

# CIVICS

## *An Agenda for Our Schools*

**W**hat does it mean for a school or a classroom to be a community? What are the characteristics that define community, and what are the values that might be central organizing forces in those communities? And perhaps most significantly, why does it matter whether schools look like and feel like communities?

There is a growing recognition of the importance of developing respect for human dignity, for teaching students to be active participants—both in their education and in the community—and for beginning this important work at a young age. Creating classroom communities where students feel accepted and feel like they belong is not just about a feel-good curriculum. Rather, there are clear correlations between students' sense of belonging and their academic and social achievement.

In a review of the research on "Students' Need for Belonging in the School Community," Osterman (2000) found that the experience of belongingness is critical in an educational setting and that students' experience of acceptance influences multiple dimensions of their behavior and achievement in school. She also cautions that some schools adopt organizational practices that not only neglect but may actually undermine students' experiences of membership in a supportive community.

A study by Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (2004), who are associated with the Child Development Project (CDP), found that students who had been part of their comprehensive elementary school intervention designed to reduce risk and increase resilience performed far better when they reached middle school. Students who had been part of the CDP were more engaged in and committed to school, were more prosocial, and engaged in fewer problem behaviors than comparison students during middle school. They also had higher academic performance.

Social studies education has come to mean not only teaching history and geography but also teaching about social justice in the broader context and interpersonal behavior at a direct level. In her book *Social Studies for Social Justice*, Rahima Wade (2007) argues that

Starting in kindergarten we must educate youth to care about humanity and to begin to understand the immensity of the challenges that will face them as adults. We must embark upon teaching them the skills and knowledge that

will ultimately enable them not only to live productive and empowered lives but also to work alongside like-minded others for the betterment of those who suffer from oppression and other inequities. (pp. 1–2)

Educators are realizing that we need not dichotomize or choose between *teaching skills* and *teaching students to be caring and responsible human beings*. We need not sacrifice reading to teach sharing or abandon math goals in favor of teaching mutual support and help. Rather, the classroom community can be structured so that students learn reading *through* sharing and work on math goals *with* teacher and peer support.

And the growing focus on culturally relevant pedagogy and multicultural education also makes it clear that our sense of community must be expansive, inclusive rather than exclusive. We must teach our students to be members of multiple communities, fluent at moving between communities, and knowledgeable about a wide range of people and cultures.

I would like to revive an old word, a word that has fallen into disuse and ill repair. The word is *civics*. What is civics? Civics can be defined as those skills, attitudes, and beliefs needed to be a member of a community. Civics was a course that many people in previous generations took—it was a course about learning to become a useful citizen. Few schools offer courses in civics these days; for some, the word civics may even have negative connotations—as indoctrination into unquestioning obedience or mindless parroting of official rules and regulations. For many, the phrase “citizenship education” is equally narrow and limiting, implying that becoming a U.S. citizen, for example, means embracing particular values of Christianity or the dominant culture in ways that diminish or even destroy the histories and cultures of other groups. But what if we saw our task as preparing world citizens?

I would like to propose here that we adopt a new kind of civics curriculum, a civics curriculum that would help us to shape classrooms, schools, and a society that values community. Learning to be a part of that community is an essential, perhaps *the* essential, goal we should set for our students and ourselves.

In an article titled “Educating Global Citizens in a Diverse World,” James Banks (2003a) argues that

Cultural, ethnic, racial, language, and religious diversity exist in most nations in the world. One of the challenges to diverse democratic nation-states is to provide opportunities for different groups to maintain aspects of their community cultures while at the same time building a nation in which these groups are structurally included and to which they feel allegiance. A delicate balance of diversity and unity should be an essential goal of democratic nation-states and of teaching and learning in a democratic society. (para. 1)

Banks (2003a) sees the goal as achieving a balance between unity and diversity and refuses to see these two objectives as antagonistic or incompatible. He feels strongly that

Because of growing ethnic, cultural, racial, language and religious diversity throughout the world, citizenship education needs to be changed in substantial ways to prepare students to function effectively in the 21st century. Citizens in this century need the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function in their cultural communities and beyond their cultural borders. . . . Students also need to acquire the knowledge and skills required to become effective citizens in the global community. (para. 4)

Because my focus is on teaching children to be part of community at many levels—the classroom, the school, the neighborhood, the nation, and the world—my civics curriculum looks different from previous civics courses that emphasized laws, governmental structures, and regulations. This civics curriculum is founded on six values that could inform our teaching, our curriculum, and our interactions with others. These values might run through the entire school community and beyond, guiding the behaviors of students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Each value is as important for the adults in a school as it is for the students; it is hard, for example, to ask students to be courageous if they do not see that behavior modeled by adults. It is not enough to make schools safe for students to learn if we cannot also make schools safe places for teachers to learn, to grow, to take risks, and to challenge themselves. The proliferation of programs on character education shows the growing recognition that teachers (and parents) teach values all the time by everything they do, regardless of their awareness of that agenda. Our goal is not to be value neutral. The relevant discussion is not about whether to teach values but which values to teach, how thoughtful we are about what we are teaching, and how these values should be selected and operationalized.

