

The  
Minimalist  
Teacher

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C. Y. Arnold



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# Introduction

## **The Making of Minimalist Teachers in a “Maximum-ist” Society**

When conjuring up the image of a minimalist teacher, a few images may come to mind. First, you may think it’s not possible. Conversely, you may imagine an expertly organized teacher in an expertly organized space that is highly structured and color-coded with all items in designated places. Or perhaps you imagine a space that is bland and bare, with only the necessities like pencils, paper, and furniture. The reality of creating and living the minimalist approach to teaching and learning in everyday classrooms can stem from these very different ideas, personalities, and personal intricacies, but all with a common purpose.

This book is a result of us coming together after many professional conversations around a common belief about quality teaching and learning. Although our systems of organization are different, and we have some different views for how spaces or resources can be used, our priority is the

same—meeting our students’ needs effectively and efficiently. A minimalist approach to teaching and learning may sound impossible with all the impending demands, or it could be regarded as an overly simplistic way to view quality education. However, simplifying teaching and learning to keep students in our direct line of vision is not oversimplification. It is creating a simplicity that allows education to become richer and more meaningful by way of paring down distractions and all the waste we are faced with daily.

## A Culture of Waste

### How Did We Get to This Place of Too Much?

Teachers do not need more “stuff” to clutter their space. Where is it written that *more* ever meant *better*? Simply put, it means more work without any guarantee that the learning will be more meaningful or better experienced. What teachers *do* need is support sorting out all the stuff that has been collecting inches of dust, shoved into cupboards, and left on shelves over the years. Our personal lives are filled by this systemic culture of waste, which endlessly bleeds into our school lives. We suffer from economic, social, intellectual, and time waste that can validate that what we have is just too much.

### Paradox of Choice

Restaurants give us such a wide range of options on the menu, but how do you narrow it down without having a slight bout of inner panic? The priority is to eat, and quick, because you are just that hungry. How do you choose which jelly bean to eat first? With a ruffled brow, we put too much thought into something so trivial. Likely no assumptions are made in stating that every educator has been a deer in the headlights, paralyzed with the amount of choice in initiatives, programs, strategies, or tools. In *Paradox of Choice*, Barry Schwartz (2005) speaks about the paralyzing fear of making a choice and understanding the process behind this. He states that “[o]pportunity costs subtract from the satisfaction that we get out of what we choose, even when what we choose is terrific.” The additional intellectual waste we face once a choice is made—wondering if the right choice has been made and thinking that another would have been better—causes unneeded stress. This then becomes a good time to think about how choices can be made with efficiency and purpose. Once a choice is made, thinking can be decluttered and the initiative can be modified for your particular context.

## Too Many Choices

Another effective example of this choice-initiated paralyzing fear has been presented by Malcolm Gladwell. In his TEDTalk “Choice, Happiness and Spaghetti Sauce,” Gladwell (2004) speaks about the number of spaghetti sauce choices produced by one spaghetti sauce manufacturer. Offering a few dozen choices does not necessarily mean that people will be drawn to purchase a new sauce. There is comfort in purchasing the one you always buy. You know what it tastes like, how it cooks, and that your family likes it. And what if we try a new flavor and it isn’t received well? Your prowess in the kitchen could be called into question, let alone the food, money, and time wasted on this trial of the unknown. We can draw definite parallels between these spaghetti sauce choices to the overabundance of choices in our field. There are so many choices and options in education, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. It is no wonder that educators are drawn back to the ideals and practices they feel are familiar on well-trodden ground.

Likely you have been to an education conference. What do you see at the exhibit hall? Rows upon rows of vendors. Are you drawn to the exhibitors you know? Of course! There is comfort in the known and in returning to practices we have been successful with in the past. However, we need to be cautious of being overly comfortable and less open to innovation. The key when onboarding anything new is to think deeply about what the purpose is, wisely consider your priorities, and be thoughtful about ways to pare down without stripping away the effectiveness of what you are attempting to do.

## Cue the Minimalist Movement

People from Japan to the United States and everywhere in between have become fascinated by minimalists, such as Joshua Fields Millburn, Ryan Nicodemus, and Marie Kondo, and their approaches to decluttering spaces. They spark the desire to find purpose and meaning in what takes up space in their physical environments and purge the rest. People are prioritizing life experience over material objects and moving into tiny houses while still recognizing that we cannot do away with all material objects. There is a delicate balance in knowing what you need and how you can maximize what you already have to develop a strong sense of commitment to creating a better life.

Additionally, more and more Americans are reading about and practicing meditation to declutter their minds of intellectual waste. Since 2012, there has been a surge in the number of Americans practicing yoga and



meditation according to Amy Norton (2018) in her *Health Day News* blog. Increasing numbers of Americans are also getting outdoors to hike, walk, and interact with wildlife according to some U.S. Fish and Wildlife studies (Smith, 2017). And to eliminate mental fatigue, people perform “spring cleaning” of disconnected friends on Facebook to declutter personal relationships. The good news is, we can do the same in our schools and classrooms.

## **Do Less, Better**

Those of us in education might think the idea of doing less seems like an impossible task, as though it is not even a choice. Expectations and duties corner us from every angle of our peripheries and from a wide range of stakeholders. Your students want to schedule a time for class soccer matchups. Your principal is asking to complete the documentation of your assessment results before the break. Parents would like further information about how their children are performing before the next round of standardized assessments. Bulletin board displays of student work are dated from three months prior and have that faded and torn look about them. Your colleague next door is asking you to share what provocation task you are going to use next week to start the new unit of work. How do you say no to these tasks? How do you decide which stakeholder receives your time and effort before the others? How do you find the time to do all of these to-do's justice?

