

10 Key Strategies for Teaching in Challenging Circumstances

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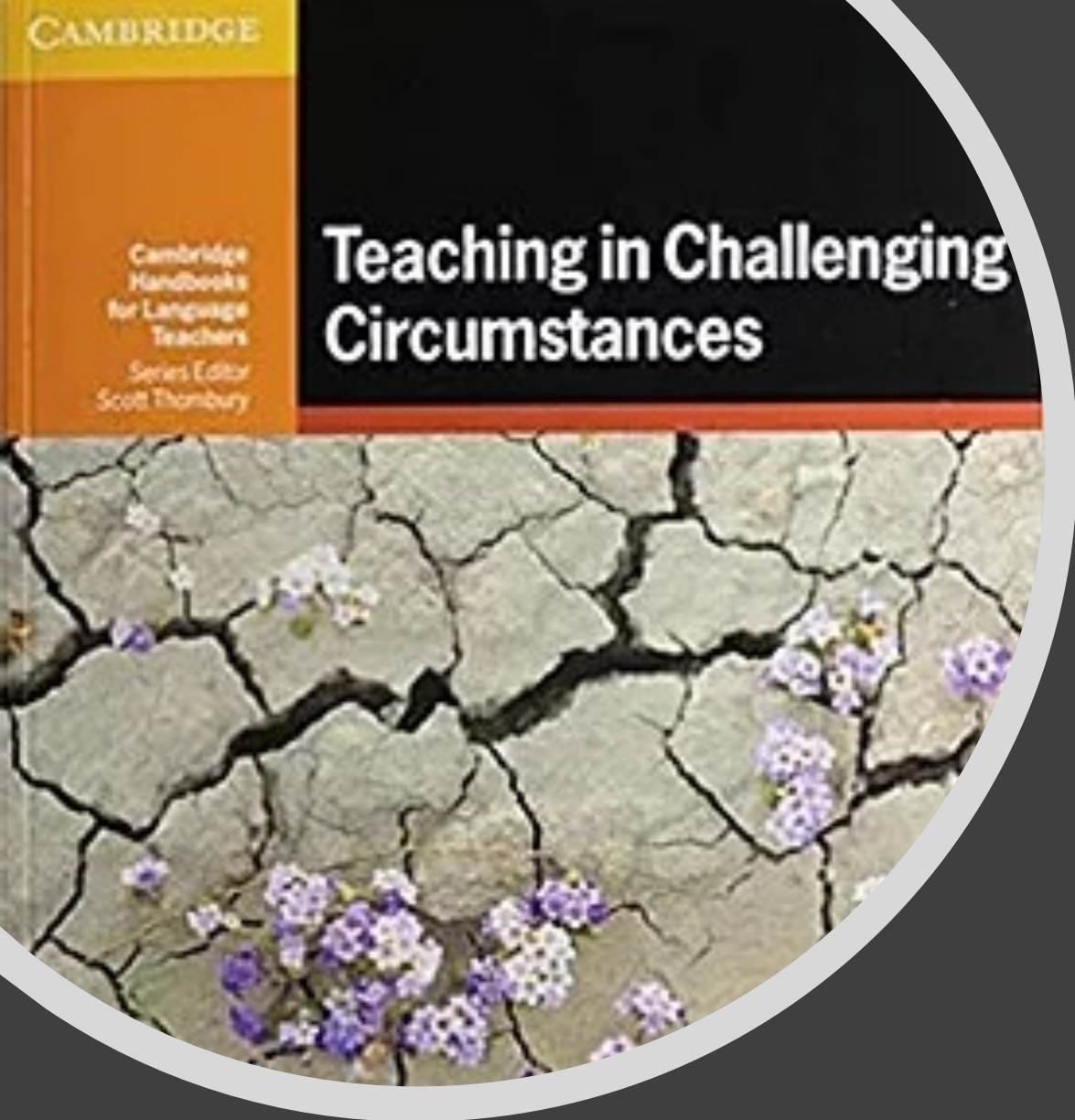
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About me

- **International Education Consultant, specialising in ELT**
 - Writing coursebooks, self-study books & teacher development materials
 - Teacher training
 - Materials development (offline and online)
 - Educational research





“Washing one’s hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.”

Paulo Freire



1. Use positive language
2. Create a positive classroom environment
3. Do whole class tasks
4. Collaborate
5. Challenge the textbooks
6. Link learning to community and outside world
7. Empower students
8. Create good storage systems
9. Look after yourself
10. Be human



Come here

Stop doing
that

Anita,
please come
here

Why are you
doing that?