Within this new civics curriculum, civics can be represented as follows:

**C**ourage  
**I**nclusion  
**V**alue  
**I**ntegrity  
**C**ooperation  
**S**afety

What would each of these principles look like if it were used as an organizing principle for our teaching and classroom communities?

## **COURAGE**

Courage is one of those “soft” words we don’t use much in education. To state that courage should be one of the defining values of our educational system is to push hard against a system that is more comfortable talking about accountability, effectiveness, and quality management systems. But if we are going to change our schools so that they serve *all* children within respectful, nurturing communities, then courage is what it will take.

A song by folksinger Linda Allen (2001) says, “Courage is the letting go of things familiar.” Courage is what it takes when we leave behind something we know well and embrace (even tentatively) something unknown or frightening. Courage is what we need when we decide to do things differently. Perhaps we have always done ability grouping, but now, decide to leave it behind and embrace more heterogeneous ways of grouping students. Perhaps we have always segregated students with significant behavioral and learning challenges, and now, we decide to work toward more inclusive, integrated models of education. These changes required preparation, training, and support—yes—but they also require courage. Courage is recognizing that things familiar are not necessarily things that are right or inevitable. We mustn’t mistake what is comfortable with what is possible.

An Australian teacher, Rosemary Williams (personal communication, 1995), describes what she does as “bungee teaching.” She explains, “First you take the training, then you check the ropes, then you assemble your support team on the ground—but at some point, you have to jump.” You can’t wait to feel fully ready or prepared because you never will. We might identify our commitment to changing the ways schools respond to diverse learners as “bungee inclusion.” We must, of course, make a plan, prepare ourselves, and gather information and resources. But at some point, we must decide that we will go ahead and do it, even though we don’t feel ready, even though we are scared, insecure, and being asked to do something we have never done before.

What gets in the way of our acting courageously? The first obstacle is often fear. We are all scared of the unknown, of looking bad, and of failure or humiliation. Many of us have felt punished in the past for taking risks, making it difficult to break out of our molds and do things differently.

But there is much at stake. When we act in solidarity with others to change patterns of exclusion and isolation, we take a strong stand that goes far beyond our schools. The song “Courage” by Bob Blue (1990) makes this point eloquently.

### Courage

*A small thing once happened at school that brought up a question for me  
 And somehow it forced me to see the price that I pay to be cool  
 Diane is a girl that I know; she’s strange like she doesn’t belong  
 I don’t mean to say that it’s wrong, we don’t like to be with her though  
 And so when we all made a plan, to have a big party at Sue’s  
 Most kids at our school got the news, but no one invited Diane  
 The thing about Taft Junior High is secrets don’t last very long  
 I acted like nothing was wrong when I saw Diane start to cry  
 I know you may think that I’m cruel, it doesn’t make me very proud  
 I just went along with the crowd, it’s sad, but you have to in school  
 You can’t pick the friends you prefer, you fit in as well as you can  
 I couldn’t be friends with Diane, or soon they would treat me like her  
 In one class at Taft Junior High we study what people have done  
 With gas chambers, bombers and guns in Auschwitz, Japan and My Lai  
 I don’t understand all I learn; sometimes I just sit there and cry  
 The whole world stood idly by to watch as the innocent burned  
 Like robots obeying some rule, atrocities done by the mob  
 All innocents doing their job, and what was it for, was it cool?  
 The world was aware of this hell, but how many cried out in shame?  
 What heroes and who was to blame, a story that no one dared tell  
 I promise to do what I can to not let it happen again  
 To care for all women and men; I’ll start by inviting Diane*

Many people can relate to this song because they were Diane, are the parent of Diane, have taught Diane, or remember the Diane from their school days. At an early childhood conference, I shared this song with a large audience. After my presentation, a woman approached me and said, “I just want you to know—I was Diane.” And she burst into tears. The woman, now in her 40s, described how she had grown up rural and poor and had gone to school in clothes that did not meet the standards of her classmates. Her teacher, in an attempt to create community, had sat the children in a circle. But no one wanted to sit next to this “raggedy, country girl,” and so the teacher had placed her in the center. This woman’s pain, more than 30 years later, was still real and tangible. The hurts of rejection and of being left out, teased, or humiliated—unfortunately—are familiar to many people.

