Lessons Learned from the Special Education Classroom is a quick and practical read. With 26 years of experience, Grafwallner draws on her teaching, coaching and learning to drive the text. Each chapter features examples, anecdotes, resources, and a conclusion on how to use section and book study questions. Professional learning communities or teachers in book clubs will find the end of each chapter particularly useful to guide discussions or apply strategies. These questions could also suit school, department or new teacher meetings.

Following a forward written by Dave Stuart, Jr., Grafwallner presents ten chapters: “Accept Every Student as They Are”; “Scaffolding a Lesson Is Just Good Teaching”; “Responding to Every Student”; “Students Want to Feel Loved”; “Empathy, Equality, and Equity”; “The Community of Family”; “Change Your Language, Change Your Mind-set”; “Share What You’ve Learned with Others”; “Ask Your Colleagues for Help”; and “Celebrate—It’s Good for the Soul.” The brevity of the book makes the read manageable, and Grafwallner’s simplicity allows readers to understand, process and implement the content.

Not just for special education teachers, the takeaways, tips and examples apply to a variety of content areas and ages. Lessons Learned focuses on good teaching for all students, including those with special needs as well as disengaged students and the gifted and talented. Although many of the examples focus on high and middle school students, they could be modified for any content area or age. Her philosophy focuses on explaining, modeling, practicing and applying. Similar to the modeling strategy “I do, we do, you do,” Grafwallner presents specific examples for her recommendations.
The focus on parents will be particularly useful for teachers who want practical, easy-to-apply strategies. In our school, teachers are encouraged to send postcards to families in order to commend achievements or recognize growth. A similar strategy is presented in Lessons Learned, but Grafwallner takes postcards a step further, recommending pre-printing and including students in the process, allowing them “the chance to showcase the important work they do and the crucial learning that goes in their classroom” (53). In addition, forms such as conference logs, teacher postcards, and annotations also facilitate student and parent engagement. Grafwallner often refers to familiar strategies and then presents a way to expand or better the practice.

Throughout several chapters, Grafwallner focuses on the power of language and how word choice can impact a teacher’s message to parents or students. She suggests teachers refrain from using “struggling or reluctant when referring to student learning” (p. 66). Instead, she recommends a growth mindset approach, referring to students as developing. Similarly, she suggests teachers replace grades with goals. These language choices apply not only to assessment, but any situation in which students begin to “navigate sophisticated and reflective learning experiences” (69). She also advises avoiding absolutes (always, never, forever) and instead giving “explicit examples, and partnering with parents to create opportunities for growth” (51). Using generalizations or absolutes can put students and parents in a defensive stance (shutting off communication), so Grafwallner stresses positive language choices in building rapport, trust and communication.

Much of education is focused on relationships. Grafwallner writes, “Any less than our absolute presence in the classroom shortchanges [students] and the valuable work you do on their behalf ... offering differentiated choices to all students illustrates empathy, equality and equity” (41). She encourages authentic learning opportunities and getting to know students. The challenge for teachers will remain large class sizes and increasing demands, responsibilities or mandates.

By the end of the book, educators will feel affirmed in their good work: being transparent with students, remaining optimistic and positive, starting with the why and goal of each
lesson, personalizing and differentiating instruction, as well as collaborating with parents, principals and colleagues. They will also be inspired to try new techniques, strategies or language choices to make their classrooms even more inclusive, authentic and inspiring.