1. Use positive language

Without trust, it's very hard to achieve good learning. In challenging circumstances, many learners have trust issues – for very good reasons.

Positive classroom language is one way in which teachers can effectively build trust.



I liked how you worked together in that activity.

Rukhia, I noticed how you shared your book with Hala.

Some general thought on classroom language

- Don't assume any 'bad' action is deliberately negative
- Give students the opportunity to think about why they've done something
- Students like pleasing their teacher – so tell them when they have
- Small changes can have a big impact
- Use multiple languages





2. Create a positive classroom environment

Look at the following picture of a classroom in South Africa. It is typical of many classrooms around the world. Think about how some of these factors are relevant in creating a positive environment in this classroom. Share your thoughts in the chat box.

Weather; Seating; Clothing; Connection to the space; Language



Do students feel that this is *their* classroom?

How do external weather conditions affect learning?

Some students have uniforms, some don't – how does this affect learning?

Does the classroom language exclude some students?
Does it negatively impact on their ability to learn?

Do the seating arrangements maximise learning?



**Decorate the walls.
Let students decide
what goes up. Don't
assume 'it will all
get ripped down'**

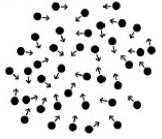
**Ensure the same
students don't
always sit in the
worst places**

**Don't make an
issue about clothing**

**Use L1s as a
scaffolding device.
Celebrate
multilingualism.**

**Change and
experiment with
the seating. Be bold**

Mingle



A ► mingle activity is a way for students to talk to lots of different people, especially people who they might not normally work with.

Example:

Tell children they have to ask a question (e.g. *What's your favourite colour?*) to at least six people in the group (girls and boys). They go around the group and ask the question. You can then take feedback.

Share

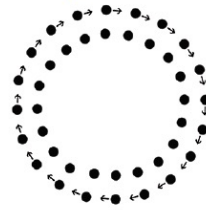


A ► share activity is good for children to see what other groups have done. It is a bit more structured than a mingle activity.

Example:

Groups do work on a large piece of paper. When the activity is finished, one or two members of each group stay in their place, and hold their paper up. The other children then circulate and look at what all the other groups have done. They can ask questions, if they wish.

Doughnut / Onion ring



A ► doughnut or onion ring activity is useful for when you want children to repeat a communicative activity with different partners in a structured way. The steps are detailed in the activity below.

ACTIVITY: Doughnut / Onion ring

- 1 Half the group makes a small circle, facing outwards.
- 2 The other half of the group faces them in a bigger circle.
- 3 Each pair talks for a short time (e.g. one minute).
- 4 The outer circle then moves round one place, clockwise. They repeat the activity.
- 5 This can be repeated several times.

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3. Do whole class tasks

Too often, we just tell students to work in pairs / groups without really thinking about it – or else we just use a teacher-fronted pedagogy



4. Collaborate

Create opportunities for learners to work together, and make your classes genuinely learner-centered.

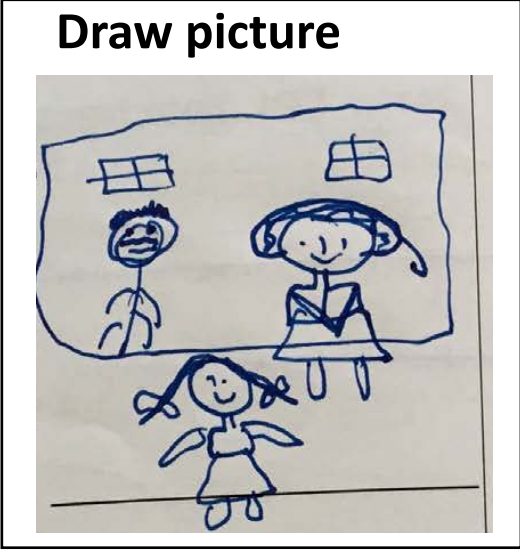
This is especially important in writing tasks, which teachers often find challenging.

Collaborative writing can also have a significant therapeutic effect.

Paragraph 3
After hours of searching, they found nothing. They call the police and everyone they knew, but still no response. So the parents felt hopeless and started to imagine bad things to their daughter. Suddenly Noura jumped from behind the curtains, saying: "Don't give up!"

Title
The Surprise

Characters
Father (a bakery man, who own a small shop), mother (house keeper), daughter



Paragraph 2
Their daughter is missing. They came home after a busy day, when they said "Hey Noura, where are you?" There was no answer. The mother started crying, and the father felt hopeless.