But there is another pain as well; the pain experienced by those of us who saw Diane, who saw another child rejected and teased, and didn’t know what to do. This is the same pain we experience when we see a homeless person in the street or witness some other travesty of justice or fair play—the sense that something is wrong here, that something should be done, and, often, that we don’t know what that something is. When we see another person rejected, isolated, or turned away, we can recognize that a blow to any member of the community is, in a way, a blow to the entire community. If we are a solid unit, a cohesive group, then we cannot tolerate mistreatment of any individual.

The song also allows us to see that it is within schools that most children first experience grouping, labeling, and the valuing and devaluing of individuals. It is in school that we learn who is of worth and value and who is beneath contempt. It is in school that we learn how to befriend and how to turn away. And those lessons, once learned, have tremendous implications for all aspects of our lives. But there is also good news: it is within schools that we can teach children to act in solidarity; we can teach children to have the courage to step away from the crowd or challenge the bullies if that crowd is hurting someone; we can allow children opportunities to take risks and to act courageously. It is within schools that we can teach children to have the courage to make a difference.

## INCLUSION

What does *inclusion* mean? Inclusion means we all belong. Inclusion means not having to fight for a chance to be part of a classroom or school community. Inclusion means that all children are accepted. Although the concept of “all children” should be fairly self-evident, it is still difficult for many to grasp. “But, of course, you don’t mean a child like Matthew?” someone will ask. Although children will require different levels of support and resources, the concept of inclusion means all children—all children, not just those who are clean or who have agreeable parents or who come to school ready to learn. *All* means all. Or to paraphrase a country-and-western song, “What part of all don’t you understand?” (Perry & Smith, 1992).

Inclusion can be distinguished from earlier terms such as *mainstreaming* or *integration* by understanding what it means that there is a “presumption of inclusion.” In other words, you don’t have to earn your right to be included or struggle to maintain it. It is up to the teachers and administrators involved to make inclusion a viable possibility, not the responsibility of the children to prove that they are entitled to be educated with their peers.

What gets in the way of our acting inclusively? Unfortunately, many of us have been systematically taught patterns of exclusion, and some of us have even come to accept

exclusion as inevitable or undesirable. Growing up, many of us were told that there simply wasn't enough time, success, room, or love for everyone and that some people had to be excluded. Those messages, once internalized, can be difficult to counteract (Sapon-Shevin, 2007).

The dangers of embracing a philosophy of exclusion go beyond the day-to-day hurts of not being invited to birthday parties or chosen from the team. In their most extreme forms, a philosophy of exclusion leads to the destruction of our communities.

An experience I had with exclusion was illuminating. In the summer of 1993, the Nazi Party announced that they would hold a march and rally near Syracuse, where I live. They announced that they had scheduled their march for Yom Kippur (the most sacred of Jewish holidays) and that the march would go from the Auburn town hall to Harriet Tubman Square (a landmark to the famous African-American abolitionist). For weeks, a small group of us met, trying to discern the appropriate response to such a demonstration of hatred and prejudice. There were some that favored doing nothing, arguing that the best way to discourage such behavior was to have it met by silence and lack of attention. But unfortunately, media attention had already created a situation in which the chances of nothing happening were small. It seemed inevitable that the event would be well attended (if only by onlookers) and that there would be considerable press and media coverage. The decision, finally, was to assemble a group, as a "visible presence" (as we called ourselves) and to hold signs that said, simply, "No." Another group of people appointed themselves peacekeepers and committed to maintaining the peace and keeping things from becoming violent. The period of planning for the march was a tense time for me. I was upset by the fact that there were Nazis marching, and as a Jewish woman, I felt particularly vulnerable and frightened. But my feelings were stirred even further by the fact that my then-14-year-old daughter, Dalia, wanted to be part of the demonstration. Part of me, as a parent, was proud that I had raised a child who was willing to take a stand, a child who went to 30 hours of meetings as well as 10 hours of nonviolence training over two weekends. And another part of me, of course, was terrified, frightened that I was somehow agreeing to let my precious child be somewhere she could get badly hurt. I wrestled with this through many sleepless nights and was only somewhat reassured by the many people who made personal pledges to look after her and keep her safe throughout the march.

But my biggest lesson came from my younger daughter Leora. Leora, at 11, was not coming to the march. We had decided that she would spend the day with Robin Smith, a friend of the family, attending synagogue with her in the morning. Because Leora worries a lot about the people she loves, we hadn't shared every detail of the march with her. Riding in the car two days before the march, I said to Leora, "I just want to tell you what's happening on Saturday: Papa, Dalia, and I are going to go to Auburn to march, and you are going to spend the day with Robin." Leora immediately began to cry. "Why are you crying?" I asked. "Because I'm scared," she responded. "What are you scared of?" I pushed. "I'm scared you'll get hurt," she replied.

