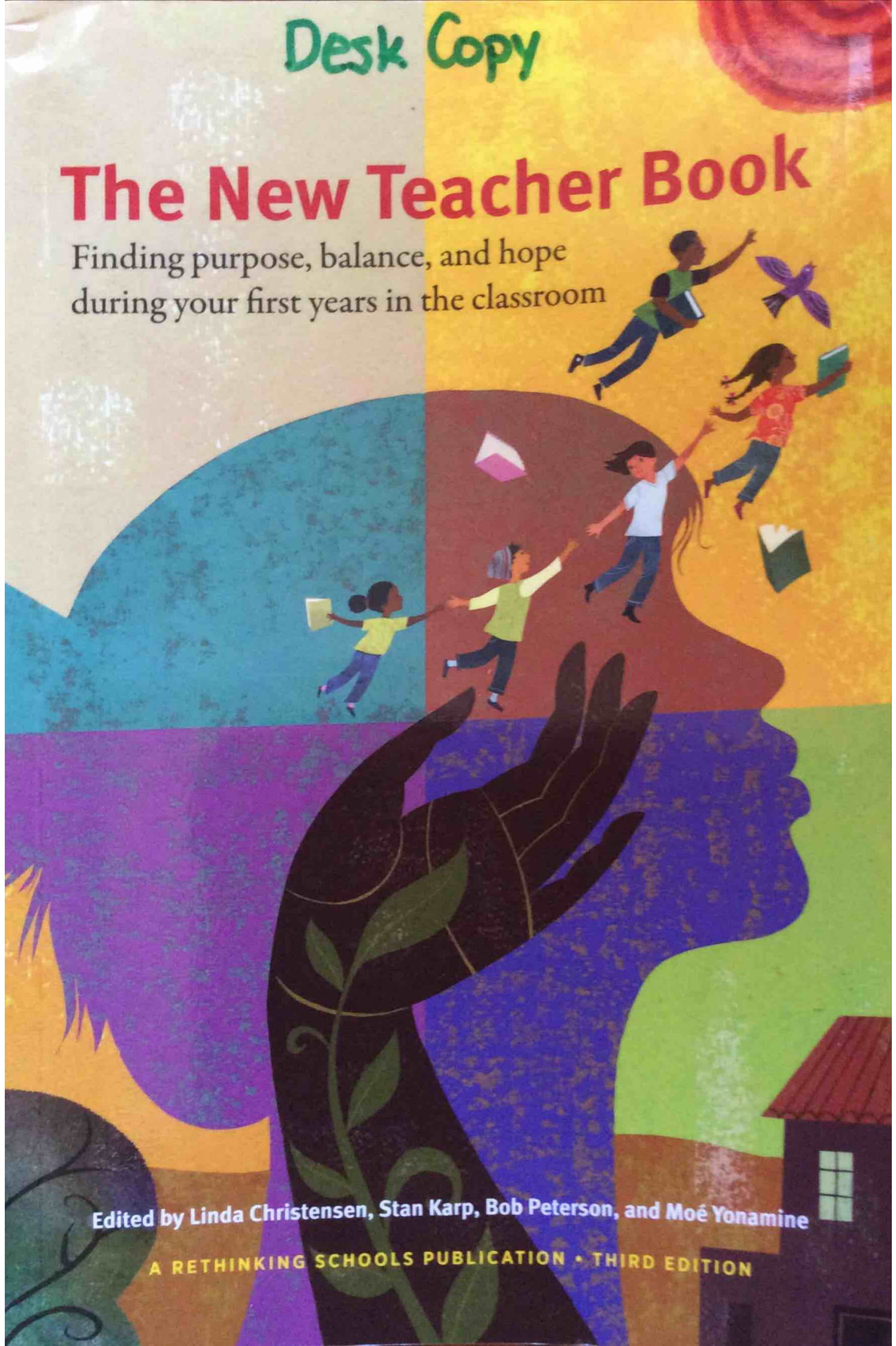


Desk Copy

The New Teacher Book

Finding purpose, balance, and hope
during your first years in the classroom



Edited by Linda Christensen, Stan Karp, Bob Peterson, and Moé Yonamine

A RETHINKING SCHOOLS PUBLICATION • THIRD EDITION

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6737 W. Washington St.
Suite 3249
Milwaukee, WI 53214
800-669-4192
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Cover and Book Design: Nancy Zucker
Cover Illustration: Rafael López
Production Editor: Elizabeth Barbian
Proofreading: Lawrence Sanfilippo
Indexing: Carol Roberts

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What I Wish I Had Said

BY ANITA STRATTON

“**G**oodbye everyone,” the music teacher sang out as she does every time my class leaves her room.