Paragraph 1
Once upon a time there were a family of father, mother and a little daughter. They were living in a small beautiful house. The father was working as a bakery and his wife helped him to make bread and sweets.

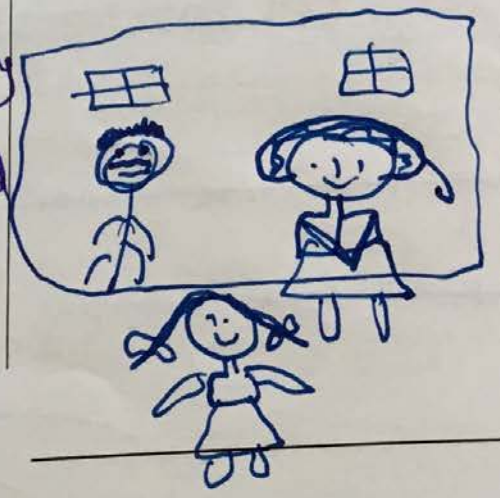
Characters (Stage 3)

father (A bakery man, who own a small shop)
mother, house keeper
daughter

Paragraph 1 (Stage 4)

Once upon a time
there were a family
of father, mother and
a little daughter.
They were living in
a small beautiful
house. The father was working
as a bakery and his wife helped
him to make bread and sweets.

Picture 2 (Stage 5)

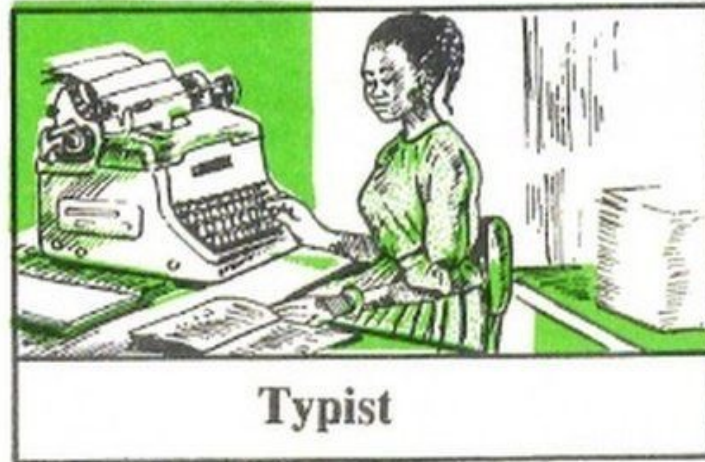
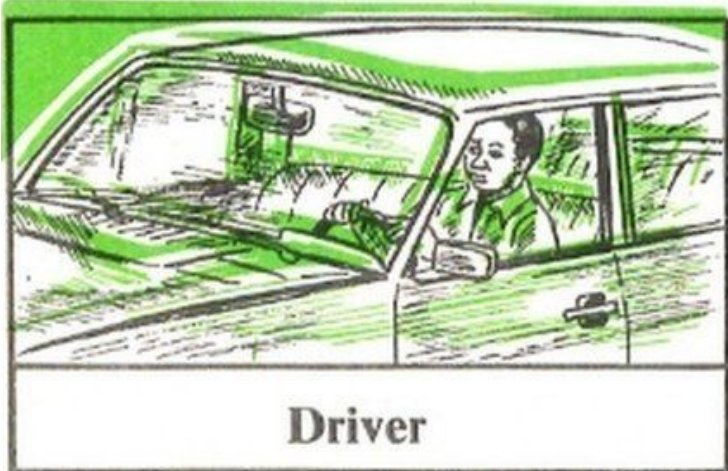
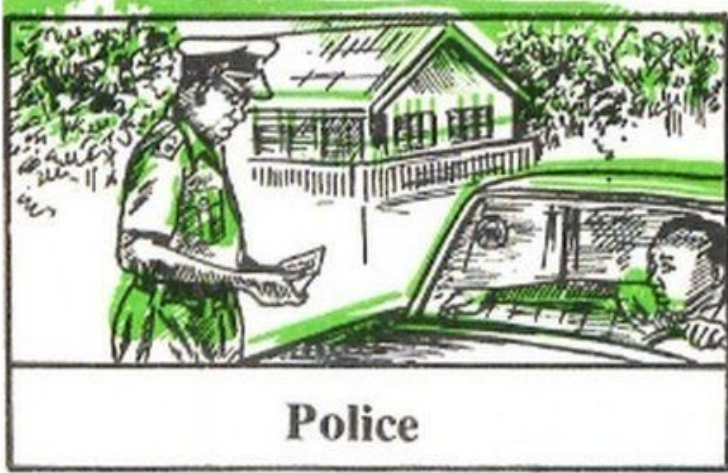


Paragraph 3 (Stage 6)

Their daughter is missing.
They came home after a long day,
when they said "Hey noua, where are you?"
There ~~was~~ was no answer. The mother
start crying, and the father felt
hopeless.