I reassured her, as well as I could, that we were committed to nonviolence, that we would take every precaution, and that we would leave if the march became violent or difficult. Leora began to cry again. "Now what?" I asked. She looked at me plaintively. "Why are they doing this?" I took a deep breath. My experience has always been that when children ask a question, they want a real answer. They don't want research or statistics or an article to read; they want an immediate, simple answer. "Well," I ventured to say, "I think they are confused people who think that only white people should live and

that anyone who is black or Jewish or gay or lesbian or disabled or an immigrant shouldn't be allowed to live." She looked at me, paused for a moment, and then, shaking her head, offered, "Picky, aren't they!"

Leora's characterization of race hatred and a politics of violence and exclusion as "picky" is both laughable and yet completely on-target. When and where did those folks learn who was "in" and who was "out," who was acceptable and who was unacceptable? What were the school experiences of the young Nazis, and what did they learn? What are the risks of failing to teach children an inclusive response to difference?

Schools can become the places where we teach children to be inclusive, teach them to embrace differences as typical and acceptable, and encourage them to reach across categories and lines and labels to form friendships and strong relationships. Whatever lessons we teach young people, whether in kindergarten or third grade, shape their understandings beyond the walls of school.

Jowonio School in Syracuse, New York, recently celebrated its 40th anniversary. Jowonio (an Onondagan word that means "to set free") was the first school in the country to systematically include children who were labeled as "autistic" within regular classrooms with "typical" children. The administrators, teachers, parents, and students at Jowonio are solidly supportive of inclusive communities and of the importance of many kinds of children learning to play and work together. At the event organized to celebrate Jowonio's 25th anniversary, I offered this poem as a celebration of the gifts that Jowonio has given to the community and as my appreciation of the meaning of inclusive schooling.

### *What the Children of Jowonio Know*

*The children of Jowonio know—not because they have been told—but because they have lived it  
That there is always room for everyone—in the circle and at snack time and on the  
playground—and even if they have to wiggle a little to get another body in and even if they  
have to find a new way to do it, they can figure it out—and so it might be reasonable to  
assume that there's enough room for everyone in the world*

*The children of Jowonio know—not because they have been told—but because they have lived it  
That children come in an dazzling assortment of sizes, colors and shapes, big and little and  
all shades of brown and beige and pink, and some walk and some use wheelchairs but  
everyone gets around and that same is boring—and so it might be reasonable to assume that  
everyone in the world could be accepted for who they are*

*The children of Jowonio know—not because they have been told—but because they have lived it  
That there are people who talk with their mouths and people who talk with their hands and  
people who talk by pointing and people who tell us all we need to know with their bodies if  
we only listen well—and so it might be reasonable to assume that all the people of the world  
could learn to talk to and listen to each other*

*The children of Jowonio know—not because they have been told—but because they have lived it  
That we don't send people away because they're different or even because they're difficult, and  
that all people need support and that if people are hurting, we take the time to notice, and that  
words can build bridges and hugs can heal—and so it might be reasonable to assume that all  
the people on the planet could reach out to each other and heal the wounds and make a world  
fit for us all*

## VALUE

The third central organizing characteristic of our communities can be defined as value. What would it mean to not only believe but also act on the belief that all people are of value and everyone counts? What would it take to organize our schools so that we could really value every individual, for himself, without reference to the value of other individuals?

Two of the biggest obstacles to this kind of valuing are our predisposition to devalue people and our systematic instruction in ranking people according to set criterion. Many of us were raised with sometimes explicit and sometimes very subtle messages about who was good and who wasn't. From outright racist, homophobic, or anti-Semitic statements such as "You can't trust a Jew," or "Faggots are dangerous," or "Blacks aren't as good as whites," to more subtle messages about who we should or shouldn't play with, invite to our parties, or interact with, many of us were kept from seeing the value in all human beings.

At the same time, many of us were not allowed to value ourselves fully either. Ironically, when a four-year-old is thrilled with the picture she has drawn, pointing out the details of color and shading, we label that child as having "good self-esteem," but when a 44-year-old is pleased with what she has accomplished, we label that pride as "arrogance," "showing off," "snobbishness," or being "full of oneself." And if it is hard to be pleased with ourselves, our accomplishments, and our triumphs, it becomes increasingly hard to appreciate others. A child who has been told he or she is no good, lazy, and stupid is unlikely to be able to reach out to another child with warmth and acceptance.

Often, comparison with others also keeps us from taking pride in who we are. No matter how accomplished I am at something, someone has achieved more. I am thrilled with how I've decorated my new house, but surely there are people with nicer homes; I am now able to run 2 miles without stopping, but there are people (younger and older than I am) who run 10 miles a day effortlessly. We find ourselves making constant comparisons: "Well, I have a better job, but she has a better car; I have a bigger house, but her children are doing better." Constant devaluing and ranking and constantly looking at how we compare to others keeps any of us from feeling really pleased or accepting of ourselves or of others.