In his book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, Geoff McKeown (2014) proposes that we “do less, better.” The proposition is that we find our way to our priorities by paring down to take on more focused tasks and do it better. He describes a filtering process in which we consider our purpose first and foremost, and only say yes to activities that will meet that purpose. He reminds us that remaining in a situation in which we feel like all tasks are vital, that we cannot say no, or that we feel overwhelmed and exhausted actually leads us to be less efficient and poorer performers at our work. So, in fact, our ability to serve our stakeholders decreases as a result of our struggle to meet the needs of all stakeholders efficiently. Joseph Neil (2014), in his book *Less > More*, goes as far as to compare this overwhelmed and frantic state with facing constant failure. When framed in this light, this seems like a defeating and uncomfortable state to exist in. Further to this, in his *New York Times* article “The Unbearable Heaviness of Clutter,” Emilie Le Beau

Lucchesi (2019) highlights an important conclusion made from a study published in *Current Psychology*. He found

a substantial link between procrastination and clutter problems in all the age groups. Frustration with clutter tended to increase with age. Among older adults, clutter problems were also associated with life dissatisfaction. The findings add to a growing body of evidence that clutter can negatively impact mental well-being, particularly among women. Clutter can also induce a physiological response, including increased levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.

Is it any wonder that rates of teacher burnout and attrition are what they are? If we take these cues from our essentialist and minimalist friends to focus our attention on our purpose, we can more easily align our actions with those intentions. Educator and productivity specialist Angela Watson (2018) reminds us that what we say no to is just as important as what we say yes to. Our real purpose should be equally evident in the things we put our time and effort into, as well as the things we say no to. We need to remove the narrative that we do not have a choice in this matter.

## **A Mini Historical Lesson on Minimalism**

Minimalism originally stems from the principle of nonattachment in Buddhist religious philosophy (O'Brien, 2019), or how attachment to the extraneous things in life can lead to suffering, the foundational First Noble Truth of the Buddhist teachings. This principle is based on achieving joy and enlightenment through detachment, which is sometimes the opposite of what we see and experience in Western industrialized society, yet we see aspects of this cultural belief emerge as part of new approaches to modern lifestyles.

So, when we fast forward to the 1950s and begin to see minimalism popping up in an art movement at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Glover, 2017), it's a sign that this way of thinking can have a large influence on people's lives, in general.

## A Cultural Gap in Minimalism

Historically and culturally, minimalism tends to be represented predominantly in the lifestyles of white Scandinavian and Asian cultures. When thinking of Scandinavia and minimalism, we probably first think of architectural and furniture design. But it goes much deeper than this in traditional culture, as described by the Danish term *hygge* and the Swedish word *lagom*. These terms encapsulate ideals such as life balance, well-being, comfort, and enjoying life and our time. Japanese culture is known for living small, but as explained above, it has deeper roots in Zen Buddhist values in venerating simple lives and rejecting material possessions. Minimalist approaches have more recently been popularly adopted in many countries around the world. Furthermore, we can trace minimalist values to many different religions, philosophers, and leaders around the globe and throughout written history.

However, is this modern experience of minimalism as a lifestyle choice represented equally and similarly across different countries and cultures? The Blackminimalists blog describes that they “experience minimalism differently from the mainstream movement and [they] noticed that [their] voices were not represented on those mainstream minimalist platforms” (Acree, 2017). So perhaps it is reasonable to say that this mainstream approach is less conspicuous or congruous in Black and Brown communities. While we may have read about the reasons behind this and the differences in these experiences outlined in several blogs, we feel that we are not the voices to best convey them. We would, however, like to share the viewpoint of Christine Platt (2020), author and Afrominimalist, who found the spark of beauty in what could be seen as another whitewashed aspect of trending lifestyles by ensuring she did not “let go of her culture just to conform to mainstream minimalism . . . because the beauty and history of the African diaspora are at the core of [her] life’s work.” Platt went through the decluttering process, a similar process we will be taking you through in this book. Platt also mentions that, for her, minimalism hasn’t necessarily been about counting the number of things she owns, but rather having things that serve a purpose in her life and amplify her culture. This is our hope for you as you work through your own process, when you dig into each aspect of teaching in order to find the intentionality in all that takes space in your teaching life.

## A Culturally Minded Minimalist Teacher

We recognize that we must remove the historical stigma in a whitewashed education system and dismantle inequities that prevent Black teachers or other educators whose culture may not encapsulate the ideals of minimalism from engaging in a meaningful shift in teaching life. We hope that our framework and questioning translates to educators in schools everywhere at any point in time, shining a light on the positive implications of a minimalist approach to your teaching and learning life. We are a community of individuals who have come from the widest ranges of life experiences, from every culture, from every region of the world, and yet we have all gathered in this one special place: the field of education. We were drawn to this field because we know the importance of learning together and nurturing young minds. We have a desire to affect the communities in which we choose to live, whether near or far from where we were brought up. We hope the minimalist journey provides the benefits of reduced burnout and decreased stress. Maybe the effects will trickle over into your personal life, and maybe not. The key is that you have an entry point here, which can greatly benefit you and your teaching community.

Shifting to a minimalist approach in your teaching life requires you to think deeply about your purpose when educating students. Decluttering does not mean we take away meaning. Decluttering means we find meaning in the essentials, such as shifting our curriculum to become relevant, anti-racist, and as unbiased as possible. It means we shift our instruction and assessment to become trauma-informed and culturally competent.

One path to teach an anti-racist curriculum involves teaching conceptually and removing assessment bias. By removing the clutter of the biased elements of the curriculum and focusing on the students in our classrooms, by learning about who they are and where they have come from, we can design an assessment system *for them*. Statistics show us that year after year, Black students in America are failed by the current standardized assessment structures (Muhammad, 2020). Their scores fall far below the “standard,” yet somehow these poorly developed and biased assessments are still used. With this in mind, these assessments can be viewed as a waste of time, money, and energy and can cause a tremendous amount of stress on teachers, students, and their families. Why do we continue to clutter our assessment systems with assessments based on biased information?

However, when teachers can develop conceptual understanding in their anti-racist curriculum, the teaching is honest and the learning is rich. It provides an open space for students to develop insight about how the education system is rooted in racism and layers upon layers of inequities. In her book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, author and activist Gholdy Muhammad (2020) mentions the use of frameworks that encompass depth, not just skill development. Providing students with unbiased historical information and the space to feel, share, and uncover the system we are all a part of resembles the work that Black organizations have long been doing. It's not a complicated approach, but instead, deep and focused, and it allows for the truth in learning that white students need. It brings concepts such as inequity, social constructs, racism, and activism to the surface and allows for all students to then become equipped to problem solve, think critically, and understand the need to advocate for equity in education for their peers who have been victims of an inequitable system.