Paragraph 3 (Stage 7)

after hours of searching, they
found nothing. They call the
police and every one they knew.
but still no response.
So the parents felt hopeless
and started to imagine bad
things to their daughter. ~~Then~~
suddenly noua jumped from
behind the curtains, saying:



5. Challenge the textbooks

The contents of a textbook are not value-free; they are generally shaped by a wide range of different forces.

Textbook bias can be directed towards many marginalized groups. Textbook bias can also be demonstrated by either the lack of representation of particular groups and identities, or else stereotyping or presenting them negatively.

As teachers, we have the opportunity – even the duty – to combat this bias.

МЕНИҢ ДОСТАРЫМ.
МОИ ДРУЗЬЯ.



Мынау – достар.

Запомни: дос – друг
достар – друзья



After doing the compulsory text in class, you could ask these questions:

- *What does this text say about your community / society?*
- *Do you agree? Why / why not?*
- *What are the problems of portraying your community / society in this way?*
- *What does the text not say about your community / society?*
- *Why do you think these facts have been omitted?*
- *What would be a more accurate way of portraying your community / society?*

| | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| take dresses | serve and eat dinner | clean and wash |
| read newspaper /magazine | watch TV news | eat dinner |
| | | listen to music, do some writing |
| | | — wa T Talk- show. |

