

A Review of “Things I Wish I Knew as a Teacher: Reflections of a Retired Principal” By Robert Hamilton (2021)

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T*hings I Wish I Knew as a Teacher* is a worthy read for early career teachers (pre-service and in-service) in Canada. Hamilton’s methodical structure allows readers to study the book from start to finish to gain a holistic picture of teaching and learning, or select individual chapters to find advice for specific areas of concern. The book serves to blend the gap between conceptual understandings of core concepts in Canada’s education systems and the on-the-ground circumstances experienced by students, teachers, and school administrators. The wisdom conveyed in this book is anchored in Hamilton’s experience as a former teacher and principal. Although the content is most relevant to the Canadian education context, the chapters draw on international research evidence and perspectives on education. Having experienced a full teaching career and supported and led many educators in their professional learning journeys, Hamilton provides invaluable insights for early career teachers in Canada across K-12 teaching divisions.

The book opens with a helpful chapter on acing the interview. After acknowledging the competitive job market in Canada, the chapter delves into understanding the job advertisement, refining the resume, and using online tools to facilitate the job search. Hamilton then discusses how to make a favourable impression during an interview, including questions to prepare for and ways to convey professionalism—all helpful suggestions while bearing in mind that professional expectations vary by school board and location. Here, Hamilton provides an almost step-by-step guide to navigating the interview from the moment interviewees enter the school to the moment they leave. A valuable insight Hamilton shares on preparing for the interview is to anticipate questions that may come up, group them by topic, and then rehearse key points one would like to articulate about that topic, rather than memorizing complete answers—this approach may prevent interviewees from becoming flustered when variations of questions they prepared for are asked. There is also a valuable section on video interviews, which have become increasingly common owing in part to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Chapter 2, Hamilton addresses the role of relationships and their centrality to success as a teacher. Focus is first directed to the iterative process of relationship-building with students, leading from an investment of time to mutual respect. He is intentional about driving the message that understanding one’s students not only forms that all-important bond but also improves classroom management and academic achievement. From this basis, Hamilton discusses the value of engaging parents in their children’s learning journey, noting that “a strong home-school connection increases the probability of changing negative behaviours” (p. 37). The chapter concludes by centering how relationships with colleagues and oneself round out the relational infrastructure that supports teaching and learning. Hamilton later expands on these ideas in Chapter 8, where he addresses how communication among teachers, parents, and students is a reciprocal process. He devotes considerable attention to what can go wrong in teachers’ communication with parents but spends comparatively little time on the importance of language and form. The chapter also discusses formal reporting timelines, a helpful addition but also a topic that will be most relevant to teachers transitioning into full-time employment, where longer-term relationships with parents become a crucial aspect of the job.

Shifting the focus to getting started in the classroom, Chapter 3 guides early career teachers in utilizing the time from mid-August to when they first meet their students. Hamilton advises not to put off the critical planning and preparation work until the week before school starts. He provides practical guidance on setting up a classroom, building relationships with colleagues, and getting to know the students before they arrive, structuring the chapter in a loosely chronological fashion. While informative and specific, Hamilton avoids being overly prescriptive, inviting readers to consider various perspectives and approaches. For example, he provides several suggestions and resources for approaching the topic of equity in teachers’ initial lessons. One area beyond the scope of this book is how the

content relates to supply teachers. Since many teachers in Canada begin their teaching careers as supply teachers, further reading about supply teaching contexts could be a strong supplement to this book.

Looking beyond the initial days of the classroom, Chapter 7 explores the regulations, standards of practice, and policy amendments teachers must know and follow. From the pithy observation that “ignorance is not bliss” (p. 137), Hamilton identifies the mandatory sessions and training required for teachers to complete and offers guidance on what to do when starting at a new school. He uses exaggerated examples to highlight key components of the profession (e.g., duty to report and boundaries) and reviews what to expect as a teacher in many situations (e.g., lockdown, fire drill, bomb threat). To dispel any skepticism about the importance of these elements, Hamilton points to the Discipline Hearings section in Ontario’s *Professionally Speaking* magazine to reiterate the fact that teachers who fail to observe professional expectations are reprimanded.

