JANE CALIFF

HOW TO TEACH WITHOUT SCREAMING

Inspiring stories, insights & strategies to help you and your students thrive

How to Teach Without Screaming was originally published in 1975 as a short article in the National Education Association's magazine, Today's Education.

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DEDICATION

To Dr. Jean Anyon

Inspiring educator, visionary author and dear friend.

PREFACE

How This Book Came to Be Written

How to Teach Without Screaming is a guide for daily survival and fulfillment, illustrating through teacher experiences and stories how a classroom teacher, administrator or other staff member can deal with challenges in humane and creative, not punitive ways and how to provide positive support to students. The book gives examples of situations at the K-12 levels and adult literacy classes illuminating how I and other teachers have dealt with them. I believe many approaches used at one level can trigger ideas for adapting them to challenges at other levels.

The idea for this book took many years to develop. It began as an article, "How to Teach Without Screaming," published in 1975 in the National Education Association's magazine, Today's Education. Two years later I received a letter from the Omaha, Nebraska Public Schools saying that the article was required reading in their in-service teacher training program.

Years later while I was living across from an elementary school, I regularly heard teachers screaming at their students. I remembered the article I had written, found it, and took it to the principal. She explained that the teachers I was hearing had problems: one was new and inexperienced and the other had one classroom "full of 10 crazy children" they were trying to get placed somewhere else.

This principal had basically resigned herself to these two situations. I left my article, suggesting that it might be helpful in providing teachers with alternative approaches to classroom problems, but the screaming continued.

This encounter prompted me to find the longer version I had originally written (shortened by editors of Today's Education because of space constraints) and to consider expanding it into a book.

I combed libraries, book catalogues and the Internet for available literature on discipline and classroom management. I found out some took the punitive approach, advising teachers, for instance, to "stand near students when you are reprimanding them, not far away." Other sources emphasized the value of doling out stickers, prizes, candy, certificates or putting up charts on which students get stars when they are "good" or have their names moved from an acceptable area of a chart to an unacceptable section with traffic light signals indicating whether the child is behaving or not.

The overall implied message was "You have the sole responsibility to see that students do their work and get along with each other." Having students participate in finding solutions to a better classroom climate was not often part of the protocol.

The more I read, the more I believed that my years as a classroom teacher, university professor in an urban education department, staff developer and parent of a public-school child had given me insights that I should share with other educators in a book that had a different focus.

My view of successful teaching had broadened to include not only classroom management skills and a humanistic approach, which my original article had featured, but other areas as well:

the importance of an interesting and interactive curriculum

the need for a curriculum of social justice that includes preventing personal attacks due to bullying, racism, sexism and homophobia since students have a great interest in fairness

being successful in a multi-racial classroom or classroom in which students are of different cultures or class than your own

having class meetings to help resolve problems

saving the environment and climate which are crucial to having a livable planet for ourselves, our students and future generations

the importance of including the arts, especially music in many subjects

limiting students' exposure to TV, video games and other electronic media

building positive partnerships with parents

connecting with and learning from people, organizations and activities in the community surrounding the school since student behavior and learning are influenced by the world outside.

In my experience and my research, addressing these areas conscientiously is important to any effort to improve school climate and student cooperation, an approach often left out of many books on discipline. As a result, what began as an essay of classroom vignettes became a guide on a deeper level for maintaining a calm, productive and interesting experience for teacher and student where the need for a teacher, administrator or staff person to yell all but disappears.

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Introduction

I had been teaching only about two months when Jay, one of my third graders, walked over to my desk. He was a round-faced, happy child, with an inquisitive mind. He asked, "Is this your first year of teaching?"

Unwilling to admit that I was completely green, I replied, "Not really; last year I taught a class with another teacher." "Well," he concluded, "you're on your own now, aren't you?"

And indeed, most teachers are because in many schools there is little time created for serious communication among teachers on techniques of instruction, handling of discipline problems, or evaluating solutions to common problems. Once assigned a class, you find yourself "on your own," standing behind a closed door in front of thirty or so restless students, expected to maintain a calm, authoritative demeanor, keep your class under control and to deliver interesting lessons.

Meanwhile, standardized testing continues to replace hands-on learning in the arts, shop, home economics, physical education as well as eliminating civics and languages in many schools, leading to less instructional content in regular subjects and hours of boring test preparation. It's enough to make educators feel like screaming before they even set foot in their classrooms.

This can be a trying time, particularly for a new teacher who, although armed with various vague educational precepts such as, "You must provide for the individual needs of your pupils," lacks the practical knowledge, strategies and time to put them into practice.

As situations arise that teachers cannot deal with, tensions that began in the first days of school can intensify and create a serious barrier between students and teachers. They can find themselves floundering and, although well-meaning, can take out frustrations on the children by shouting and doling out punishments. They may try to frighten unruly students into behaving as they search their mind, course books and notes on how to deal with disruptive students who refuse to do their work, or how to help the passive ones who don't seem to be learning anything.

The pressure of dealing day after day with so many students and so many problems, often with too little help from administrators or overworked support staff, can reduce us at times to some pretty poor behavior or even to tears. It can make us feel like beating the kids out the door at 3 p.m.

