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# *Preface*

The intended audience for this book includes educators and school leaders in the elementary grades who want to find a way to be successful with children for whom the odds are not so great. Although I have used vignettes and offered examples from general classroom settings, any educator working in an elementary school, from the physical education teacher to the librarian, should find the ideas and perspectives offered here applicable to his or her own work. The basic notions upon which I have based the book are simple yet powerful: creating safe pleasant places where children can let down their guard, relax, and learn; making the accomplishment of academic tasks inherently rewarding and motivating; keeping children too busy being engaged in learning to have time to misbehave; and persisting with a child even when that child and other adults have given up.

The book is for those educators who want to be the ones still trying to connect with desperate children—their last hope. It is for teachers who understand that they have the power to change the path of a child's life and are willing to go beyond what others consider reasonable. It is for teachers who want to catch children before they are desperate and give them an understanding of what doors an education can open for their future. The work is not easy, at times may be best characterized as uncertain, and can be lonely in the wrong school climate. However, the work can also be deeply rewarding, filled with celebrations over seemingly minor accomplishments, and make a world of difference to the children and families fortunate enough to have such an educator in their lives.

Today's classrooms are filled with many different types of students. Most, if not all, begin school eager to learn. Some progress through the years at or above expected rates of learning and exit secondary school with an abundance of Advanced Placement credits and scholarships in hand for their postsecondary education. Others fade into a pool of poorly performing students. For a portion of students, their own eagerness and that of their parents turn to dread at the thought of the struggles they come to associate with school. Regardless of the cause of the poor performance, it

becomes a challenge for these students to retain any sense of hope that education and schooling will provide an avenue to success in life. Rather, their schooling becomes a persistent reminder of their apparent inadequacies and the limitations they can expect to experience for the rest of their lives.

Teachers equipped with a deep understanding of their ability to break a cycle of failure for poorly performing students can resist the temptation to join these students in their sense of hopelessness. In the materials presented here, I hope teachers will find ideas and principles that will help them sustain their determination to find ways to succeed with many children, not just the ones that make teaching pleasant and easy.

The general education classroom teacher is expected to provide culturally relevant, context-based differentiated instruction to all of his or her students. The call to reduce minority placements in special education, the adoption of Response-to-Intervention models of tiered instruction, the expectation that students with disabilities will have maximum access to the general curriculum, and the obligation for students with disabilities and other designated populations to demonstrate adequate yearly progress are all aimed at improving the instruction provided by the general education classroom teacher.

Teachers who can draw on their own instructional capacity and determination are more likely to avoid the tempting pitfalls that are inherent when educators allow themselves to adopt an over-reliance on commercial highly scripted programs as the answer to working with students who are doing poorly in school. Effective, determined teachers hold far more potential for breaking a child's cycle of failure than do the best programs ever put on the market. Relationships and the associated personal motivation and sense of commitment embedded in them simply cannot be replaced with published materials or computer software, no matter how great they might be. Teachers *do* matter (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Sanders, 1998, 2000, 2004; Vellutino, Scanlon, & Small, 2006). They can allow the cycle of failure to continue or they can become the ones who help a child break the cycle. It is not easy work, but it *is* vital.