

Preface

*“Metal mouth.” “Faggot.” “Retard.” “Fatso.” “We don’t want you in our group.”
“You’re not my friend.” “I hate kids like you.”*

Many people’s memories of school include rejection, isolation, teasing, and exclusion. When you think about school, maybe you remember the groups you weren’t permitted to join; the child who was “different” and teased unmercifully; or the private snickers and the not-so-private jokes about children who were poor, didn’t have the “right” clothes, came from atypical families, or whose academic skills either lagged behind or were far ahead. For many children, schools are places of isolation and loneliness. Many children report that school is meant for other kids, that they “don’t belong.” Is this what schools have to be like? Are there other possibilities? Can we hold a different vision of classrooms? Of schools? Of the world?

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I was concerned about the many students for whom school wasn’t a safe place but rather a site of struggle and rejection. I was concerned that an increasing focus on academics made many teachers feel that they didn’t have the time, support, or skills to work on issues of classroom climate and peer interactions. The need to create different schools—compassionate, caring, and responsive ones—seemed essential then. Now, 10 years later, the world is different, and—for many children—it is not any better. The task now seems even more urgent.

Bullying and cyber-bullying have reached epidemic proportions. The level of violence in schools includes not only the day-to-day acts of aggression but also multiple school shootings that have left students and teachers dead and wounded and entire communities devastated and confused.

International events include the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, which left many people scared and increasing numbers of citizens endangered by racial and religious prejudice and fear. As I write this, wars are raging in several countries at once, and the United States is sharply divided about the road to peace. Growing economic and social challenges have left many people homeless, jobless, and impoverished, creating even bigger gaps between the haves and the have-nots.

Our schools are more diverse than ever, with students of color now representing nearly 50% of the school-age population. And yet, schools are more segregated than ever, with more than 70% of black students now attending predominantly minority schools and white students remaining the most segregated in their school settings. Although this growing diversity presents opportunities for great learning, it can also occasion prejudice and discrimination, making the need for anti-racist and anti-oppressive education even more critical.

The good news is that it is increasingly recognized that building a strong, cohesive classroom community is the foundation of a successful classroom. All students must feel

safe, respected, and valued to learn new skills. Fear, discomfort, and anxiety are fundamentally incompatible with the learning process and make teaching and learning difficult. Successful classrooms are those in which students feel supported in their learning, willing to take risks, and challenged to become fully human with one another and open to new possibilities.

The increasing heterogeneity of classrooms—through the movement to fully include students with disabilities and other efforts to desegregate classrooms previously divided by race, gender, or ethnicity—makes the need for classroom communities even more salient. If we are to have classrooms that not only include students who are diverse in many ways but also make them welcome, appreciated, and valued members of the classroom environment, we will have to set community building as a high priority.

And our vision need not end with the classroom. Within classroom communities, we can help students acquire the attitudes and skills they will need to move beyond the borders of the classroom and school and into the broader community. It is often said that schools are designed to “prepare students to function well in society.” Although this is certainly true, it is equally accurate that the students we teach today will shape the society they (and we) live in tomorrow. The experiences that teachers structure for students can enable them to act boldly in the world, taking individual and collective responsibility for making things different and better. When we teach, we change our students, the world, and ourselves.

Although most teachers receive instruction in how to teach reading, math, social studies, and science, there is often little preparation for understanding and shaping the social climate of the classroom: what do I do when kids fight? What if some students have no friends, and others seem isolated? Should children have to work with others if they don’t want to? What should I do about racial name calling?

Teachers often don’t feel well prepared to deal with broader issues either: How can I help students to feel powerful (instead of hopeless) in the face of racism, poverty, and violence? How can I deal with challenging, even controversial, issues in ways that are responsible and responsive? Can I help my students to envision and enact other possibilities in the face of unemployment, abuse, and intolerance?

This book is dedicated to teachers who are trying to make a difference in the lives of their students and to teachers who want to make their classrooms warm, nurturing environments for learning and who are looking for help and support in that endeavor. Often, books for teachers can be characterized either as books of educational theory or as how-to books. This book blends theory into practice in a way that helps teachers to think more clearly about their practice and then to modify their practice in accord with their best thinking.

It has been said that there is nothing more practical than good theory. It is also true that we can learn theory from good practice. In trying new ideas, exploring challenging directions, and implementing varying practices in our classrooms, we can begin to look at and think about our students differently. Changing our practice can help to illuminate our values and our beliefs about children, learning, schools, and society. As we change concrete aspects of our classroom practice, we can move from the specific to the more general, find connections among the things we do, seek congruence and harmony between our beliefs and our day-to-day actions, and realize that everything we as teachers do can be linked to broader concepts and principles.