I made many mistakes in the classroom, but as the months and years progressed, I discovered positive methods which helped create mutual feelings of respect not only between me and my pupils but among my pupils as well.

These methods were developed over a 44-year teaching career in a broad range of teaching environments: elementary school classroom teacher; literacy instructor to teenagers and adults in basic education programs including the Brooklyn House of Detention for Men; and as Professor at Rutgers/Newark University preparing students to be powerful teachers committed to social justice.

I was a researcher, writer and lecturer at the Council on Interracial Books for Children conducting workshops on racism, sexism and historical distortions in children's books; led workshops such as "Using Social Issues to Teach Reading and Writing" and "Creating an Atmosphere of Multicultural Respect and Support in the Adult Basic Education Classroom;" led classes for parents on how to instill a love of reading in their young children.

I wrote articles, book reviews and lesson plans based on my teaching experiences and research that appeared in magazines, books and curricula.

An Overview of purpose and goals

This book does not dwell on external rewards. It does not speak in generalities, leaving you to wonder why certain strategies work and others fail. This book is specific, based on actual classroom experience. It shows many ways that a cooperative, supportive, nurturing environment can grow when the teacher enlists the help of the students. It offers a philosophy of education, combining my classroom experiences with those of other teachers to show how it is possible to avoid many discipline problems, and how to handle conflicts in ways that will enable all to win.

You will learn how it is possible to have the entire class involved in resolving interpersonal problems and building classroom unity through class meetings where the issues are presented and solutions proposed by students, not just by the teacher. I describe how teachers can get students on their side. After all, thirty heads are better than one, and students usually care more for what their peers think of them than about the opinions of their teachers.

You will read about how crucial it is to have high expectations and standards for each student, and to expect the highest quality behavior and academic work, not settle for the least.

These solutions are aimed at fostering good relations among students, developing self-confidence, and proposing positive non-violent alternatives to conflict. In short, the goal of this approach is best expressed by the question: "How can we help each other to do our best?"

Creating this kind of classroom environment takes TIME and PATIENCE. It is more difficult at first than laying down authoritarian rules which neatly define the classroom environment and the students themselves as subservient to the teacher's preferences. But if we can overcome this strong tendency to deal with problems in a dictatorial manner, and begin to perceive students as fellow human beings with a basic need for love and respect for their ideas, the time and patience required to achieve this

change in attitude will usually result in a more harmonious and better learning environment.

The solutions offered are not necessarily meant to be copied, but to stimulate your creativity when facing difficulties. When you come across stories where students are much younger or older than yours, and you believe the strategies cannot be adapted to your grade level, skip them, but be assured that you will find other stories and approaches that are more relevant. This information can help prevent burnout, enable you to enjoy your work more, and to teach more effectively. It also is my hope that this book can be of use to administrators, staff developers, professors in college and university departments as a helpful resource.

Testimonials for How to Teach Without Screaming

"Jane Califf captures what every teacher needs to learn: How to engage students in a way that builds on their strengths. Her easy to understand classroom suggestions urge teachers to listen to their students. It is through that listening that teachers can construct a classroom culture which respects each student and in most cases leads to a much more relevant and motivating classroom environment.

Califf is reflective without begin preachy. Her emphasis on gaining a deep understanding of her students reflects years of patient grappling with the complexities of teaching urban young people.

Her insights are not just for new and inexperienced teachers. They resonate with all teachers who are constantly refining what they need to do to reach all students."

Michael Charney taught Social Studies with a social justice perspective for over 30 years in the Cleveland Public Schools. In 1996 he was chosen by the American Federation of teachers as the k-12 teacher of the year. He is an editor of Teacher Unions and Social Justice, Organizing for the Schools and Communities Our Students Deserve, a Rethinking Schools publication.

Jane Califf culls her extensive experience as a K-12 teacher and university teacher of teachers to provide pearls of wisdom accompanied with pragmatic applications. She demonstrates authentic student engagement in discovery learning that evokes democratic citizenship. This is a jewel

for the novice teacher as well as the seasoned teacher who is seeking inspiration!

Carolyne White, Professor, Department of Urban Education, Rutgers University Newark

If you are thinking of taking a more student centered approach to teaching, this is a great book for you. It's practical and easy and interesting to read. Worth the time it saves you in the long run.

It's chock full of practical examples. One that stood out for me was getting classmates involved when there is a behavior issue. My middle and high school students are way more receptive to help from their peers than from adults; and their peers really do want to help.

Many of the examples remind me that it is worth the time and effort to address issues of race and gender. Yes, it's time out of a lesson, but the hurt and alienation to students, by not doing so, is a much more serious consequence.

Alice Freund, High School Biology Teacher

I found this book to be very informative and helpful as it contains many nuggets of great information for all teachers, especially new ones. I've been teaching for 20 years and still need to be reminded of some of them. I felt validated that I'm doing right by my students and families after reading Chapter 9 Parents. I really feel that being open, forthcoming and building rapport with each family can really make the year go so smoothly. I also enjoyed reading Chapter 10 Music as an Intrinsic Part of the Curriculum. It has opened my eyes to how to I can use music more in my 3rd grade classroom. This year my students' favorite times of day are when they are listening to Classical or Meditation music; writing in their journals (first thing they do when coming to class) and while doing art. I had a student tell me, "It helps me concentrate more." I think that since

teachers are such important roles in these young lives, we can help them learn to appreciate genres that are less familiar.