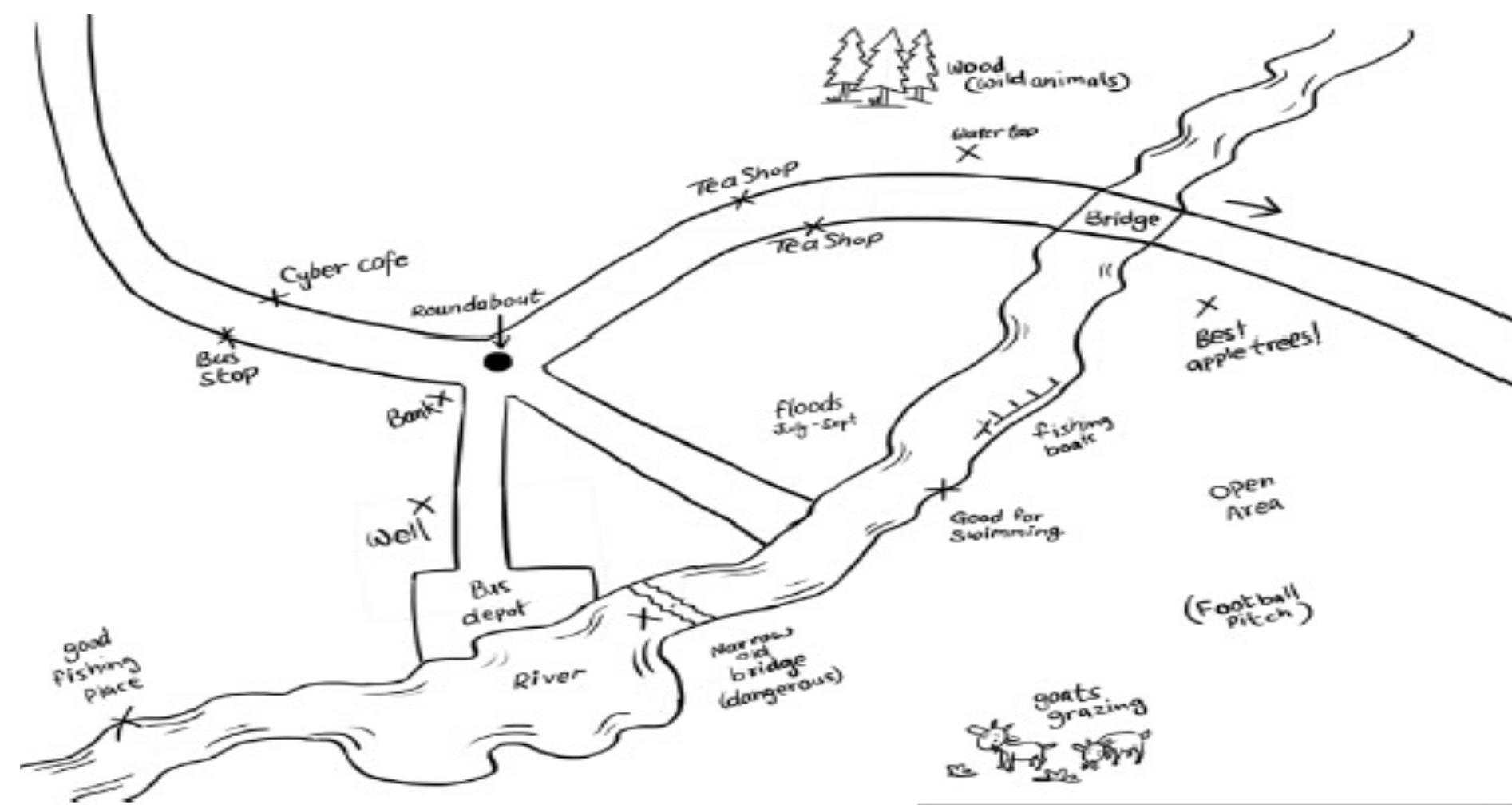
ACTIVITY: Listen to the world

- 1 All the students get up and go outside. They should take a pencil and some paper. They walk around wherever they like for five minutes.
- 2 As they are walking, they should write down all the sounds they hear (e.g. *I heard a dog barking*). They should do this in English if they can, or in their L1 if not.
- 3 Students return to the class. In pairs / small groups, they discuss these questions:
What was the sound you heard the most?
What was the most interesting sound?
What was the most unusual sound?
What sound is easiest to make with your own voice? Can you do it?
- 4 Take feedback from the whole class.

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6. Link learning to community and outside world

Even more important in post-pandemic era – where so many children have had their education so negatively impacted. The community and local environment are huge language learning resources. There are huge social benefits to including them in your teaching.



ACTIVITY: Community map

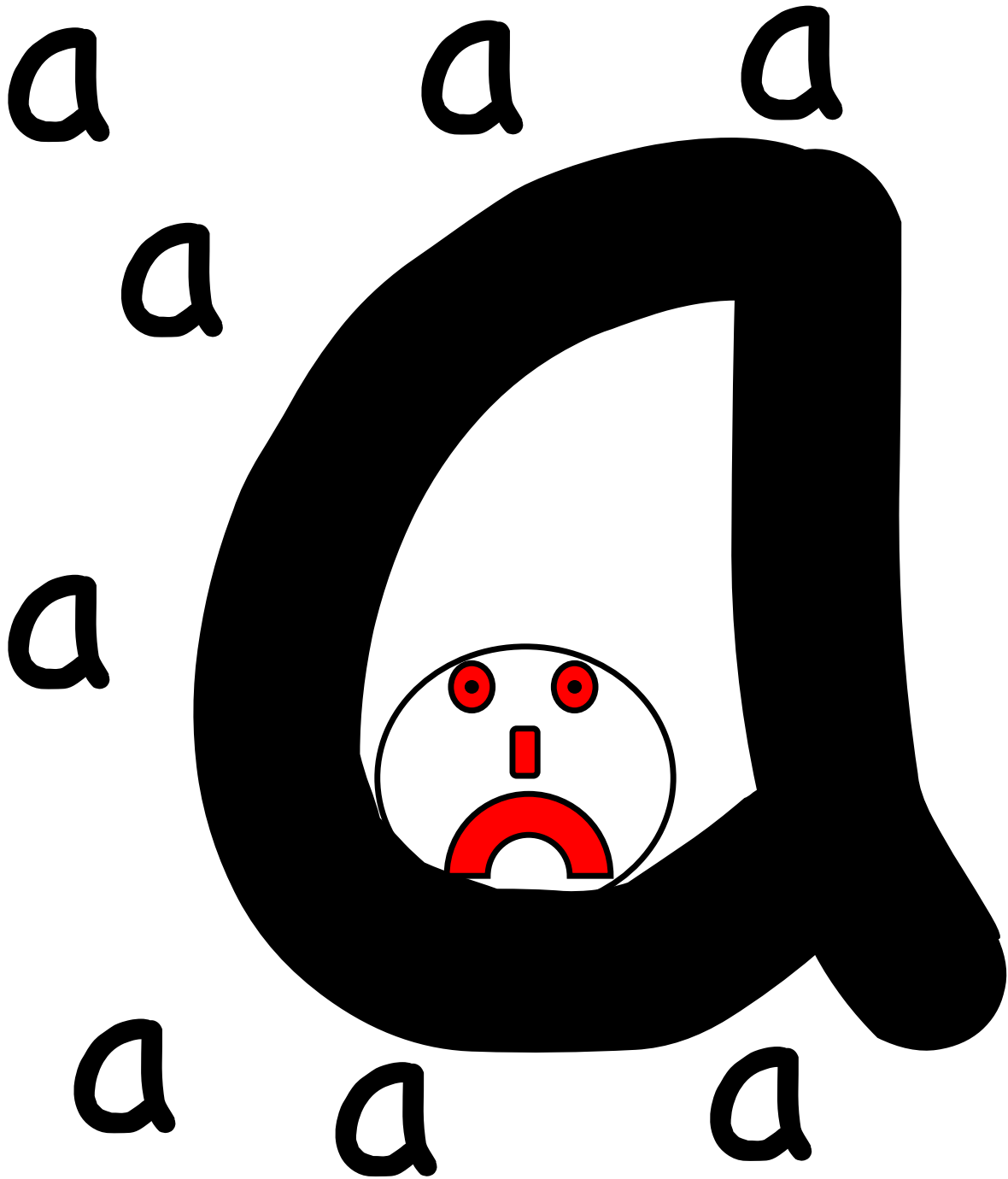
- 1 Explain to students what a community map is.
- 2 Students work in groups of two or three. They discuss (and write down) what they think should be in a map of their community.
- 3 Combine two groups together. This larger group of four or six share their ideas, and agree on what they should include on their community map. They then draw this map.
- 4 Each group shares or displays their map with the rest of the class. Students should look, in particular, at the different things which each focuses on. If possible, also compare it to an official map of the area.



