



# My Bookshelf: Titles That Inspire, Inform, and Influence

BY BARB VOLPE

This summer, as I dove into [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol Dweck, I found myself reflecting on the books that have shaped how I think, lead, coach, and grow—not just as a professional, but as a person. These books have informed how I show up in my work: how I support others, design and facilitate professional learning, and continue to learn myself. So, I thought I'd share what's on my shelf—the books I've read and returned to, and the ones I'm looking forward to next. Maybe one will speak to you, too.

***Books I've Read (or Reread) This Year*** (These have sparked recent insights or support current work.)

- ***The PD book: 7 Habits that Transform Professional Development*** by [Elena Aguilar](#) and [Lori Cohen](#). I love a book that is a perfect blend of the “why” and “how to” for designing transformational professional development. I am a big fan of Elena Aguilar's books, and this is one of my favorites.
- ***Lose the Lecture: Engaging Approaches to Early Childhood Professional Learning*** by [Teresa A. Byington](#). Another great book with lots of tips and strategies to engage early childhood adult learners. This book is great for those who facilitate (coaches, mentors, early childhood directors, and trainers). It gave me new tools for designing interactive sessions.
- ***Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*** by [Chip Heath and Dan Heath](#). A go-to resource on leading change, packed with memorable stories and practical strategies. The ideas of “directing the rider, motivating the elephant, and shaping the path” stuck with me.
- ***The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change the Way You Lead Forever*** by [Michael Bungay Stanier](#). This book is approachable, concise, and surprisingly powerful—it offers a way to ask key questions for coaching in your regular routine.
- ***Onward: Cultivating the Emotional Resilience in Educators*** by Elena Aguilar. I found myself returning to this throughout the year. It's not just a book—it's a companion through the ups and downs of working in education.

***Books I Return to Again and Again*** (These books live close by. They are grounding, uplifting, and continue to offer new insights no matter how many times I read them.)

- ***Learning to Listen, Learning to Teach: The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults*** by [Jane Vella](#). Every time I revisit this book, I'm reminded of the power of listening and true dialogue in adult learning. A must-read for anyone who facilitates learning.
- ***Circle of the Nine Muses: A Storytelling Field Guide for Innovators and Meaning Makers*** by [David Hutchens](#). A playful and powerful guide to using storytelling in professional settings. I return to it when I want to bring more heart and creativity into facilitation.

- ***Inspiring Peak Performance: Competence, Commitment, and Collaboration*** by Paula Jorde Bloom, Ann Hentschel, and [Jill Bella](#). *An excellent guide for leaders aiming to build strong teams. It offers frameworks that feel grounded in real early childhood contexts.*
- ***Reflecting in Communities of Practice: A Workbook for Early Childhood Educators*** by Deb Curtis, Debbie Lebo, Wendy C.M. Cividanes, Margie Carter. *A hands-on, thoughtful workbook that helps teams go deeper together. The reflection prompts are gold for peer learning teams and coaching.*
- ***The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching*** by [Deb Curtis and Margie Carter](#). *Reading this feels like an invitation to slow down and truly see children. A beautiful reminder of why observation matters.*
- ***Leading with Heart and Soul*** by [Toni Christie](#). *A heartfelt book on leadership that blends personal reflection with professional purpose. It speaks to the soul of early childhood leadership. I simply love this book; it brings me back to my “why”.*
- ***Graceful Leadership in Early Childhood Education*** by [Ann McClain Terrell](#). *This book models leadership that is dignified, values-driven, and relationship-based. It’s like a wise mentor in book form.*
- ***The Art of Possibility: Transforming Professional and Personal Life*** by [Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander](#). *This book helps me reframe challenges and step into possibility. It’s equal parts philosophical and practical—a favorite when I need inspiration.*

***Books Waiting for Me*** (On my “to-be-read” list, each is chosen with curiosity and intention. I’m looking forward to what they will teach me!)

- ***Power of Moments: Why Certain Experiences Have Extraordinary Impact*** by Dan Heath and Chip Heath
- ***Joy, Inc.: How We Built a Workplace People Love*** by [Richard Sheridan](#)
- ***Small Teaching: Everyday Lessons from the Science of Learning*** by [James M. Lang](#)
- ***Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art*** by [James Nestor](#)
- ***Respect: An Exploration*** by [Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot](#)
- ***Exit: The Endings That Set Us Free*** by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

These books have informed how I lead, learn, and reflect. I share this list not as a prescription, but as an invitation. I’d love to hear what’s on your bookshelf!

Here are a few questions to get you thinking:

- What is a book that shaped your thinking or affirmed your values?
- Which titles do you return to again and again—and why?
- What kind of learning or growth are you seeking right now? Is there a book that might support that journey?
- What book would you recommend to someone stepping into leadership for the first time?
- Is there a story or quote from a book that has stayed with you?

Each time I finish a good book, I feel like something in me has shifted—even if just a little. The stories, ideas, and questions stay with me and often show up in unexpected ways in my work and life. As Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. said, *“The mind, once stretched by a new idea, never returns to its original dimensions.”* I share this list not because I have all the answers, but because these books have helped stretch my thinking—and maybe one or two of them will do the same for you.

**Barb Volpe, M.Ed.**, is the Director of Professional Learning at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University. She oversees the development, facilitation, and implementation of leadership academies for early childhood center administrators. Barb is a state and national trainer in areas of early childhood program leadership and administration. Barb obtained her M.Ed. from National Louis University (NLU) in early childhood administration and her B.S. in child and family development from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale (SIU-C). Building on past experience as a statewide assessor for the Illinois QRIS system, she supports statewide technical assistance providers through training on quality assessment tools and coaching practices. Prior to her work at the McCormick Institute, Barb worked as an infant/toddler and preschool teacher, site director, and education coordinator for both community-based and Head Start programs. She has written articles on topics in leadership and management of early childhood programs and taught for several years as adjunct faculty at a local community college. Barb’s passion is to support early childhood leaders to continuously grow professionally and improve the essential care and education services they provide for young children and their families.