Melinda Creps, Elementary School Teacher, Fremont Unified School District, California

Jane Califf has put together a book filled with practical advice from herself and other teachers. I marvel at this book because who better for us to learn from than other teachers. I have been teaching for 39 years and I still found motivation in this book and new ideas to try. I zeroed in on the cooperative learning chapter knowing that it is not a strength of mine. After reading the stories and suggestions, I am ready to start tomorrow with that all important list of rules for cooperative learning. This is just what I needed to feel more comfortable updating my teaching style in this manner. The quotes from research about the subject got me started thinking I should do this and then the stories made me think I could do this. Reading about other teachers' successes will carry me through. This book will take me on the journey of something I have wanted to do, but felt ill equipped to do. I think teachers everywhere will find a chapter like that for themselves.

Lori Hartwick, Public Elementary School Teacher in South San Francisco

This is just the kind of resource I have been looking for as a new teacher! Far from posing more educational theories for teachers to wade through, How to Teach Without Screaming provides real, concrete solutions to difficult classroom situations that will benefit teachers of all experience levels. Califf draws on decades of her own experiences in the classroom to discuss how teachers might meaningfully engage students of all ages in complex issues such as racism, sexism, and homophobia. Most importantly, Califf affirms our highest call in the classroom: to build a classroom community where all students feel respected and can thrive.

I have served as a children and youth choir director for several choirs in the past, and find this book to be a great resource for people working with children both in and outside of the classroom.

Allison Schommer, Music Teacher in Montclair, NJ

I love this book! Jane Califf has obviously "walked the walk" in a variety of teaching situations, and has wonderful and practical suggestions for creating an inspiring classroom, with thoughtful strategies for dealing with problems as they arise. Califf had me right from Chapter One, with great suggestions for helping kids realize that they are able to have agency in how society- in this case, their classroom- can be run in a respectful way that benefits all. Not only does Califf show how the children and teacher create the classroom rules together, but the teacher, too, comes up with a list of their own "teacher responsibilities" that the children then have a chance to weigh in on. Fascinating are the many and varied classroom examples woven throughout the book illustrating creative ways of developing a truly democratic classroom, where children take an active role in their own learning. (Don't miss the section on the "quiet child"!)

I highly recommend this book to all teachers; indeed, to anyone who has, or works with children in any situation.

Laura Liben, Music and Movement Teacher, Madison Ave. Presbyterian Day School, N.Y.C.

How to Teach Without Screaming is a very thoughtful book that provides ample resources, real-life examples and suggestions that are laid out in a non-judgmental and straightforward manner. I wish I had a book like this when I began teaching. I can see that it could become required reading for teachers.

Wynnie-Fred Victor Hinds, Former Elementary, High School and College Languages Teacher

CHAPTER ONE

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

(How can I get their attention?)

There you are, standing in front of the class, while far from paying attention to your well-prepared lesson, the students are carrying on a conversation among themselves. In such a situation, I used to try to make them stop talking and listen to me. Later I read a perceptive analysis of just this problem in the informative book, *The Lives of Our Children,* by George Dennison (Random House, N.Y. 1969). Dennison asks, "Why shut them up when they are not paying attention? Why not find out what they are talking about and discuss it with them?" When the matter has been fully discussed, the teacher can then guide the class into the lesson she has prepared. In some cases, however, it may be wiser to postpone the planned lesson and take up another subject which can be tied logically to the previous discussion so as to capitalize on their interest.

High School/Middle School Stories

Once, in my role as supervisor of student teachers, I entered a high school social studies class to watch a lesson on the Opium Wars in China. I got there early, and the room was empty except for Bill and his cooperating teacher. The bell rang and soon students were bursting into the room talking excitedly and at high volume about a bad physical fight they had just observed between two female students outside the school, "Her glasses were broken!" "The cops came and took them both away in handcuffs!"

Bill thought his lesson was paramount (especially since I was there to observe him teach) and tried to introduce the topic with very few students listening. He tried to get their attention and failed. All they wanted to talk about was the fight. His cooperating teacher, thinking he should not intervene since the lesson was being observed, took no action.

At the end of the period, I met with Bill and pointed out the futility of trying to teach amid chaos; that he should have shelved his lesson and begun a discussion of what had happened outside. After students had a chance to say what they had seen, he could have asked, "What exactly set off this fight?" "Could it have been prevented?" "Should the police have been called?" "Couldn't a teacher or school administrator have broken up the fight?" "Do you think these two girls will now have an arrest record? If so, how will that affect their future?"

If it was impossible to have an orderly discussion, Bill could have handed out a piece of paper to students and asked them to write down what they had seen and imagine what a positive solution to the problem could have been. Then he could have asked them to pair up with another student and share what they had written, after which some students could tell the class what they had discussed. After each comment, Bill could have asked, "Who agrees?" "Who disagrees?" which would have encouraged a dialogue among students on alternative conflict resolution approaches.