7. Empower students

In challenging circumstances, it's extremely important that learners develop confidence, feel valued, have agency and believe that they can have a positive impact on the lives of others.

This can be achieved through relatively simple straightforward classroom techniques.



(student holding an 'a' at the front)

Once upon a time there was a letter 'a'. The 'a' lived on her own.

Q: How do you think the 'a' felt?

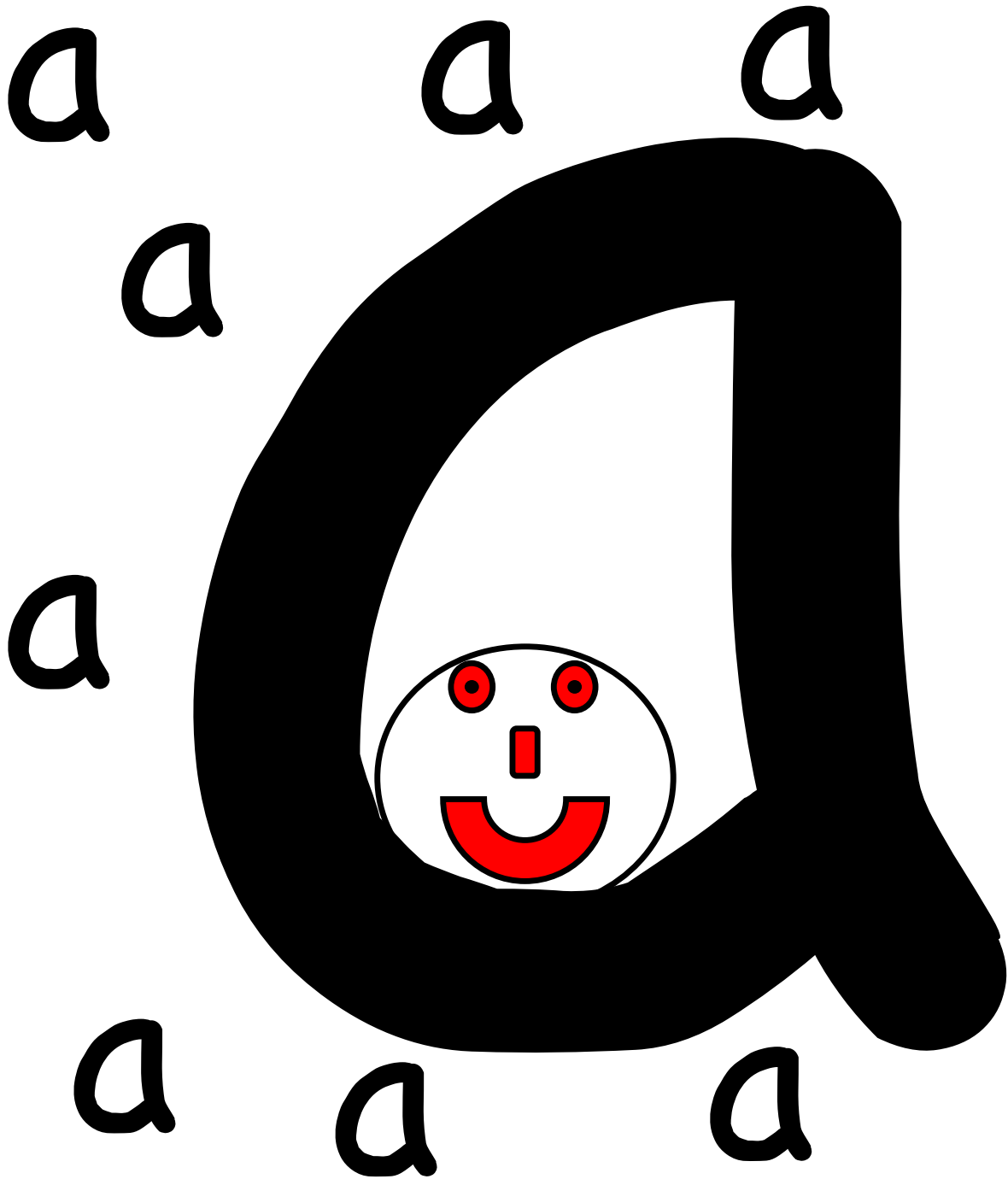
(student draws a sad face on the 'a')