For a deeper understanding about the equities that countless BIPOC students face in the education system, we have listed recommended resources by Black educators, as well as a list of Black educators to follow on social media (see Figure I.1). Learn from them throughout this minimalist journey, and focus on the true purpose of education when you pare down to a trauma-sensitive and culturally informed learning experience for your students.

## Minimalism in Education

Before we move into a thorough examination of how and why to use our Triple P decision-making questions on page 12, we need to take a moment to consider what should be the springboard for all our work toward decluttering aspects of teaching: research, the fundamental element in school-based decision making. Being mindful of evidence can help prevent us from wasting time, energy, and resources (Sumeracki, Caviglioli, & Weinstein, 2018). Research in education is taking place across many relevant fields, including teaching practices, pedagogy, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology. Why not make use of it? Informed educators need to be able to see through the hyperbole or possible popular trends, and closely examine the research, if any, that supports our ultimate purpose: student learning and growth. Often we see the evidence for initiatives presented in one of two ways:

Figure I.1

**BIPOC Educator and Educational Leader Resource List**

Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="http://teachingtolerance.org">teachingtolerance.org</a></li> <li>• <a href="http://teachingforchange.org/anti-bias-education">teachingforchange.org/anti-bias-education</a></li> <li>• <a href="https://www.racialequitytools.org/">https://www.racialequitytools.org/</a></li> <li>• <a href="https://www.thebipocproject.org/">https://www.thebipocproject.org/</a></li> </ul>
Educational leaders to follow	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dr. Salome Thomas-EL; @principal_EL; <a href="http://www.principalel.com/">http://www.principalel.com/</a></li> <li>• Ijeoma Oluo; <a href="http://www.ijeomaolu.com/">http://www.ijeomaolu.com/</a> and Dr. Ibram Kendi; @DrIbram; <a href="https://www.ibramxkendi.com/">https://www.ibramxkendi.com/</a></li> <li>• Kevin Simpson; KDSLGlobal and AIELOC; @GlobalKDSL; <a href="http://kdslglobal.com">kdslglobal.com</a></li> <li>• Craig Martin; @CraigCMartin12; <a href="http://craigcmartin.weebly.com/">http://craigcmartin.weebly.com/</a></li> <li>• Dr. Basil Marin; @basil_marin; <a href="http://basilmarin.com">basilmarin.com</a></li> <li>• Cornelius Minor; @MisterMinor; <a href="http://kassandcorn.com">kassandcorn.com</a></li> <li>• Ki; Woke Kindergarten; @AkieaG</li> <li>• Dr. Paul Gorski; Equity Literacy Institute; @pgorski</li> <li>• Dr. Sheldon Eakins; Leading Equity Center; @sheldoneakins</li> </ul>
Writing and talks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vernita Mayfield; @DrVMayfield; Cultural Competence Now: 56 Exercises to Help Educators Understand and Challenge Bias, Racism, and Privilege</li> <li>• Bettina Love; @BLoveSoulPower; We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom</li> <li>• Gholdy Muhammad; @GholdyM; Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy</li> <li>• Dena Simmons; @DenaSimmons; <a href="https://www.denasimmons.com/stockists">https://www.denasimmons.com/stockists</a></li> <li>• Dr. Cheryl Matias; @cheryl_phd; <a href="http://www.cherylmatias.com/publications/">http://www.cherylmatias.com/publications/</a></li> </ul>

1. Research has been undertaken into this exact program or strategy, and here are the positive results. (We followed students in this program, and a control group that wasn't, and here are the benefits for the students who participated.)
2. Aspects of this program or strategy are connected to other research that has been undertaken. And therefore we can assume that our linked approaches will have similar effect sizes. (A group conducted research and found positive effects for *X*. Our program incorporates elements of *X*, and therefore we will probably also have the same impact on learning.)

Additionally, we can consider how the evidence was collected and collated to help us make pertinent decisions. Is the research presented based on empirical evidence or on anecdotal evidence? Have the results been presented in such a way that creates bias in the predicted effectiveness of the program?

Who did the research, and would they have an interest in presenting findings in one way as opposed to another?

Take this example of how research to inform the adoption of initiatives in schools can go awry. Perceptual Motor Programs (PMPs) in Australian schools are physical movement education programs based on the idea that developing perceptual motor skills will support the academic development of young students. They were initially recommended as a remedial support for students or as a whole-school early intervention approach to support young students' development. However, research into the efficacy of actual PMPs showed a close to zero effect size on academic skills and not much more for perceptual motor skills (Stephenson, Carter, & Wheldall, 2007). This research was collated and presented in the 1980s. However, these programs still exist today, with some schools across Australia still using them as both remediation programs and as physical education programs. Stephenson, Carter, and Wheldall discuss the persistence of these programs and suggest that educators are relying on anecdotal success stories, instinct, and easy access to materials over the review and weight of evidence. Teachers are returning to the familiarity and knowledge of this program rather than looking for a more effective but unknown program. Applying our critical thinking skills to the evidence will help us apply our time and efforts to the most effective practices possible. Considering the breadth of all education-based programs, strategies, and tools for learning available, critical thinking should form the foundation on which we build our approach to the decluttering process.

Andrea Felker, a middle school English as an additional language teacher in Singapore, told us that "it would help everyone to be more minimalist. This is a problem—trying to pack far too much into a lesson, trying to use too many different technologies or strategies, schools trying new initiatives because they feel they need to tick a box. Most units are too full, and lessons move too quickly; learning becomes shallower and shallower rather than deeper." Andrea went on to say that many teachers need to be explicitly taught and supported in their efforts to effectively and sustainably create a clutter-free environment. After teaching in a number of schools in several countries in both North America and Asia, she has not taught in a school that has explicitly supported minimalism but rather "schools that value efficiency." She sees this as "a real disadvantage for those who haven't honed their skills in this area, and especially new teachers."