If time remained, or at the beginning of his next attempt at teaching, he could have used this discussion about the fight to segue into the Opium Wars. After all, both are conflicts that could have been avoided under certain conditions, and this connection might have engaged the students more in learning about wars that occurred long ago.

Day Dreamers

Another scenario faced by teachers is the day (or days) when it seems that everyone is day-dreaming. Again, almost no one is listening to you or

answering your questions. Rather than scolding them, one could say what the authors of *Discipline With Dignity* recommend:

"stop what you're doing and say, 'My guess is that many of you are bored with the lesson. Probably you're thinking about other things. While your bodies are here it looks to me as if your minds are not. Your assignment for tomorrow is to write down all the places that your mind has been during this class. Tomorrow I'll collect your work and read each paper out loud. You don't have to put your name on your paper unless you would like others to know what you wrote.'

"As it is neither desirable nor possible to eliminate students' daydreams, it makes sense to legitimize this 'misbehavior' by attending to it."[1]

These daydreams could provide the teacher with clues to students' concerns and interests which in turn could help in developing future lessons that would be of more interest to them.

In general, I have found that teachers do not pay enough attention to what their students are saying or to their interests. They have a lot to tell us if we would only listen. Listening helps us see the world through their eyes and thus enables us to relate to them with greater understanding. On my website, see **The Value of an Extended Discussion with a Disruptive Student** by **Tara Mansman Romero** in which a loudly cursing 8th-grader is calmed down by his teacher without contacting an administrator.

Elementary School Stories

A technique for catching children's attention in elementary school that usually works is to point out who is ready rather than who is not. For example, you are about to read a story, but the class is too noisy. You then say, "Mary is ready. Thank you, Mary. Joshua has cleared off his desk. Billy just sat down. Thank you to all the children who will let the story

begin." Invariably you will hear, "What about me? I'm ready too," to which you respond, "You're right. I should have mentioned your name."

Another approach is to say, "Six people are ready on this side of the room. How about the other side?" Then as they make an effort to be ready too, you say, "Now it's even, and I think I can almost begin." Noticing the trend is to pay attention, the remaining children usually cooperate.

In this way you are focusing on cooperative students. You give them credit, thus encouraging other students to consciously change their behavior, so they too can be recognized.

The Unusual Situation

There are also individual students who insist on doing their own thing which seems to have nothing to do with the lesson or activity at hand. In such cases, creativity and the ability to surprise the child by doing the unexpected is needed to help capture the child's attention. Here is one teacher's success story as told by her granddaughter, Paula Von der Lancken:

"My grandmother, Guilia von der Lancken, taught art in the public schools of Louisville, Kentucky and Tulsa, Oklahoma through the 1940s. In one of her classes was a boy who enjoyed games more than art. He sat in the rear of the classroom and shot marbles.

"My grandmother went to him and demanded to see the marbles. With great admiration, she knelt down and pointed out the brilliant colors, the free-flowing design in some, the symmetry in others. They examined every marble and when finished, my grandmother had won over a student and had a marble in her pocket to remember him by." [2]

Kathy Matson, 5th-grade teacher

Kathy Matson, 5th-grade teacher, found it helpful to have direct lessons on teaching children to listen carefully to each other. She was a member of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program created by Educators for Social Responsibility which provides workshops and materials for creating a peaceful, respectful and productive classroom.

For example, she gave her class a topic such as "When did you have your last conflict with someone? Answer these questions: who, what, where, when, why, and how was the conflict resolved? Then you will pair up with the person next to you and share stories, and when you are finished, you will report what you learned to the entire class. To do this successfully you have to listen carefully to each other. If we don't finish today, we will continue tomorrow."

This topic was so interesting to students that the conversations they had with one another in pairs and with the whole class showed increased attentiveness to what their peers were saying. Lessons like this were key to expanding her students' skills in interpersonal communication, as well as relevant reading and writing.

In another instance, when Ms. Matson's class was getting out of hand, she stopped everything and asked, "What are the plusses and minuses of this class?" She listed their answers on the board. Students liked that their work was displayed in the classroom and outside in the halls. A number of students said they didn't like to line up according to height and that they had too much homework. The class brainstormed solutions.

Together they decided that children would line up in alphabetical order from then on. They agreed to try having a little less homework. Later, they would evaluate how it was working out.

By using techniques such as these, in giving her students a voice, her students became easier to work with, and by Thanksgiving or Christmas had jelled by and large into a cooperative working unit.[3]

Joel Brooks 6th-grade teacher

Joel Brooks, a sixth-grade teacher and a member of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, believes that children need to be taught how to distinguish between good and poor listening.

Author Miriam Miedzian describes one of his lessons:

"Mr. Brooks starts out by asking the children if they've seen any movies they've liked lately. The response is enthusiastic, and he chooses a girl named Maria to come to the front of the class.