Q: How can we make the 'a' feel better?

(students draw as many 'a's as they can in 10 seconds)

Now there were lots of 'a's

Q: How does the 'a' feel now?



(student holding an 'a' at the front)

Once upon a time there was a letter 'a'. The 'a' lived on her own.

Q: How do you think the 'a' felt?

(student draws a sad face on the 'a')

Q: How can we make the 'a' feel better?

(students draw as many 'a's as they can in 10 seconds)

Now there were lots of 'a's

Q: How does the 'a' feel now?

(student changes sad face to a happy face)

8. Look after yourself

Rule 1: Don't blame the students

“A child’s current behaviour often reflects an essentially sane response to an untenable set of life circumstances.”

Madge Bray

- *I'm hot*
- *I'm cold*
- *I'm tired*
- *I'm angry*
- *I'm hungry*
- *I'm depressed*
- *I'm worried*
- *I'm in pain*
- *I'm bored*
- *I don't understand what I have to do*
- *I can't say what I want to*
- *I'm confused*
- *I'm stressed*
- *I'm sitting in a different place than usual*
- *I'm working with someone I don't like*
- *I don't feel well*
- *I'm sad*
- *I had a bad experience this morning*
- *A teacher hit me*
- *My Mum / Dad hit me*
- *A teacher was angry with me*
- *My Mum / Dad was angry with me*
- *My Mum / Dad is ill*
- *My Mum / Dad is sad*

Rule 2: Don't blame yourself

“I was blindsided by the emotional aspect of teaching—I didn't know how to handle it. I was hurt by my students' pain, and it was hard for me to leave that behind when I went home.”

Alysia Ferguson Garcia

There are limits to what you, as a teacher, can do and what you can give to each student. For some, not even your maximum will be enough.