Unfortunately, our schools are structured so that we often focus most of our attention on what children cannot do, on their weaknesses or areas of need. This keeps us from seeing the whole child and narrows our lens of appreciation. A mother once told me about her daughter, who I'll call Jackie. Jackie was adopted as a young person and experienced a difficult early life. Now, at 10, reading was still elusive for her. But Jackie's gift was gymnastics. She excelled on the balance beam, did graceful backflips, and flowed on the parallel bars. This was where Jackie was affirmed and experienced a sense of success and belonging. The school, however, concerned about Jackie's failure to progress in reading, suggested to her mother that Jackie should quit gymnastics so she would have more time to work on her reading. Luckily for Jackie, her mother was a strong advocate for her child and gently told the well-meaning teachers that it made no sense to deprive Jackie of the one thing that made her feel good about herself to work on her weakness. And somewhat predictably, after several years during which Jackie felt better and better about herself as a person and a learner, she was better able to profit from reading instruction and learned to read. If her life had come to revolve around the one thing she was not good at, one wonders what might have happened, not only for her reading but also for her self-esteem and sense of herself as a valued and valuable human being.

How can we create classrooms where children learn to value and appreciate one another? At a recent workshop, I asked participants to bring in and share with a small

group an object that was important to them. People brought and shared a variety of things: a shell, an old photograph, a childhood book, a stuffed animal, a plaque. I then asked each person to talk about one of the other people in their group, telling others not what that person had shared but what they had *learned about that person* from what they had shared. People's responses were profound: "I learned that relationships are very important to Sharon—she cares deeply about her friends"; "I learned that Steve loves nature and that he really notices the beauty around him." And perhaps most touchingly, this about a woman whose outward reserve could have been mistaken (without this exercise) for standoffishness or aloofness, "I learned that there's more to Mary than meets the eye. She really has a deep, spiritual side to her." Many people were quite moved during the sharing experience. The joy of being seen so clearly and so fully by relative strangers was overwhelmingly affirming.

My daughter Dalia invented a Thanksgiving ritual that we participate in each year. She gives each person enough little slips of paper for every other person at the table and asks them to write one thing they like or appreciate about each person. Little people who cannot write are encouraged to draw or dictate their messages. All the slips are put in a box, and the box is then passed around the table. Each person takes a turn drawing out a slip of paper and reading it: "I like Sharon's warmth and the way she reaches out to people." "I like the way Iman cares about his work and is committed to making a difference." "I like the way Lucy giggles when something is funny and makes everyone else giggle too." The slip of paper is then given to the person it is about.

This is a challenging task for some people because in addition to appreciating and valuing people you know very well (siblings, relatives), you must also notice things to appreciate about relative strangers who you may have only met hours before. It is also hard for some people to receive their appreciations—societal messages about not feeling good about oneself can make it difficult to say, "Yes, I do have a great sense of humor. Thanks for noticing." And yet I have never seen anyone who did not take these little slips of paper home, tucked in a purse or a shirt pocket. Many people have reported, years later, that they still have the slips pasted on their mirrors or on their desks.

We need to give all people multiple chances to show themselves fully and be seen by others. And we must give many opportunities for people to see others, notice things about them, and appreciate them. Rather than belittling people for craving approval, we can realize that all people want, need, and deserve appreciation, and we can help students and teachers find appropriate and systematic ways of receiving and giving such appreciation.

## INTEGRITY

The second *I* in *civics* stands for integrity. Integrity means wholeness. What would it be like to be able to claim (or reclaim) all parts of yourself? What would our lives be like if there were no lies or secrets about who we really are, if we were able to show ourselves fully, knowing that we would be accepted in our complexity, acceptable even with our seeming contradictions and inevitable inadequacies?

One way of looking at this issue centers on how schools respond to differences. Are differences seen as something to be avoided, ignored, worked around, and minimized? Or as characteristics to be understood, valued, appreciated, supported, and celebrated?

When my daughter Dalia was almost three years old, my childcare situation fell apart suddenly, and I embarked on a quest to find a new day-care center. I visited one center

that I really liked. The teachers seemed warm and supportive, and then, at the end of my visit, I sat down with the director. “There’s something I haven’t mentioned,” I said. “Dalia is a vegetarian.” “Oh, dear,” exclaimed the director, “I don’t think we could handle that. I mean we’ve never had a child like that before. That would mean explaining it to the kids, and their parents and the staff would have to make special accommodations, and I just don’t think we could deal with that.” Our interview ended rather abruptly. It was clear to me that this was not the place for my daughter. If this was how the director reacted, I could only imagine what discomfort and fear she would communicate to her staff and they to the students. How could my daughter be in such a setting and be comfortable with who she was?