"They sit down facing each other and she starts telling him with enthusiasm about Eddie Murphy's latest movie. Mr. Brooks plays with his pen as she talks, his gaze wanders around the room; he stares vacantly at the ceiling, smiles at the students in the class. As she is in the middle of a sentence, he starts telling her about another Eddie Murphy film he saw. When Maria starts again, he interrupts her to ask her if a pen on his desk is hers. She is looking more and more exasperated. When they are done, he turns to the class and asks: 'Was I a good listener?' The answer is a loud 'No!' All the children are waving their hands in response to the next question: 'What made me a poor listener?' 'You kept interrupting.' 'You avoided looking at the speaker,' and so on.

"Mr. Brooks then asks Maria how she felt. She does not mince words in explaining how upset and angry she was 'cause you weren't listening; then you interrupted me.'"

"The second exchange involves a student describing "Robocop." This time Mr. Brooks is listening carefully. When he is done he asks the class: 'What was I doing? What are good listening skills?' Again a flurry of hands: 'You were concentrating'; 'No interruptions'; 'You looked her straight in the eye'; 'You summarized what she said'; 'You nodded – communicating understanding.'

"When Mr. Brooks asks the students how many of them have had the experience at home of having their parents pretend to listen, almost all raise their hands and tell anecdotes about their parents not listening to them. When he asks, 'What about teachers?' he is met with another flurry of anecdotes about teachers – including himself – not listening."

In a discussion of what they learned from the lesson, the point is made that "Learning how to listen well is a means of avoiding some conflicts and a building block for resolving those conflicts that do occur."[4]

The strategies described above take a positive approach to the problem of inattentiveness. They show that we must always try to develop ways of communicating which enlist the cooperation of students, to help them see that it is in their interest to listen carefully to each other and to their teachers; teachers in turn must listen carefully to their students and be quick to apologize when we get distracted. For example, "I am sorry Juan; I can't listen right now, but you can tell me the rest after I finish giving the class their assignment and the students get to work."

Teachers who show interest in what their students have to say, who give them respectful attention, and where appropriate, ensure that a student's classmates are attentive as well, are setting a wonderful example that will not be lost on the class.

Letting Students Get To Know One Another

Many of us also do not allow our students much opportunity to communicate with one another. It's a fact that many children go through an entire school year without getting to know half the boys and girls in their class because the teacher insists on monopolizing their attention. Lunchtime is usually short so that there is little opportunity for them to talk with their classmates there. At the end of the day, they scatter to their separate homes and play only with children on their own block or in their own neighborhoods. Some don't play with anyone or hang out with

friends at all if they live in dangerous neighborhoods where parents keep them inside. Latchkey children are told to go right home after school and stay indoors.

So what we are doing in effect is helping to keep thirty or so students isolated from one another when actually what they need and thrive on most is an environment in which they can discuss problems together and help one another.

One way to begin this process is to give students a chance to introduce themselves to one another. This can be adapted to any level where they can tell or write about what they would like their classmates to know about them. Teachers can model how to do this by recounting their own stories. Students can pair up and share with each other. Volunteers can tell their class one important thing they learned from their partner. Teachers can research other "ice breakers" and share with one another.

The Importance of Unstructured Free Time/ Recess

A growing problem negatively affecting students' behavior and ability to concentrate and learn is the increasing time spent on academic subjects while unstructured recess or free time has decreased. A policy statement by the American Academy of Pediatrics entitled "The Crucial Role of Recess in School" (January 2013), makes recommendations that include:

"Cognitive processing and academic performance depend on regular breaks from concentrated classroom work. This applies equally to adolescents and to younger children. To be effective, the frequency and duration of breaks should be sufficient to allow the student to mentally decompress…

"Peer interactions during recess are a unique complement to the classroom. The lifelong skills acquired for communication, negotiation, cooperation,

sharing, problem solving, and coping are not only foundations for healthy development but also fundamental measures of the school experience."

An article entitled "Running, Jumping and Swinging Their Way to a Lifetime of Innovation" by Laura M. Holson (N.Y. Times, 3/02/19) backs up the AAP statement above. It states that in April 2018, "Arizona legislators passed a law that provided 2 daily recesses for the state's elementary school students. Teachers have already seen encouraging results, reporting fewer disciplinary actions, enhanced test scores and improvement in children's overall health."

Lucy Dathan, a parent with 3 children, who was elected to the Connecticut legislature in 2018, supported a state bill that would require schools to provide at least 50 minutes of daily undirected play for student enrolled in preschool through 5th-grade. She says, "You need to give kids an opportunity to learn social skills. It's good for overall happiness. And playtime builds relationships." (N.Y. Times, 3/02/19)

Collectively Deciding Class Rules at All Levels as a Means to Improve Communication and Behavior

Class rules that are chosen collaboratively at the beginning of the year, whether agreed to at the elementary or high school levels, are more democratic and more effective than rules made only by the teacher. When students participate in classroom decisions for creating the kind of community they want to live in for the semester or year, they are more likely to be invested in seeing that the system will work.

Elementary School Level

Jonathan Kaspari tells how rules were decided in his fourth-grade class:

"My class was divided into six groups and each group made a list of all the rules they could think of. Then the teacher put them all in a computer and printed them out. Then each group reassembled the next day and looked at the list and chose the ten best rules. The teacher put these in the computer and printed them out. We looked at the new list, and each group had to pick the best five.