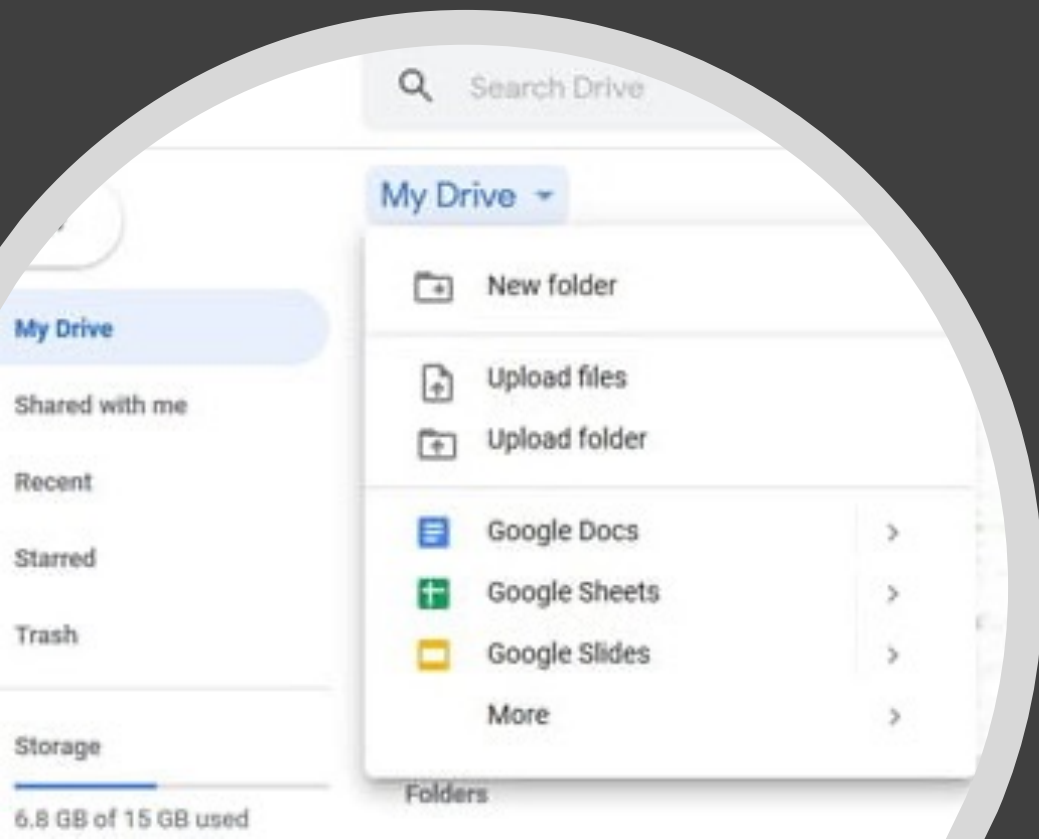




9. Create good storage systems

Good admin and document management is important in all education settings – but especially in challenging circumstances, which often have a shortage of time, material and personnel resources, and where teacher churn and turnover is high.

This is true for physical and digital storage.



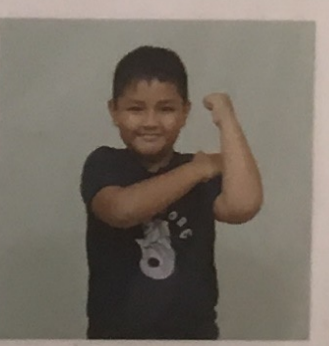
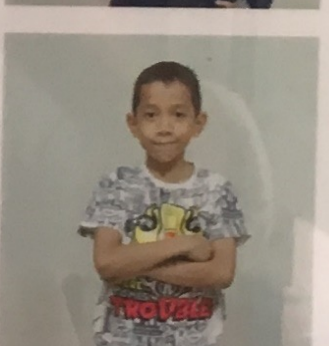
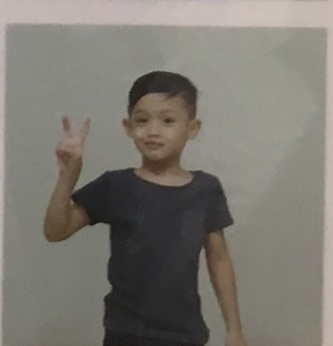
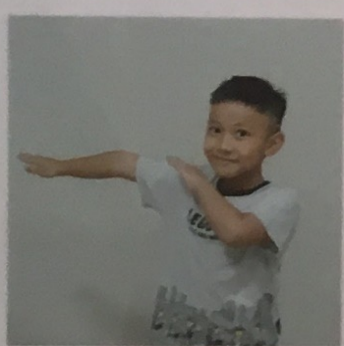
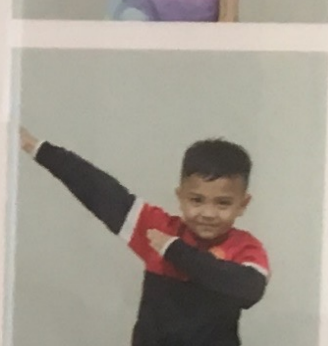
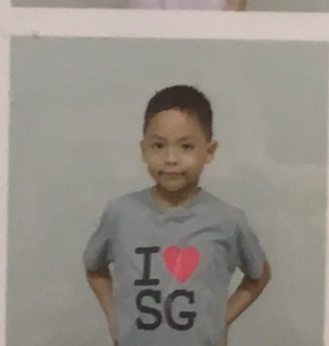
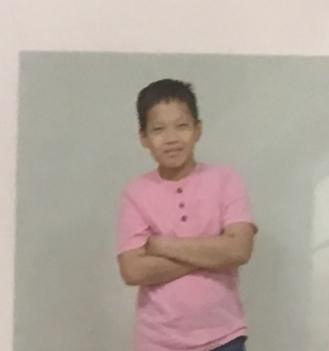


10. Be human

You're a teacher, but you're also a person.

It's important for students to know this.

(I'm the one underneath)



Student pictures at the entrance to a language school in Jakarta, Indonesia



Teacher pictures in the same school, hanging next to the students



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Please let me have
your questions

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my website



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