Fortunately, leaders in the minimalist movement have created many different mediums to interact with and support people developing these skills. They have published books, websites, podcasts, documentaries, and TV shows, all focused on their mission to guide people to find meaning in their lives through this lifestyle. Their discussion centers around how the trend toward a life lived through the accumulation of “things” leaves our modern selves feeling adrift, lonely, and purposeless. By reflecting on what is vital in our lives and actively working toward that, we will begin to feel fulfilled and content.

Similarly, if our work in education is made up of the clutter of too many ideas, tasks, initiatives, unnecessary resources, and philosophies, we will also begin to feel lost and overwhelmed. As educators, taking the time to pare down and focus on our priorities will support our greater purpose.

“The Minimalists” discuss the importance of identifying your values, beliefs, or “musts” to free yourself from the extraneous things that are not adding to your life (Millburn & Nicodemus, 2011). Analogously, we have framed the Triple P questions to help you find your priorities and purpose so that you can pare back the unnecessary clutter in your work life and perhaps vice versa. We hope that this will aid you in finding your impetus and satisfaction in your role as an educator.

Counterintuitively to this work, the media, and what seems to be the whole of society, bombards us with the idea that more is better. We must realize that this is not so. We also need to understand that in our process to find purpose, prioritize, and pare down, we must undo prior learning that has developed habits of wanting more or thinking you need more. At this point, we have Prochaska and DiClemente (1983) to thank for their theory about these behaviors. As a result, they developed the transtheoretical model, “an integrative, biopsychosocial model to conceptualize the process of intentional behavior change.” The model outlines the “stages of change” to describe how people approach and conquer change. By choosing to read our book, you have already passed the precontemplation stage, in which people are not quite ready to acknowledge they need help and do not have any intention of making change in the next six months. You, on the other hand, are likely further along in the contemplation stage (ready to change in the coming months), the preparation stage (ready now), the action stage (you have already started making changes in recent months), or the maintenance



stage (working to prevent relapse). For whichever stage you identify, we have a set of tools for you.

## Introducing the Triple P Framework

Throughout the book, we will be working through the different elements of the overall Triple P framework. The whole framework includes the overarching Triple P questions, the Triple P funnel and decision-making questions to focus priorities, and the Triple P cycle. Let's look at each of these elements now.

### Triple P Decision Making

When discussing ideas for this book, we knew introducing new educational jargon or acronyms that did not meet the goal of transforming to a minimalist approach would be a poor decision. Yet, we knew we needed a simple phrase that *would* stick in a cluttered teacher's mind to move the work ahead. After we boiled down many of our professional conversations, as well as conversations we have had about writing this book, we were consistently coming back to three main points resulting in what we have called the Triple P questions part of our Triple P framework.

1. What is our purpose?
2. What are our priorities?
3. How can we pare down resources?

**Purpose:** Every day we ask ourselves easy-to-answer questions. "Why am I running when my knee hurts?" Easy answer. "Why am I using this product instead of that one?" Easy again. But when we ask ourselves, "Why would I teach that?" or, "Why would I teach that in this way?" we must peel back the layers of teaching and learning, because there are so many "Why am I doing this?" questions to ask.

**Priority:** Now, here lies a great challenge. How do you prioritize when there are just so many "things" that require attention? Go back to your purpose to help you build your prioritization muscles. Your priority will always be the well-being and learning experiences of your students. Always and forever. Remember this when your mind is swamped because we know from experience that our priorities are masked by other clutter. In schools, items for discussions are usually prioritized by time and money, not by student or teacher needs. How do you unmask these mandated compliance tasks in a

short time frame while still ensuring integrity in your teaching and, quite honestly, your sanity? While the Triple P questions become more intricate when peeling back the layers, remain simple in your response: your students are your priority.

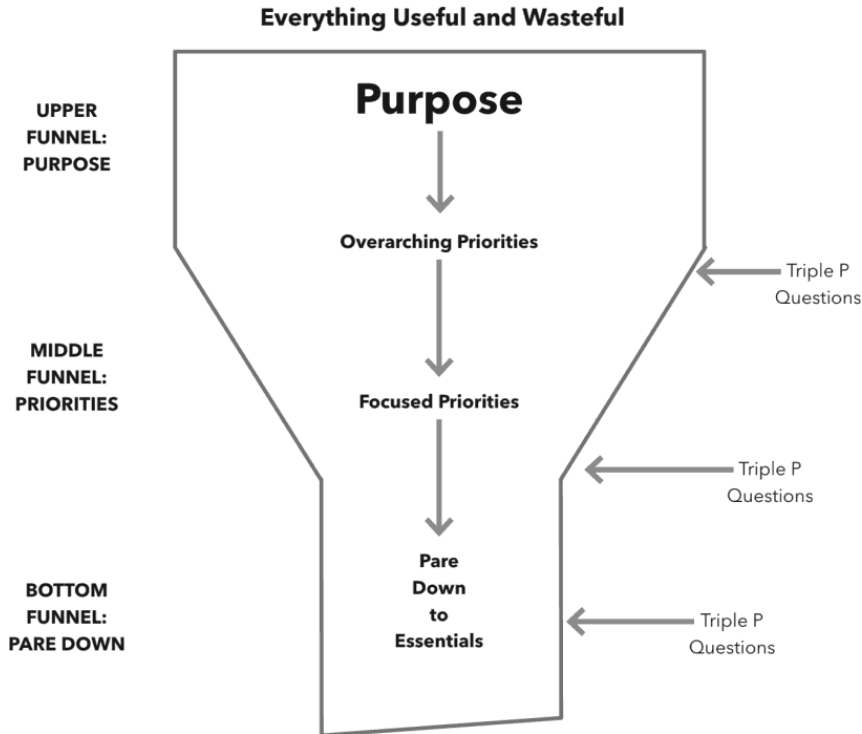
**Pare Down:** Last but certainly not least—how does one pare down all that “stuff” so that priorities match purposes? How do you really do more with less? This may become the most challenging part of the transformation of practice. The challenge comes with letting go of things, control, and feeling overwhelmed to make space for increased efficiency, productivity, and new feelings of satisfaction and supported well-being. We will work with you through this process of letting go.