"My teacher put all of this together, and our class voted on them. We ended up with six rules that we all agreed on, and we all signed our names to the rules. Our teacher signed too. She gave us a copy of the rules to keep, and she hung them up in the classroom."

Room 212 Rules

1. Treat people with respect.
2. Don't get into other people's relationships.
3. No violence.
4. Clean up after yourself.
5. Stop if someone says, "Stop."
6. Listen when other people are talking.

In thinking about these rules, Jonathan said, "They were fair because we had all agreed to them. They set some boundaries for us for things we could and could not do."[5]

High School Level

When I began teaching at an alternative high school, the Frederick Douglass Center in Brooklyn, New York, I faced a class of twenty 17–21-year olds. The focus of the school was to raise students' low reading levels to at least 6th-grade when they would qualify for a GED class.

My students were drop-outs and push-outs of regular New York City high schools as well as immigrants from different English-speaking Caribbean countries with various dialects. Many seemed depressed and alienated. I started the term with a class meeting in which I said:

"In this class, we will be dedicated to improving reading skills so that you will qualify for a GED class. What we need to find out today is what kind of class you need to help you to learn as much as possible.

"I want you to divide yourselves into groups of 3 or 4 and on this ½ sheet of paper I am giving you, I will ask you to write down 3 or more rules that would make a successful classroom environment which will help you learn as much as possible. We will put your suggestions on a chart, discuss them and decide which ones are the best."

When they were finished, I called on one group after another, getting a suggestion from each and putting them all on the chart paper until there were no more. After we discussed each one, I told them I would write them up neatly to put up on the wall to remind ourselves what we had agreed to. In addition, I told them that I would make a chart of my commitments to teaching them in the best ways I could.

The next day, I came in with the completed charts which were clearly and colorfully written, and put them up in a prominent place. I could see that the students were impressed that I had taken the time to create them, and that I had included the chart I had promised of rules for me as their teacher. I read mine and asked "What do you think?" The general consensus was that they were O.K.

Then we went over student rules, and I asked if anyone objected to any of them – that we could still change them. Since no one objected, I explained that we would hold each other to these agreements, that from time to time we would go over them to see if any needed to be revised or eliminated. I added that if I saw anyone breaking one, I would simply go over to the chart and point to it, and that I might not say anything since the student who was guilty would probably know who he or she was. I also said that if I violated any of my agreements, I hoped they would point them out to me so that I could improve too.

Here are the two charts:

Class Rules

1. Always respect one another and each other's opinion.
2. Make classmates feel welcome.
3. Try to understand if a person is right or wrong.
4. Don't talk while the teacher or student is talking. (I added the student part with no objections from the group proposing the rule.)
5. Don't laugh at another person's accent. (This referred to the fact that many students in the class were from different Caribbean countries with varied accents.)
6. No arguing.
7. Help each other with classwork and problems.
8. Be on time every day.
9. No littering in class.
10. No graffiti.

Teacher Responsibilities

1. Be prepared each morning.
2. Be on time except if subways don't run.
3. Try to have interesting lessons.
4. Do my best to teach you if you don't understand something.
5. Respect you and listen carefully when you speak to me. I will learn as much as I can from you.
6. Give homework that helps you to learn.
7. Try to be helpful if you have a problem.
8. If there is something many people want to learn, and I don't have enough information, we will do research to find the answers.

This proved to be fair and helpful in setting a positive tone to start off the year. I rarely had to raise my voice and most students tried to cooperate. To read about how this year unfolded, see **Students and the Power to Change** on my website.

Another example of creating class rules collectively is: **Urvi Shah's Class Meeting, High School Social Studies** on my website. Ms. Shah was a student teacher who faced a very difficult and unruly class, but as a result of class discussions and creating rules, she was able to begin teaching.

A key point to remember is to regularly refer to the class rules, especially in the weeks immediately following their creation, to remind students of their importance and to evaluate whether any of them need to be changed, as mentioned above. This will avoid the pitfall of rules being ignored because they are put up on the wall and soon forgotten.

Class Meetings for More than Creating Rules

In his book "Beyond Discipline, From Compliance to Community," Alfie Kohn sees class meetings as very important forums to address more than rules. He describes in great detail how to make them successful instead of simply ritualistic, and how helpful they can be for sharing interesting things that happened in their lives; for making decisions on things such as decorating the classroom or how best to help people in need; for planning field trips, or making sure that when the teacher will be absent, the time will be spent productively; for reflecting on what kind of place the classroom should be, i.e. how to treat one another, what to do when classmates don't agree or someone says or does something mean.

He points out that it is difficult for many teachers to share power with students especially because there are pitfalls that must be prepared for and to overcome, but "… Anyone who truly values democratic ideals would presumably want to maximize children's experiences with choice and negotiation…for it is experience with decisions that helps children *become* capable of handling them."[6]

You will find more examples of the value of involving students in meaningful decision-making in the classroom throughout this book, particularly in **Chapter 4, "Specific Challenges and Solutions."**

In addition, you will find essays on my website that stress improving communication between teacher and students and among students themselves:

Who Are Your Students? by **Nabeelah Abdul Ghafur**

Teaching Without Screaming: A General Perspective by **Nicole Neil**

Fresh Start Every Day: Creating a Compassionate Classroom Community by **Jennifer Christiansen**

Building Community Through Letter-Writing by **Jane Califf**

Cultural Conflict in the Classroom as a Barrier to Communication

A barrier to effective communication that is not well understood or even realized by many teachers is what African American educator Lisa Delpit calls "cultural conflict in the classroom."