So I went to the last day-care center on my list of possibilities, nervous now about the outcome of my search. This day-care center was lovely: tiny chairs and toilets, lots of parental involvement, and a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. At the end of my visit, I nervously initiated the same conversation about Dalia and her eating requirements. “Oh, that’s no problem,” said this director. “We have Mohammed, who doesn’t eat pork; and we have Rachel, who keeps kosher; and we have Justin, who is lactose intolerant. We just make it all part of our teaching curriculum with the children.”

And so they did. Dalia’s vegetarianism was well accepted and well understood by her classmates. She came home one day and told me, “Today, I explained to my friends why I don’t eat Jell-O because gelatin is an animal product, and they didn’t know that.” And Dalia learned about other religions, other dietary requirements and customs, and about respecting differences. The children were not only accepting of one another, but also they were knowledgeable. It was not uncommon to hear children say, “Justin—you can’t eat the yogurt because it’s a dairy product, but we have some bananas you could eat,” or to hear them brainstorming inclusive snacks: what could they make that all of them could eat?

The children, following the wonderful model of their teachers, evidenced not just acceptance of diversity but understanding and celebration. There are those who say that our goal should be teaching children to tolerate differences. Certainly, tolerance is better than hatred, prejudice, and active rejection. But I would like us to set our goals higher than tolerance. After all, how many of us want our friends to simply tolerate us? Don’t we want enjoyment, appreciation, and depth of understanding?

Tom Hunter (n.d.), a children’s songwriter, writes movingly about a teacher who saw and accepted him fully: Mrs. Squires (see Box 1.1).

### **BOX 1.1 MRS. SQUIRES**

I don’t remember a lot about third grade, but I do remember Mrs. Squires, and what I remember are not her lesson plans or unit themes. Nor do I have any recollection of her knowledge of Piaget, or whether she used math manipulatives. What I do remember are moments, and one in particular about two weeks after school started when she asked me to stay after school. I remember being afraid, because staying after school was supposed to mean you were in trouble. Right away, she said, “You’re not in any trouble; I just want to talk with you.”

To understand what followed, you need to know that I stuttered a lot when I was a child. I used to say, “stuttered badly,” until someone helped me to realize I was good at it—better than any other kid in my class. That was small comfort at the time, but I did like the idea—I never stuttered badly; I stuttered a lot, and well.

In our empty classroom that day after school, Mrs. Squires told me, “I know people have ended sentences for you when you’ve had trouble talking, and I know teachers have said you didn’t have to read out loud. In this class, I have a message for you—I will not end sentences for you, and you’re going to have to read out loud when it comes your turn.” She paused, and then said, “And we’ll get through it together.”

I don’t remember any heavy drama in that moment. No lights flashed. No angel choirs sang—at least none I heard. What I do remember is the feeling that something significant had just happened. For one thing, she had wanted to talk with me alone like that. But there was something more too, some sense that I was learning something new and important.

When it came to my stuttering, every other grown-up I knew had tried to fix me, to make it all better. In a way, of course, that made sense—stuttering is not fun for the stutterer or the listener. It’s natural enough to want to decrease the frustrations, understandable that people believe attempts to “make it all better” are kind and helpful. Mrs. Squires had a different message. Rather than “We’ll make it all better,” she said, “We’re in this together.”

The conversation that day after school wasn’t long. I’m not sure I said anything, but I did get the message. It wasn’t a verbal thing, really, though I do remember the words. It was an experience, something like being able to relax a little, maybe like a deep breath. It was a moment when someone paid attention to what was important to me, in a way that others hadn’t.

The experience of having the realities of my life noticed deepened through that year with Mrs. Squires. I remember that when someone giggled during one of my longer speech blocks, she said there was no room in her classroom for that. I remember a couple of times when she found me at recess to tell me she was fascinated by what I was doing with my mouth. She never did end sentences for me. I did have to read out loud when it came my turn. And she was always there, sometimes walking across the room to stand quietly beside me when I had trouble reading or talking.

I don’t know when it happened, really. It probably wasn’t on any particular day I could identify, or at any particular time. But gradually, I became aware that Mrs. Squires stuttered, too. She wasn’t as good at it as I was, but she did stutter. She’d pause at odd times to get a word out. Sometimes her mouth would twitch noticeably, or she’d briefly bounce on one sound or another until she said the word. I don’t remember it as a big deal. It was just the way she talked, and it’s probably why she was so interested in me. We shared something, a world of speech and sounds and fears that most people don’t know about. She knew me in ways others didn’t.

Not long ago, I was talking with a teacher friend of mine about how rare and difficult it is for teachers (and adults in general) to celebrate their own talents, to acknowledge what they are good at. She mentioned being good at singing, knitting, cooking, and telling stories. Then she said, “I think I’d also have to say I’m good at sadness.” When I looked confused, she said she’d known a lot of sadness as a little girl, and more as a young woman. She had worked hard at coming to terms with it, and now, as a teacher, she’s aware of how well she connects with children who themselves know sadness. She’s good at it. Right away, I thought of children who need her as their teacher—children (in growing numbers) who know sadness well and simply need someone to share it with them.