Throughout each chapter of this book, we will examine various ways in which Triple P decision making will guide you in finding solutions and making improvements in your work. Unfortunately, we could not write a book about a minimalist approach and address every aspect of teaching. That would result in a book hundreds of pages too long! However, our hope is that Triple P is open-ended enough for you to refer back and find your way to solutions in almost any area of teaching. Whether it is working with parents, using hours of your free time to plan, navigating team collaboration meetings, or putting together portfolios, considering your purpose, priorities, and how to pare down will help you find a navigable way through the clutter. To support your work ahead, we have included Appendix B, which has nonexhaustive lists of initiatives, purposes, and priorities for each chapter of the book.

## The Triple P Funnel

To help you visualize how the Triple P decision-making process flows, imagine a funnel like in Figure I.2. A funnel allows you to pour a large amount of substance through the open top. As it moves through the funnel, the substance passes through a narrower area, finally filtering into your intended space. That space at the bottom of your funnel is where you create intentionality in each element of your teaching life. The process of funneling is careful and deliberate. We sift through our workload to ensure extraneous or oversized elements do not end up in our filtered result. As you work through your questioning and decision making, you are filtering and sifting for the essential elements only, not removing the important pieces, only the extraneous distractors, blockers, and space fillers.

Figure 1.2

**The Triple P Funnel**

- **Top Funnel.** This is the place where all forms of everything useful and wasteful (time, energy, money, mental and intellectual effort) coexist, just before we dump everything into the funnel.
- **Upper Funnel.** This is the place where we look at all the elements and determine the overarching purpose before we start to filter all the pieces more carefully. Determining your overarching purpose or goal will allow you to clarify the supporting priorities. At this funnel level, we ask, “What is our main purpose here?”
- **Middle Funnel.** Once your purpose is clear, you will begin asking yourself some more Triple P questions as you filter into the middle funnel. Here you will ask, “What is our main priority or couple of priorities that will support our purpose?”

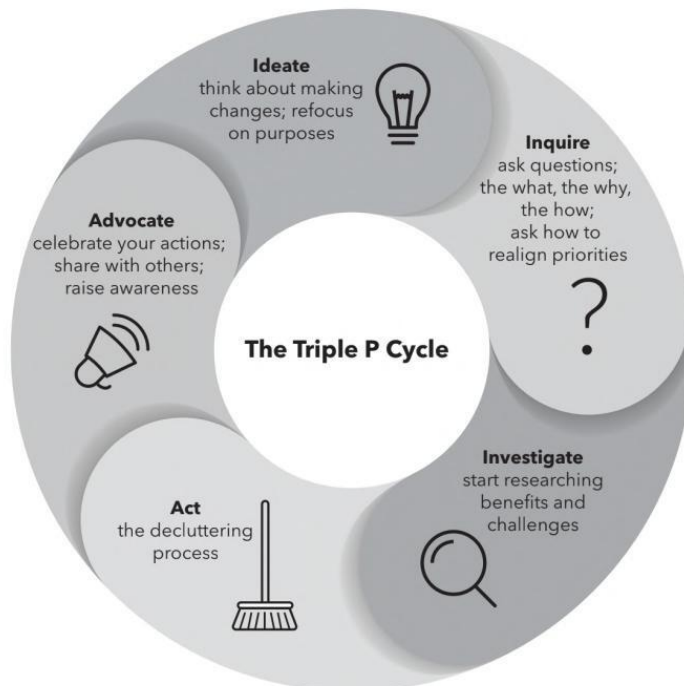
- **Bottom Funnel.** As you sort out your priorities and your elements are becoming clearer, at this point you can ask more specific questions around your priorities such as “What is the priority in this element for this class, student, or teacher?”

## The Triple P Cycle

Now that you have been introduced to our Triple P framework and have seen the fundamental elements of finding your purpose, priorities, and how to pare down—and how the Triple P funnel allows you to narrow your focus—you may also begin to notice a series of events taking shape. As we work through the necessary changes toward becoming more minimalist in our approach to education, you will notice a series of repeated experiences form that will take us through the process of the Triple P cycle in Figure I.3.

Figure I.3

### The Triple P Cycle



As you move through the chapters and utilize the entire Triple P framework (funnel, cycle, and questions), you will begin to see that you are going

through a process of considering new ideas, asking questions, and investigating benefits and challenges in your own context before moving into taking action (description in Appendix A). We encourage you to complete this cycle by advocating to those around you about what you have discovered and found successful.



### The Cycle Element for Introductory Ideas

**Ideate.** This introduction has you at the ideation phase of the cycle. You are thinking about making changes in practice and want to refocus on the greater *purpose* of teaching. This is extremely important to recognize as you take on new thinking and create new habits within your practice.

To assist you in being mindful about your own individual process and journey, we have included markers throughout the chapters to remind you what stage you are working in and where you will be moving next. Our hope is that this will prompt you to be considerate of where you are to deepen the engagement and deliberation throughout your participation. If you find yourself taking action before you've had a chance to really inquire and investigate, you know that you may not be making the most informed decisions. If you miss a step, go back to previous markers and reread to ensure you are truly considering your purpose and priorities before taking any next steps.

When Pam was trying to convince herself not to attend art school on an episode of the American version of *The Office*, Jan told her that “[t]here are always a million reasons not to do something.” You may be thinking of your million reasons not to take on this transformation as you read this chapter, but we ask you to think of all the reasons you should.

## How to Use This Book

Before reading the rest of the book, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you think you could develop a stronger sense of community and purpose in your classroom?

- Do you store resources that have been sitting in your room unused?
- Are you avoiding your administrative team because you know they will ask you to do something else?
- Do you teach a curriculum that is overwhelmingly overloaded?
- Does planning rich learning experiences cause you to feel overwhelmed?
- Are your assessment practices scattered and not as useful as they could be?
- Are you unsure about how to move ahead with speaking up for a better system of teaching and learning in your classroom?