The response to the first edition of this book was overwhelmingly positive. Teachers, administrators, and other school personnel appreciated the combination of research and specific activities. Readers recognized my goal of combining a strong foundational basis

to school change with specific suggestions about “what to do now!” One reviewer wrote that the book “enchantingly blended theory and practice in a way that was extremely accessible” (Applebaum, 1999). Another reviewer described the book as “filled with gentleness and grace yet solidly based on research and practical information” (Review, 2000). The book has been used by teachers engaged in professional development as well as by undergraduate and graduate students working on teaching degrees and advanced credentials, including courses as diverse as classroom management, strategies of teaching, introduction to education, and language arts methods.

This book explores the many facets of community building and social change, and it provides practical strategies and ideas for creating and maintaining classrooms that support and nurture diversity and help students learn to act powerfully. The activities described are ones that can be implemented in a wide variety of classrooms with a minimum of materials or preparation. These are not quick-fix ideas; the activities presented here are seen as entry points into a deeper exploration of the components of classroom community; and they encourage teachers to build, modify, and expand based on their classrooms and experiences. My hope is that the combination of principles of community building coupled with descriptions of specific activities to implement in the classroom will give you, as a teacher, immediate access to new ways of thinking and behaving in your classroom.

This book is designed to be applicable to teachers who work with students from preschool through middle school; the ideas and activities are not limited to general-education or special-education classrooms but encourage cross-pollination and the development of inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms. The book focuses on all kinds of diversity: racial, ethnic, family, ability/disability, gender, and class; and, it combines principles—expressed without jargon—and guidelines with direct classroom applications.

The book begins with an elaboration of a *courage, inclusion, value, integrity, cooperation, and safety* (CIVICS) curriculum for schools, which is seen as a set of organizing values for creating caring, inclusive classrooms.

Subsequent chapters deal with various aspects of building community: Schools as Communities (Chapter 2), Sharing Ourselves With Others (Chapter 3), Knowing Others Well (Chapter 4), Places Where We All Belong (Chapter 5), Setting Goals and Giving and Getting Support (Chapter 6), Working Together to Learn (Chapter 7), and Speaking Truth and Acting Powerfully (Chapter 8).

Each chapter begins with stories—examples of classrooms or situations in which a particular aspect of community is present or absent. What, for example, does a classroom look like where children are provided opportunities to know others well? What does a class look like when those opportunities are not presented?

Following these examples, a brief vision statement is presented. What would it look like to have a classroom in which cooperation and connection are encouraged, for example? This vision goes beyond the stories that begin the chapter and includes illustrations concerning pedagogy, curriculum, and social relationships.

The vision statement is followed by an analysis of the challenges of impediments to this vision, including a brief exploration of situations, beliefs, myths, and practices, which have interfered with full implementation. For example, how have our experiences around competition and the ways in which classrooms are often structured kept us from seeing cooperation as a viable option or implementing cooperative structures?

New to this edition is a section titled Reframing Our Work, in Chapters 2 through 8, which provides an opportunity for readers to reflect on and analyze their experiences relative to each topic and how their classroom and schools measure up—a way of asking,

“How are we doing in this area?” This section can be used as a discussion guide to encourage reflective practice and can serve as a needs assessment, pointing the way toward next steps and goal setting.

The major section of each chapter consists of suggestions and examples for classroom practice related to the vision statement. Included in each chapter are specific community-building strategies or activities, cooperative games that support the concepts, songs related to the theme (music accessible through the book’s Web site, <http://www.corwin.com/changetheworld>), children’s literature titles that explore the area with suggestions for using such books, and ways of linking this vision to the ongoing curriculum in the class.

This book is written with great appreciation for classroom teachers everywhere who are nurturing the human beings in their care while holding to a strong vision of a just world. The title of this book *Because We Can Change the World* (and the book itself) constitutes a response to all those who assail teachers with the often despairing, sometimes disparaging, question, “Why would you want to be a teacher anyway?” This book is for teachers who know clearly that what they do in their classrooms makes the world a better place and for those teachers who need to be re-encouraged in their original vision. My belief is that teachers can and do make a difference in the lives of their students and deserve tremendous support for that task. I hope this book will continue to be part of that support.