Chapters 4 through 6 address topics foundational to the day-to-day operations of any classroom. Beginning with classroom management, Chapter 4 provides two convincing scenarios (elementary and high school) to introduce a progressive approach to behaviour management involving low-, mid-, and high-level strategies. While Hamilton provides numerous practical ideas, he recognizes the necessity of teachers finding their own style and encourages adapting his advice through professional judgement. He also stresses the impact of classroom management on teacher well-being and notes that struggling with problematic student behaviour is exhausting and can lead to burnout. Hamilton provides guidance on planning and managing a classroom in ways that instead leave teachers feeling energized at the end of the day, a perspective rarely highlighted elsewhere. Transitioning to assessment and evaluation in Chapter 5, Hamilton asserts that the primary purpose of assessment is supporting student learning. After defining assessment for, as, and of learning, Hamilton explores concepts such as fairness, feedback, final grades and reporting, and assessing learning skills. Importantly, he emphasizes the role of professional judgement—a core aspect of grading policies across many Canadian education systems (DeLuca et al., 2017)—and creating the conditions in which assessment can cultivate learning. Overall, the chapter delineates assessment practice that is both *rich* and *sustainable*, articulating how to move from time-consuming, traditional approaches to assessment towards more interactive practices that activate the learners as assessors. In Chapter 6, Hamilton highlights the complexities of special education, yet recognizes that he only “scratches the surface” (p. 112) of this topic. Starting with the distinct terminology and abbreviations that exist across provinces (e.g., accommodations and adaptations), he urges readers to focus on those applicable to their school district and most relevant to their teaching career. He then describes that all school boards will stress three plan components to support students who are struggling: (1) accommodations, (2) modifications, and (3) assistive technology. The bulk of the chapter is dedicated to raising awareness of student difficulties and introducing a three-step problem-solving process (i.e., initial school-based team meeting, school-based team meeting with a greater number of resource personnel, and formal identification and placement) for identifying how to best support students.

With an eye to career-mindedness, Chapter 9 contends that, in order to provide for students, teachers must take care of their own mental and physical health and find balance in their personal and professional lives. Hamilton’s advice is to be proactive in identifying the triggers that lead to stress and anxiety, and he provides tips and resources for instances when teachers feel overwhelmed, such as “find[ing] ‘micro-moments’ of mindfulness throughout the day to reset your focus and sense of purpose” (p. 162). This chapter also attempts to reduce the stigma associated with mental health issues by highlighting the need for conversation and reflection among educators that normalized talking about stress, anxiety, and depression. In Chapter 10, Hamilton notes that for a job as demanding as teaching, the role of teacher unions is critical—not only in collective agreement negotiations that determine salaries and benefits, but also in ensuring a fair process for those whose work is brought under scrutiny. Regarding job action, he offers advice that all teachers would do well to consider, particularly when emotions run high about the issue(s) in dispute: “do what you can to maintain the relationships you have built. . . . Think long term, not short term” (pp. 169–170). Thinking long-term is also the underlying theme in Chapter 11, wherein Hamilton discusses the retention and induction programs that support new teachers’ professional learning. He reviews four groups of factors that explain why some teachers decide to leave the profession: (1) task-related (e.g., work conditions), (2) individual (e.g., psychological characteristics), (3) social environment (e.g., forming and maintaining relationships), (4) socioeconomic (e.g., salary compared to cost of living). The main idea is that mitigating these factors need not be an independent endeavour; mentorship and induction programs can help new teachers recognize and overcome professional challenges.

Finally, Chapter 12 addresses how career advice shared throughout the book can be considered in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the past two years have shown, not all possibilities can be planned for, and to manage the

stress of uncertainty, Hamilton advises teachers to “focus on what you can control and do your best to ensure you are ready for your students” (p. 195). The ensuing topics include how to handle complex situations in the school and classroom (e.g., mask wearing), types of delivery models, and various applications that facilitate virtual learning. Yet, while these teaching and learning resources could prove useful given the potential for future pandemic-related school closures and the increasing prevalence of online and hybrid learning environments, teachers would do well to view the intersection of virtual learning and school crisis responses as a rapidly developing area of practice.

Hamilton concludes with five recommendations for leading a fulfilling teaching career: (1) enjoy the special moments, (2) do it for the right reasons, (3) focus on relationships, (4) see the bigger picture, and (5) plan your career. For early career teachers in Canadian schools, Hamilton’s book provides an exceptional resource to engage with these themes on a practical level as well as a springboard to future professional learning. At the same time, readers should bear in mind several limitations of this book. Most notably, although Hamilton frequently offers perspectives that span provincial contexts, this approach trades depth for breadth. A more nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and political factors at play in a given province or territory in Canada will require further reading. Additionally, appreciating the volume of content that Hamilton covers, the chapters would have benefited from inquiry questions and practical exercises to connect the core concepts to practice contexts. Such exercises or questions could enhance systematic reflection and implementation of concepts articulated in the book. Despite these limitations, *Things I Wish I Knew as a Teacher* stands to be a useful companion piece for early career teachers’ professional development across Canadian contexts. The clear and practical guidance, grounded in experience, theory, and policy, may support retention of teachers navigating professional challenges and early career burnout.

REFERENCES

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