Have one or more of the questions got you nodding your head with a little too much vigor? Well, good news then, because we have written *The Minimalist Teacher* with the intent that educators can choose to read the chapters about their specific decluttering needs, or as a whole. We do recommend reading Chapter 1 to set the stage for understanding the purpose of decluttering and then moving on to any chapter based on the desired topic. The book is not intended to be read in order, but it can be.

Once you have answered these questions, you can determine how you will read the book. Figure I.4 provides a couple of suggestions to help enhance your experience.

## Chapter Summaries

Merely thinking about the work ahead might be daunting, uncomfortable, and exhausting. It may cause some anxiety and worry, but to create space by weeding through the clutter is an essential step in helping you clearly focus on the purpose in your practice. To reduce mental fatigue and support choosing your starting point, we have provided chapter summaries for this book.

**Chapter 1: Creating a Culture of Minimalism in Your Classroom** highlights the importance of creating a culture of minimalism by establishing a shared understanding of what minimalist teaching and learning can represent in classrooms. We highlight and discover our priorities in creating a culture of minimalism and establish protocols for how to create it by developing knowledge, habits, and relevance.

**Chapter 2: Decluttering the Physical Environment** examines the perils of waste that partner with having a classroom. Further, we explore tools for

Figure I.4  
**Suggested Uses for the Book**

Suggested Use	Process and Actions
Reading on your own	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Answer the above reflection questions.</li> <li>2. Determine your professional need from your responses to the questions above.</li> <li>3. Take your time to read the target chapter and use its tools for reflection to guide you in the process of decluttering.</li> <li>4. Share the process with your colleagues (the feedback loop is crucial in the sustainability of this practice).</li> <li>5. Support another colleague with the same problem of practice.</li> <li>6. Share your successes and challenges with us via Twitter using #MinimalistTeacher.</li> <li>7. Use the cycle as a reminder to continue your new habits.</li> </ol>
Reading with a professional learning community (PLC)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Answer the above reflection questions independently, then share responses with the PLC.</li> <li>2. Determine your problem of practice.</li> <li>3. Group with like response colleagues or work as a whole group.</li> <li>4. Schedule meetings with your group to determine how you will read, document reflections, and share the process.</li> <li>5. Take your time to read the target chapter and use its tools for reflection to guide you and your PLC in the process of decluttering.</li> <li>6. Visit one another's classrooms where appropriate to make observations and provide thoughtful feedback on progress.</li> <li>7. Meet consistently with your PLC, as the feedback loop is crucial in the sustainability of this practice. Ensure other meetings or events take precedence over your sessions.</li> <li>8. Share your successes and challenges with us via Twitter using #MinimalistTeacher.</li> <li>9. Continue to check in with your PLC group, even when your scheduled times are completed or you have finished reading the chapter or book, by using the Triple P funnel in your future meetings.</li> </ol>

<p>Reading with a professional book club</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Survey colleagues to gauge interest in starting a professional book club (if not already in place).</li> <li>2. Plan out if you will discuss by chapter or after reading the entire book. In either case, determine your method of discussion, and determine your “read by” date.</li> <li>3. Use the book study questions in Appendix C as a guide.</li> <li>4. Upon completion of the book, meet in a social setting to have a final discussion about your reflections and takeaways, and be prepared to share your action plans.</li> <li>5. Continue to check in with your book club members to keep a clear reflection and feedback cycle rolling for sustainability of practices.</li> <li>6. Share your successes and challenges with us via Twitter using #MinimalistTeacher.</li> <li>7. Continue to use the Triple P framework and funnel to continue your new decision-making process and/or use the cycle to continue your new habits.</li> </ol>
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evaluating the quality and purpose of physical resources along with tips for paring them down and maximizing each part of a physical classroom space.

**Chapter 3: Decluttering Initiatives** explains the importance of a teacher’s voice in the process of decluttering school-based initiatives. While many teachers will feel decluttering initiatives fall in the role of school administrators, administration teams sometimes use a model of distributive leadership and building teacher capacity. This model brings teacher teams together to be involved in the process of decluttering initiatives that are funneled down from states and districts. This chapter provides reflection questions and thinking charts to develop purpose, priorities, and ways to pare down both large-scale and school-based initiatives.

**Chapter 4: Decluttering the Curriculum** digs deeper into the intellectual and time waste that teachers face when confronted with curriculum choice. In this chapter, we dig into what curriculum is and how to weed through the extraneous pieces. The chapter is full of ideas to support strengthening your curriculum with richer support and plenty of practical tips to pare down process so that chosen resources are best suited for efficiency in planning and enhanced learning.



**Chapter 5: Decluttering Instructional and Assessment Strategies** digs into the real purpose of your instruction and the role of assessment within it. Find what’s best for your practices by brainstorming priorities and identifying which are specific to your purpose. We unpack strategies and practical ideas to combat the time waste issue all teachers face during instructional and assessment time. This chapter provides research-based routines and strategies that will provide more “bounce for your ounce” and will help alleviate planning stress.

**Chapter 6: Advocating for Minimalism in Your Teaching Environment** provides insight into how the Triple P process can rewire detrimental waste into an overall positive experience in school. Benefits of advocating for a minimalist approach to teaching are explored, and practical tools are examined, including an advocacy audit and action plan.

**Appendices:** We have put together some lists and additional tools to support each step of the cycle and Triple P questioning. You will find the following:

- Appendix A: The Triple P Cycle
- Appendix B: Initiatives, Purposes, and Priorities
- Appendix C: The Minimalist Teacher Book Study Guide

## In Conclusion

### Chapter Takeaway

Our goal is to support all educators, and ultimately their students, to find the mental space to declutter your crowded role and eventually work through the Triple P decision-making process organically. This process will seep into your work with students and ultimately into the school community. It will allow you to foster awareness of minimalism as a part of classroom and school culture and teach deep learning without all the extra “stuff.” This is a practice that all members of any school community can advocate for when the purpose and benefits are clear.

### Lingering Question

Where do I need to begin my process?

## **Up Next**

We suggest you spend time working through the first chapter in this book. We'll take you through key ideas about a minimalist culture and tips for getting yourself and your students ready for your minimalist classroom environment. Good luck and enjoy the journey ahead.





