are crucial for it to become habitual.*

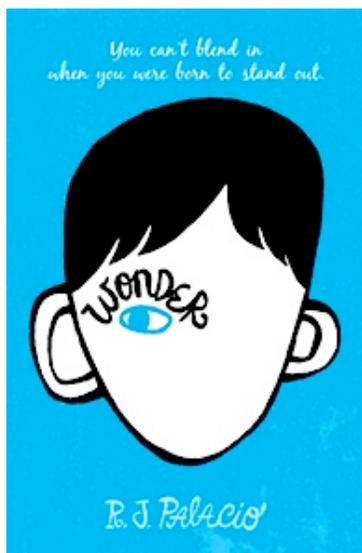
I have always believed in incorporating social-emotional learning opportunities into my curriculum (for example, my recent post “[Ideas For a Do-It-Yourself Soft Skills Curriculum](#)”), but Borba’s reminder reinforced the need for kindness to become integral to everything we do. Repetition leads to retention and internalization.



## Reconnecting with R.J. Palacio’s *Wonder*

In July, I attended my favorite PD of the year, nErDCamp, in Jackson, Michigan. This year, a surprise guest was R. J. Palacio, author of the modern classic *Wonder*.

She spoke about how surprised she was that her book became a runaway hit and led to the successful #ChooseKind movement and how excited she was for the upcoming movie. I was reminded of when I first saw her speak in 2012 and how moved I was by her desire to help children become more aware of how the choices they make affect others.



In an interview she gave shortly after the book was released, she said, “I hope that readers will come away with the idea that their actions are noticed...if they’re mean, someone suffers. If they’re kind, someone benefits. And the choice is theirs; whether to be noticed for being kind or for being mean. They get to choose who they want to be in this world.”

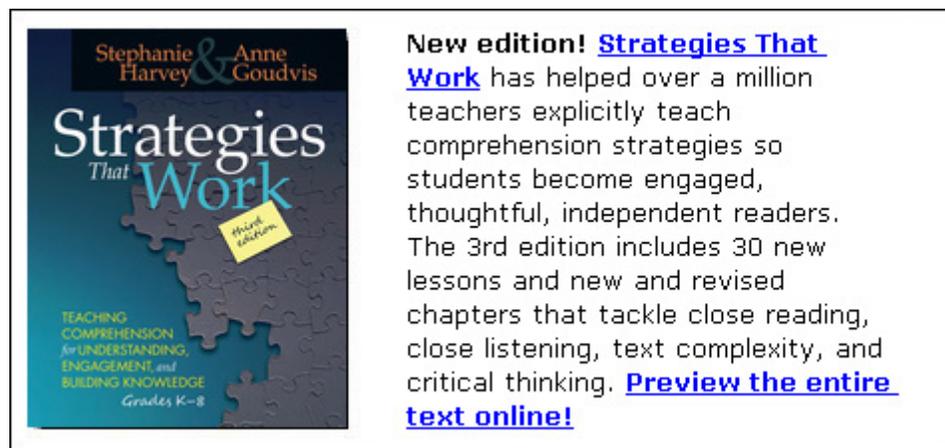
I already have many *Wonder*-themed items in my classroom, but even more are available due to the release of the movie later this fall. I plan on plastering them all over my classroom because this is the message I am going to emphasize this year.

Most of my students have already read the book in elementary school, but I plan on reading her companion picture book to them, to continue to post a “[Precept of the Day](#)” as I have been doing for the last couple of

years, and to encourage them to read the book on their own so that they all can relate to the year’s project.

## Planning for a new community

Shortly after nErDCamp ended, two friends of mine, Brian Wyzlik and Tony Keefer, revealed their new blog, *Classroom Communities*, all about the importance of relationships in the classroom. The blog includes posts written by many of my Nerdy Book Club friends, but Tony's post about Planning for a New Community really hit home. Our philosophies and practices are so aligned that he could have been inside my head.



Tony reinforced that it is crucial to build in time for creating community and mentioned that he incorporates many team-building activities as one method to achieve this goal. I have always done these types of activities too, but my professional goal this year is to develop and incorporate even more. And, of course, he included his commitment to [#ChooseKind](#), which is what I believe to be the foundation of a positive classroom community.

## Many teachers are 'empaths'

Palacio has shared that the lovely song, *Wonder*, by Natalie Merchant, inspired the title of her novel. Music inspires me too. For the last several months, I have been distressed reading hate-fueled rhetoric and witnessing acts of hatred on the nightly news.

I am one of those people that pop-psychologists would term an "empath." One of the best definitions of this I could find comes from psychiatrist Judith Orloff. She says, "empaths can have incredible compassion for people – but they often get exhausted from feeling 'too much' unless they develop strategies to safeguard their sensitivities and develop healthy boundaries."

Even without a label, I believe this is a quality shared by many talented teachers and others working in the helping professions. I feel deeply, and things that go on around me affect me. One day, while I was dwelling on a sad news story, I heard the song "[Hands](#)" by Jewel. In it she reminds us that we can either be "idled with despair" or use our hands to make a difference. She includes the credo, "Only kindness matters in the end," and I've adopted that as my mantra for the school year.

## Images to reinforce kindness

While on vacation last week, I saw this display on a beach boardwalk (below). The sign read, “The Kindness Rocks Project: One message at just the right time can change your entire day...outlook...life! Take one, share one, or add one to the pile.”

I have a wall of windows with a mostly unused ledge and I think this concept is the perfect addition to my classroom. I may not use rocks, but I will definitely make this an active part of our space.



*Click to enlarge.*

## Our journey toward empathy

As if all these weren't enough signs to dedicate myself to the lofty goal of creating a Kind Classroom, while shopping at one of my favorite stores this week, I saw this “Kind” pin (below) and purchased one. I don't need any more symbols – it's time to take action.

Now that I've decided upon my resolution for the school year, the work of adding on to my current practice of stressing empathy begins. I know I'm not alone in this because one quick Google search on creating a culture of kindness in the middle school generates nearly three million hits.

Many of these I have seen or used before, but some are new to me and perhaps they will be to you. I am excited about beginning this journey with my students. I hope this is their (and my) most memorable year—for all the right reasons.