In her book *Other People's Children, Cultural Conflict in the Classroom,* she gives many examples of how communication styles vary from one culture or social class to another. One that she describes is how middle-class teachers giving a directive to their poor students or students of color may not get what they consider to be the proper response because their words are misinterpreted. The middle-class style of giving directions or making requests tends to be indirect whereas in poor, working class and Black families it is more direct. Consequently, upon entering school the child from such a family may not understand the indirect statement of the teacher as a direct command.

Children brought up in households in which commands are given explicitly rather than in the form of questions (which are really veiled orders) are less likely to respond to the statement "Is this where the scissors belong?" rather than to "Put those scissors on the shelf."

Another cultural clash which leads to a breakdown in communication is over the question of what is an effective authority figure. According to Delpit:

"Many people of color expect authority to be earned by personal efforts and exhibited by personal characteristics. In other words, 'the authoritative person gets to be a teacher because she is authoritative.' Some members of middle-class cultures, by contrast, expect one to achieve authority by the acquisition of an authoritative role. That is, 'the teacher is the authority because she is the teacher.'

"In the first instance, because authority is earned, the teacher must consistently prove the characteristics that give her authority. These characteristics may vary across cultures, but in the Black community they tend to cluster around several abilities. The authoritative teacher can control the class through exhibition of personal power; establishes meaningful interpersonal relationships that garner student respect; exhibits a strong belief that all students can learn; establishes a standard of achievement and 'pushes' the students to achieve that standard; and holds the attention of the students by incorporating interactional features of black communicative style in his or her teaching." [7]

The point of these examples is not to say that middle-class, particularly white, teachers cannot be successful with working-class and children of color. The lesson here is that if our students are not behaving as we would like, or not showing interest in our classes, we cannot assume it is their fault, but perhaps ours in failing to develop a communication style and a curricula to which they will respond. This means that we must read about and study the social and cultural history of the students we teach, which is especially important since our social studies school texts at all levels still largely ignore or minimize the history, culture, struggles and achievements of these groups (and women, too). Parents and leaders in the community can provide input and support in our teaching efforts to improve our understanding of their children and their lives outside of school. We cannot be complacent and think that what we learned in our college education classes or remember from our own school experience prepares us for the world of every classroom today.

Another resource to help improve teacher/student/parent/community communication is *Rethinking Multicultural Education, Teaching for Racial and Cultural Justice*. This book shows the importance of going beyond learning about national and international cultures through heroes, holidays, foods, games and clothing. Essays by 36 teachers and researchers detail, largely through their own classroom experiences, how to make

multicultural education more meaningful to students in elementary through high school classrooms. Veteran teacher Bill Bigelow describes it as highlighting "injustice of all kinds – racial, gender, class, linguistic, ethnic, national, and environmental – in order to make explanations and propose solutions. It recognizes our responsibility to fellow human beings and to the earth. It has heart and soul." [8]

In another essay, "Decolonizing the Classroom, Lessons in multicultural education," Wayne Au writes:

"As a teacher educator I encounter on a daily basis the consequences of schooling that is not multicultural. Many of my students know little of the histories and cultures of the students that they will end up teaching. What's more, they don't know that they don't know, and I fear that many of them will enter communities of color… damaging the young people they're trusted to educate." [9]

Teachers who read *Rethinking Multicultural Education* will gain insights on better curricula and teaching methods which can greatly benefit all their students. They can also join the National Association of Multicultural Education to keep abreast of conferences, books and other resources: https://www.nameorg.org/

To be a success with children of another culture, race or class demands an open mind, a willingness to see things from another point of view, to learn from such experiences and to change what we do with our students as a result.

As this chapter indicates, teachers need a variety of approaches to successfully communicate with students. As a teacher and a mother, I have been concerned for many years about the negative effects TV, video games and other media can have on children's ability to listen, their attention span, learning and behavior.

The Negative Effect TV, Video and Other Screens Can Have on Students

Over decades, national organizations have been researching and reporting on the influence of media on children's emotional, social, academic and physical health. The published results are shocking.

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) produces handouts for parents and teachers, including one entitled *Media and Young Children Action Guide.* In the section "Exposure to Violence Leads to Violence," they state:

- → By the time children are 18-years old, they will have witnessed an average of 200,000 acts of violence on television, including 40,000 murders.
- → Violent toys, often tied to violent media, are commonly marketed to young children.
- → Children exposed to violent programming at a young age are more likely to use aggression to solve problems.
- → They are also more likely to be desensitized to the effects of violence, to see the world as a more dangerous place, and to crave more violence than children who are not exposed.

The Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood states in their 2013 report "Screen Smart Guide for Elementary Schools":

- → Children between the ages of 2 and 11 see more than 25,000 commercials each year. Children under 8 cannot distinguish between commercials and program content nor understand advertising's persuasive intent.
- → The $17 billion that companies spend annually on marketing to children, (an increase from the $100 million in 1983) are mostly for cereals, candy and fast food.