# Creating a Culture of Minimalism in Your Classroom

## **The Purpose for Creating a Culture of Minimalism in Your Classroom**

The term “culture” can bring to mind a variety of different images or meanings. This can encompass anything from language or food to the arts or family structures. Ultimately, a culture is a shared set of values and practices that are held by a group of people. A culture of minimalism requires members of a group, in this case your classroom, to recognize and work toward making use of currently available resources and no *more* in order to best support the requirements and expectations of the community. While a minimalist culture in classrooms may seem unconventional, overly innovative, or unrealistic now, this approach is becoming more and more socially acceptable. Rather than superficially attempting to meet students’ needs by buying “things,” adding more tasks, or creating more paperwork, there is a shift to instead maximize existing resources in the community and create a lifelong practice and lifestyle of appreciation, efficiency, and sustainability.

At this point, we do not need to use the Triple P funnel because the process to establish classroom culture is different from how to declutter the elements of your teaching. However, as we begin unpacking priorities in creating a culture of minimalism in your classroom, and really your teaching life, we can correlate two stages in the cycle. During this time, you are working in the *inquiry* and *investigation* phases of the cycle, moving you further on with your investigation.

### The Cycle Elements for Creating the Culture



**Inquire.** In this phase, ask yourself and others about *priorities* in teaching and learning, including the what, why, and how of shifting practice.



**Investigate.** This phase gets you to research, read, and understand the benefits and challenges of a minimalism approach, including why others go through this process and why it is a *priority* for you.

## Priorities in Creating This Culture

When you recognize the purpose of creating a minimalist culture in your classroom—to create a mindset of efficiency and appreciation and practice it—priorities become clearer and simpler to address. Below, we’ve highlighted three main priorities to answer why you might wish to develop this mindset within your classroom contexts.

### Priority #1: Positive well-being and avoiding burnout

Anyone in education, in any capacity, can attest to the fact that it is exhausting. Research studies about teacher burnout have been consistent in their findings across Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, Europe, the Middle East, New Zealand, and South America.

In her article “The Teacher Burnout Epidemic, Part 1 of 2,” Jenny Grant Rankin (2016) states that, while teacher workloads are different world-wide, they are at a maximum. In 2014, reports showed that 8 percent of all American teachers were leaving the field each year. Of those leaving, a 2012–2013 teacher survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (Goldring, Taie, & Riddles, 2014) reported more than half said their new profession’s workload was significantly lower than when they were working as teachers. In addition to that, a 2019 National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report highlights that teachers are consistently reporting more stress than those in alternative professions. Finally, a resounding 41 percent of teachers leave the profession in their first five years, highlighting a workforce quitting before they have had the opportunity to truly master skills and take their profession to the next level, according to Dr. Jenny Grant Rankin (2016).

Clearly our chosen profession is one in which our well-being and mental health are at risk. These pressures may be coming from a wide range of causes: federal mandates, administration/districts, parent population, accountability standards, or the students themselves. But wherever they may be coming from, we are *all* feeling it.

Our hope is that through developing a minimalist culture within your work environment, you will be able to reduce the level of exhaustion you feel. Ideally, focusing on your purpose, priorities, and ways to pare down will allow you to have the emotional and intellectual energy to continue in this valuable profession.

## **Priority #2: Reconceptualizing waste in order to combat waste**

When we think about minimalism and waste, we of course consider the extraneous items that clutter our room. We think of what we can get rid of and how to dispose of all those unnecessary items. However, in order to reset our mindset toward a culture of minimalism, we need to expand our thinking around what actually constitutes waste. A broader understanding of waste will help shift the way we approach how we work and function in our working environments, such as the many different facets of waste that can occur: time, emotional, intellectual and psychological (mental), economic, and physical or resource waste. Each day in our work as teachers we could encounter waste in any, or all, of these ways, leaving us feeling stressed, ineffective, and anxious. Consider the following examples:

- **Time waste:** Planning lessons that require excessive time and preparation.
- **Emotional/psychological waste:** Taking feedback from administration or parents personally.
- **Economic waste:** Repurchasing items you already have but have misplaced in the clutter of the classroom.
- **Physical waste:** Filling every space of the classroom until it no longer functions effectively.

Reconceptualizing waste in this way will allow you to combat waste in a less superficial manner and really build a culture of minimalism in your classroom. When we have extraneous clutter in our lives, be it abstract or physical things, we are overcome with waste. This idea is counterproductive to your priority to prevent burnout. When we focus on the purpose, priority, and paring down process, we can reduce all the different kinds of waste.

### Priority #3: Managing waste beyond the four Rs

In *Less Stuff*, Lindsay Miles (2019) discusses the importance of considering what will happen to our physical clutter when we are done with it. She argues that we need to think sustainably and move beyond just shifting our unwanted clutter to a landfill. Other potential ways to remedy a growing waste concern is to consider reusing, repurposing, repairing, and recycling.

Waste reduction helps create a culture of minimalism and reduce potential burnout. Consider the following questions:

- If we cannot reuse items ourselves, is there someone else who might find a use, whether for its intended or an adapted purpose?
- Is it possible to repair the items if they are not in use due to damage?
- Could the item, or its components, be recycled?

## What Are Your Priorities?

Now that we have highlighted both the purpose and priorities of establishing a classroom culture of minimalism, we encourage you to consider your own priorities moving forward. To do this, let's use the urgent/important matrix in Figure 1.1. Plot the following elements on the matrix, and you will quickly establish which are of critical importance for you to take action on at this time.

Where would you place the following on the matrix?

- Maintenance or restoration of your well-being
- Avoiding burnout
- Minimizing time waste
- Minimizing emotional/psychological waste
- Minimizing economic waste
- Minimizing physical waste
- Sustainably managing waste

Figure 1.1

**Urgent/Important Matrix**

	Urgent	Not so urgent
Important	High priority: Take action immediately	Medium priority: Make a plan
Not so important	Medium priority: Make a plan	Neither urgent nor important: Eliminate as a priority

What did you discover? Do you urgently need to take action to prevent burnout? Or is economic waste a more important priority for you at this time? Now armed with a definitive vision of where you need to take action, we can begin our discussion about just *how* to go about creating this culture.