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I believe we all have our own versions of what that teacher said, experiences that make us good at something or other. I'm probably not as good at sadness as she is, nor am I as good at stuttering as I once was. I am good at creating situations in which people are listened to, situations in which children get to stutter out what's in them, or sit there and wonder for a long time, or have feelings and observations that they simply want acknowledged. I love it when we can get through it together. It's in my bones, carried with me from those moments when some one connected with me and what I knew.

Mrs. Squires connected well, and I'll always be grateful. But she's not the only one. It's what any teacher does when he or she understands the human interaction at the heart of good teaching. The lesson plans fade. The latest programs to raise test scores come and go. This "effective strategy" gives way to that one. What lasts are moments of connection. I believe we carry those moments with us forever, sometimes in fuzzy pieces of memory, sometimes in clear and detailed ones. Moments of connection make us feel we belong. Moments of connection open us up to learning.

I'm glad I got to see Mrs. Squires again, and to thank her. She smiled as she listened to me remember her from thirty-nine years ago. "I don't remember all of that," she said, "but I do remember some of it. We shared something pretty special." She stuttered a little as she said it.

How can we create schools in which the Mrs. Squires of the world flourish so that children can be accepted, loved, and taught for who they are?

## COOPERATION

What would it be like if our classrooms and our teaching were based around a principle of cooperation, people working together to achieve a common goal, supporting and helping one another along the way? Unfortunately, few of us experienced schools or learning as a cooperative enterprise. More likely, we either worked in isolation from one another or were pitted against one another in competitive situations such as spelling bees, tracked reading groups, and so on. Because of our personal histories, we often think of competition as inevitable or even desirable.

Consider the following scenario, so familiar to many of us. The game is Musical Chairs. An adult is leading a group of children in the game. They are instructed to walk around the chairs to the music and then, when the music stops, to get in the chair nearest to them. The child who is left without a chair is out of the game and must go sit on the sidelines.

The children do as they are told. They move around the chairs to the music, eyeing the chairs and one another with nervous suspicion. When the music stops, they scramble for the chairs, knocking one another over and shoving others out of the way. One child who gets a chair yells to another child, who is approaching, "I was here first." Two children try to sit on the same chair, and the stronger child pushes the weaker child onto the floor.

One of the children who is pushed out of a chair and eliminated from the game goes over to the corner and starts to cry. A well-meaning adult approaches the child and says, "Come on, now it's just a game. You're not being a very good sport." When the game is

over, one child is victorious—the last child left with a chair. All the other children have been eliminated. The adult leader smiles and asks the students, “Now wasn’t that fun? Would you like to play again?”

What did we learn from playing this game? We learned that there aren’t enough chairs to go around. We learned that pushing and shoving in the name of winning was acceptable behavior. We learned that it’s all right to shove a child who is smaller, weaker, or who doesn’t understand the game to win. We learned that other people are what stand in the way of our winning or being successful. And we learned that only some of us are smart, are capable, are good, are winners.

It is clear how this kind of competition is destructive to community. Our classmates become—not our allies and our support—but our enemies who must be conquered for us to be victorious.

But we could play, instead, Cooperative Musical Chairs. In this version of the game, children walk around the chairs to the music, and although there are fewer chairs than children, the goal is phrased, “Everyone must be on a chair for the group to win.” So what happens? Children share chairs; they giggle; they sit on laps; they problem solve. “Someone hold on to LaDonna; she’s falling off Michael’s chair.” “Quick, grab Eli; he can fit in over here.” The goal is not to exclude, but to figure out, as a group, how everyone can be accommodated and included. As the number of chairs is reduced, the challenge increases, and children usually engage in extensive problem solving and negotiation to figure things out, certainly a higher-level cognitive skill than pushing classmates off chairs!

But competition isn’t the only obstacle to our envisioning cooperation as our normative goal structure. Strong patterns of isolation and an unquestioned stress on *individual achievement* also make cooperation seem elusive or unrealistic as a goal. Often, when we accomplished something as a child—a Lego construction, a puzzle, a drawing—and brought our creation to an adult for comment and approval, there were two comments. First, “Oh, how nice,” then followed swiftly by, “And did you do it all by yourself?” The message is clear: things accomplished alone are of higher value and more deserving of praise and appreciation than things accomplished in collaboration or cooperation with others. Teachers who discourage students from helping one another (“I want to know what you can do, not what your neighbor can do”) and who see students erecting boundaries around their desks with textbooks are seeing some of the unfortunate but inevitable results of a focus on individualism and competition.

Structuring our schools and our classrooms cooperatively would mean looking closely at not just how we teach but also what we teach as well. Do we encourage students to find out about peaceful, collaborative responses to conflict, or do we study only the battles and the wars and ignore the peace in between? Do we actively teach students the skills they need to work together: listening, sharing materials, negotiating conflict, asking questions, and encouraging one another’s participation and involvement?