“Goodbye Mrs. Smith,” 22 2nd graders sang back. It was my cue to walk them out. We did the quiet signal for the hallway, and a couple kids gave the music teacher a hug on their way out. Akash walked by her and she called out lovingly, “Bye, Bobblehead!”

Mundane end of the day thoughts ran through my mind: Did I remember to tell Brian his mom will pick him up after school so not to ride the bus? What rotation is it for my after-school duty? What was that one announcement I was going to make? I interrupted myself. *Wait. Did she really just call him Bobblehead?*

Fight or flight. In my shock I froze.

And I said nothing.

Akash arrived from India days ago. He had dark hair and small frame. Our classroom community worked hard to welcome him to our new school. A buddy in the classroom showed him around. We made sure he sat with someone at lunchtime and had a friend to play with at recess. He tried his best to use the English words he knew to communicate. His dark eyes were intensely studying his new surroundings.

Akash consistently nodded his head from side to side when I spoke to him. He smiled often and I hoped he was starting feel comfortable. *Bobblehead?* I thought of the plastic dolls springing their heads back and forth. I felt anger, sadness, and confusion.

Our suburban elementary school in Ohio was experiencing a shift: We had recently become a Title I building. The new superintendent was changing the narrative of our diverse population from a challenge to our greatest asset. Although some teachers embraced it, the white teachers' lounge was full of stories of "these" and "those" kids. Avoid the lounge, they always say.

More than half of my class is bilingual: English, Spanish, Hindi, Gujarati, Chinese, Serbian, Arabic. It was the classroom I dreamed of being in as a child where our collective working-class immigrant background was part of our story and not what defined us.

I was in 2nd grade when I moved to Ohio from Japan. Growing up between two languages, I was told I could be a "bridge" between cultures. It felt like a gift and a burden.

Now I was given an opportunity to become this bridge at work. I had the ELL credentials that gave me the "expertise" to express my concerns to a colleague. But I couldn't find the right words to speak to the music teacher.

I took pride in the community my class had created together. Had one of my students said this, my reaction would have been so different. There would have been an immediate private conversation with the student. I would find out what the student said, why it was said, what it means, and ask how words impact others. It may have even turned into a whole-class conversation around how our words hurt people when we don't mean to.

But the comment coming from a colleague made me mute. Why?

What would I say to her?

Was I afraid to say something?

Why?

I decided to confirm the consistent nodding I saw Akash doing as a form of communication. My Google search revealed that head nodding is common in India and most often means "I understand" or "yes." I touched base with the ELL teacher to get an expert opinion. She agreed he was showing respect.

I worried I would upset Mrs. Smith. This teacher traveled. She sings songs in other languages. She teaches students about instruments from

I realized I was more upset about upsetting the teacher than thinking about how I could speak up for my student.

around the world. I knew she wasn't trying to be hurtful. I thought if I raised my concerns with her, she would be defensive. I worried she would think I was accusing her of something. I realized I was more upset about upsetting her than thinking about how I could speak up for my student.

Before I came up with a good plan, it was music day again. I picked up my students. They sang their goodbye song. As I walked them out the door, Mrs. Smith turned to Akash and said, "Bye, Bobblehead."

If I'm expecting students to have hard conversations with me, I need to do the same with my own peers.

I was not prepared to hear it again. I had moments to respond. The next class of students were eager to step in to the music room. In the midst of the chaos of transitioning students, I said, "He's nodding yes in his culture."

As the last of my students walked out of classroom, she responded. "Oh. Well, I just called him Bobblehead." Her tone was neutral. Perhaps it was her turn to not know

what to say.

This is where the story with this teacher ends.

But it's just the beginning of my own reflection. If I'm expecting students to have hard conversations with me, I need to do the same with my own peers. This won't be the last time I hear a comment that is hurtful. If it were me saying something inappropriate I would want to know.

It was a small step but I said something.

Each time we speak up it gives us the courage to speak again. We need to model for our students how to be allies and work through injustices. Our actions, no matter how small, can have a large impact. I'm thinking about phrases I can tuck away, so I won't be paralyzed in the moment next time. I'm focusing on phrases that share information and support our students.

"His name is Akash" is what I wish I had said. *