## How to Create a Minimalist Classroom Culture

To develop a culture of minimalism in your classroom that is sustainable for you and your students, we have identified three areas that can support this work: developing knowledge, examining expectations and opportunities through routines and habits, and understanding relevance. These three main facets will form the core of how to positively shift the culture of your classroom in order to meet your priorities.



## 1. Developing the Knowledge to Build an Understanding About Minimalism

To begin the physical work of creating a minimalist classroom environment, all classroom community members will need to build their knowledge beyond just cleaning and recycling. One way to do that is to develop a mindset that focuses on the benefits of paring down the physical environment and how clutter can affect well-being. Figure 1.2 provides several resources to help you handle different types of waste. If you and your students already have some understanding of how to identify waste and how it contributes to burnout and overload, you can provide families with tools for understanding, too. You can help them understand why embarking on this journey to create less waste and use resources more thoughtfully will benefit their school learning environments as well as their families at home.

Figure 1.2

### Resources to Build Knowledge and Develop Understanding of Minimalist Culture

Waste Type	Resources	How It Builds Knowledge
Time	<p>Article: National Education Organization, "Time Management Tips for Educators"  <a href="https://bit.ly/3jRpU7w">https://bit.ly/3jRpU7w</a></p> <p>Article: <i>New York Times</i>, "Productivity Isn't About Time Management. It's Attention Management"  <a href="https://nyti.ms/37hy7Nu">https://nyti.ms/37hy7Nu</a></p> <p>Picture Book: <i>See You Later Procrastinator (Get It Done)</i> by Pamela Espeland and Elizabeth Verdick  <a href="https://amzn.to/3aliDK4">https://amzn.to/3aliDK4</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies for effective time management from planning to teaching.</li> <li>• Insight into how we manage our attention relates to our use of time.</li> <li>• Easy-to-read tips, stories, and strategies to assist students in making the best use of their time.</li> </ul>

Emotional and Psychological	<p>Article: <i>Psychology Today</i>, "How to Take Feedback"  <a href="https://bit.ly/3doFPJg">https://bit.ly/3doFPJg</a></p> <p>Book: <i>The Book of Overthinking: How to Stop the Cycle of Worrying</i> by Gwendoline Smith  <a href="https://amzn.to/3u4KMNI">https://amzn.to/3u4KMNI</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight into the negative emotions associated with criticism.</li> <li>• Eight rules for effective feedback.</li> <li>• Insight into the positives and negative related to overthinking.</li> </ul>
	<p>Picture Book: <i>Ruby's Worry</i> by Tom Percival  <a href="https://amzn.to/2NaBwGP">https://amzn.to/2NaBwGP</a></p> <p>Book: <i>No Worries! Mindful Kids: An Activity Book for Children Who Sometimes Feel Anxious or Stressed</i> by Dr. Sharie Coombs  <a href="https://bit.ly/3tW1fnb">https://bit.ly/3tW1fnb</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read-aloud activities to support students managing worries.</li> </ul>
Economic and Physical	<p>Site: "The Story of Stuff"  <a href="http://thestoryofstuff.org">http://thestoryofstuff.org</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solid foundation for building an understanding of systems thinking and how using less will benefit us all.</li> <li>• A systemic approach of how humans contribute to the development of waste.</li> </ul>
	<p>Picture Book: <i>Too Many Toys</i> by David Shannon  <a href="https://amzn.to/3u1KRBz">https://amzn.to/3u1KRBz</a></p> <p>Picture Book: <i>What a Waste</i> by Jess French  <a href="https://amzn.to/37jbt7f">https://amzn.to/37jbt7f</a></p> <p>Book: <i>Trash Revolution: Breaking the Waste Cycle</i> by Erica Fyvie  <a href="https://amzn.to/3dgg10F">https://amzn.to/3dgg10F</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging read-aloud or book club books to open discussions about physical waste.</li> </ul>
	<p>Site: Environmental Protection Agency's "The Quest for Less"  <a href="https://bit.ly/37zpxdd">https://bit.ly/37zpxdd</a></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resources, curricula, and lessons for students in K-8 to learn about waste management and reduction.</li> </ul>

## 2. Expectations and Opportunities: Establishing Routines and Habits

We have established that when creating a culture around a concept, particularly a new concept, we must understand it is about changing mindsets and developing new knowledge. But we also need to recognize that in this process we need to create new habits in which a community of students, families, and school staff can see the value of these new changes. In his book *Simplicity*, Edward de Bono (2015) states that “the human brain tries its hardest to simplify life by setting up routine patterns of perception and action. Once you identify the flow of pattern, you flow along without further effort” (p. 18).

Ron Ritchhart (2015) describes several ways in which we can build an informed classroom culture, without adding material things, initiatives, or programs to the pile of clutter. He discusses eight cultural forces: expectations, language, time, modeling opportunities, routines, interactions, and environment. Simply looking through the list of cultural forces should be encouraging. Why? Because these are likely elements of building your classroom culture that you are already doing. The key here is to focus on the deliberate development of these cultural forces. From our perspective, we can likely pare this down even more by creating two broader categories: expectations and opportunities.

Building the culture of minimalism is intentional and straightforward yet brilliantly rich and full. Lisa Fort, a high school earth science teacher in Queensbury, New York, told us that “the value is in having a vision for classroom efficiency, which then translates to the needs [and] materials to make a classroom run within those expectations.” To this end, Figures 1.3 and 1.4 provide a deconstruction of expectations and opportunities in a way that will allow you to see the connection between Ritchhart’s eight cultural forces and our stripped-down approach to creating a minimalist culture in your classroom.

## 3. Make It Relevant

Approaching teaching and learning through the lens of “doing less with more,” as we have previously outlined, is very timely and relevant to current social mindsets. Our ideas to support the decluttering process in our own spaces while developing responsible consumption with students are the focus of a larger movement. When we do this work in our daily lives with our students, we work toward meeting the United Nations Sustainable