Teachers are similarly affected by the goal structures set by administrators and other instructional leaders. Are teachers encouraged to share their ideas and materials, or are there prizes for the best teacher of the year, thus discouraging collaboration and interaction? Are teachers provided with opportunities to meet, talk, share, problem solve, and support one another? Are forms of teaching that entail cooperation—team teaching, cross-age groupings—encouraged and supported? The current focus on competitive merit pay for teachers and the publication of each school’s test scores hardly encourage collaboration and mutual support.

Embracing cooperation as a guiding principle would mean believing the poster that says, “None of us is as smart as all of us” and enacting that belief in all aspects of our curriculum, pedagogy, and school organizational structures.

## SAFETY

Safety is the last characteristic of our school communities. Many kinds of safety are required for children to learn. At the most basic level, there is physical safety. Children (and teachers) must be confident that they will not be hit, hurt, or physically abused in any way. In many schools, ensuring that basic kind of safety is a serious challenge. But physical safety is not enough. Safety also means emotional safety—the safety to be yourself, to be vulnerable, to ask for help, and to be warmly supported. It is physiologically impossible for people to learn when they are afraid. When you are standing on the ski slope, terrified that you will die, it is difficult to listen to and integrate instruction. And if you are terrified of failure or humiliation, you can’t learn either.

When my daughter Dalia was in the seventh grade, just months after having started at a new school, she came home one day and announced, “Today at school, I learned to tell time.” I was very surprised by her announcement. “But Dalia,” I began, “you’ve known how to tell time since first grade!” “No,” Dalia explained, “I never really understood it—didn’t you ever realize that’s why I have a digital watch? I’ve really been faking it for all these years.” As the story unfolded, it seemed that Dalia had told several of her close friends at lunch that she didn’t know how to tell time. Rather than responding with scorn or derision, they simply showed her how. Several things about this story are remarkable. First, they met her revelation with positiveness rather than scorn. Second, they then went on to teach her how. And perhaps important from a different angle, how easily people can learn when they are not expending their energy trying to cover up or get by, afraid that someone will find out about their weakness or deficiency.

Unfortunately, most of us do not feel safe enough to let others in on the places and ways in which we are struggling. In some school settings, it is impossible for the teachers themselves to ask for help and support without being stigmatized and scorned. Several years ago, a local first-grade teacher, Marie, was fired after her first year of teaching. The teachers’ union became involved, and there was considerable community interest because firing was unusual in this district. When the full story was shared, one of the points made against this teacher was that four times during the year she had gone to the principal in tears.

Going to the principal in tears is not unusual for first-year teachers or for many other far more senior-level teachers, nor is struggling with your first teaching assignment. This young teacher felt overwhelmed by trying to implement a multilevel, multiple intelligence curriculum in her classroom as a first-year teacher. All such cases, of course, are complex; to fully assess the situation, we would want to know more about Marie’s overall performance in the classroom and about her success with students. Certainly, students are entitled to be taught by thoughtful, stable, and effective teachers. But new teachers are also works in progress requiring nurturance and support. The principal’s reaction could have taken many forms: “Why don’t I take Mrs. Lopez’s class for an afternoon—she does a lot of differentiated instruction—and she can come spend time with you,” or “Why don’t I take your class, and you can spend time in hers,” or “Why don’t I send you to this differentiated instruction conference that’s coming up,” or “Maybe we should set up a teacher study group on Wednesday morning before school—we can have coffee and

doughnuts and talk about multilevel teaching.” Any of these responses would have been helpful, supportive, and might have helped Marie to become a better teacher. But instead, the principal’s response was to document Marie’s fears and to make careful note of her feelings of inadequacy and lack of adequate preparation.

This is an example of a teacher not having the safety she needed to ask for help. In this case, she actually did ask for the help she needed, but the consequences of showing her vulnerability and needs were devastating. Teachers and students alike need the safety to take risks, the safety to show their vulnerability and the safety to grow. Without this kind of safety, teachers become narrow and defensive of their current practice, and students focus their energy on staying safe and looking good rather than on taking on new projects and stretching themselves.

Courage, inclusion, value, integrity, cooperation, and safety are all essential components of a healthy classroom community in which all students and their teachers can grow in an atmosphere of support and mutual help. The values identified in this chapter are important for teachers as well as for students. The challenge now is to operationalize these values in ways that seem doable—to take a characteristic and translate it into specific practices and procedures for the classroom. We do not want to reduce these values to the word of the week shared in an assembly or over the loudspeaker each month but not represented in any concrete way in classroom practices. Only by translating theory into practice can we reap the benefits of our desire and commitment to creating cooperative, inclusive classrooms.