The Parents Television Council's "Facts and TV Statistics" states:

- The average eight-year old child spends eight hours a day on media.
- A teen typically more than 11 hours of media a day.
- Nearly 43% of kids have been bullied online.
- 1 in 4 say it has happened more than once.
- Only 1 in 10 kids report bullying to their parents.
- More than 58% of children surveyed (ages 14 -17) report having seen a pornographic site on the Internet or on their phone.
- 37% have received a link to sexually explicit content.

Other organizations and studies have corroborated this research, adding that too much screen time has resulted in shorter attention spans, obesity, increased risk of attention deficit disorder, becoming more attached to screens and objects than to people and the worlds around them, becoming easily bored, and nagging parents after they see foods, games and toys advertised. Creative play, which helps lay the foundation for later academic learning, has diminished.

What are Teachers to do?

With so much distracting media available to students, the job of teaching becomes more challenging and frustrating. Many students' minds are full of news stories of mass shootings and exposure to adult sexual abuse and other images they have witnessed on their media devices; they are used to constant change and excitement as they multi-task from one media device to another. In contrast, even teachers who work hard at developing interesting and relevant lessons can be considered boring if they don't have fast action lessons with lots of drama and variation.

The organizations mentioned above and others can provide guidance on how to mitigate this state of affairs. Their suggestions and explanations include:

- → educating parents about the dangers of unlimited interaction with media and lack of parental emotional availability while offering family-building activities to take their place.
- → teaching students at all levels with age appropriate lessons on how to critique media, how to keep media from negatively influencing their behavior and to take action to change programs that feature violence, stereotyping, bullying and other negative behavior.
- → participating in the nation-wide annual Screen Free Week: https://www.screenfree.org/

A great source for lesson ideas from elementary through high school is the book *Rethinking Popular Culture and Media* edited by Marshall and Sensoy in which teachers explain successful lessons and activities that they have created.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN INTERESTING CURRICULUM

(How can I keep from boring my students?)

A surprising discovery I made in reading many books on classroom discipline is that very few even mention, much less stress, the importance of an interesting curriculum as a key component of a cooperative and interested student body. Teachers cannot regularly expect students to pay attention and behave if their lessons are perceived as boring.

As Herbert Kohl states in *On Teaching:* "The more the students enjoy and value what they are doing, the more they will fight to see that it is not destroyed. In a boring situation, so-called discipline problems are inevitable since the struggle for power and control is then more interesting than the content of what is supposed to be learned." (p. 83)

Kohl points out how important it is for teachers to listen carefully to their students. He says,

"Often students ask for resources and express the desire to learn things that are not in the curriculum or that their teacher is not competent to deal with. Requests for knowledge and skills should not be denied, no matter how much they might put you out. If someone wants to learn about airplanes, sharks, volcanoes, sex, embryos, police, weapons, self-defense, TV, then chase up some information or resources or learn

with the students. I have found that following up on one students' request to learn something of special interest to him or her opens up the rest of the students; it tells them you will listen to them and take their interests seriously, too. Then you as a teacher can become a personal resource to your students, someone who will find a way to help them learn what they care to know, not as a favor because they are good or obedient, but because it is your job." (p.80)

This is possible even if you have an assigned textbook for the subject you are teaching. Each state has Core Curriculum Content Standards which are supposed to guide instruction in each subject area. Many of them are general and you can cite them in your lesson planning to justify what you are teaching. For example, one of New Jersey's Standards for 6th-grade states:

"Determine the impact of European colonization on Native American populations, including the Lenni Lenape of New Jersey."

You don't have to study only what happened in the past, but can show how injustices continue into the present by providing writings by Native Americans in your community/state for students to read and discuss, inviting a Native leader to speak to your class, playing samples of traditional and current modern music. If there is a cause they are working for to improve their lives, you can talk it over with your students to see if there is a way to show collective support.

In *On Teaching,* Kohl shows how he has developed interesting curriculum themes in his classes and how he has gone about collecting resources and ideas for implementing them. His approach can help any teachers who, having found themselves with boring and irrelevant curriculum, want to try something different and more creative, but do not quite know where to begin.

Kohl also provides examples of how a curriculum relevant to students can improve behavior. Here is one of them:

"One of the boys in your class acts crazy whenever you ask him to read. He says the book is boring, reading irrelevant to his life. He calls you a fascist pig for trying to force him to read and says he just wants to be left alone.

"However, this same boy is looked up to by the class for his great store of information on sports, the latest movies and hit songs.

Kohl says, "Some of this involves reading, all of it involves being aware of a world outside the school that is of value to the other students, though irrelevant for their school experience.

"The knowledge of this person can be brought to the center of the curriculum. What he knows and the other students value can become a vehicle for them to educate the teachers, who can then use this material to help the students in reading and writing. Or it can become a barrier. Then that student's defiance cannot be overcome or turned to strength within the school because the rewards he gets from the other students for standing up for what they value are much greater than those a mere teacher can offer." (p.79 – 80)

In my experience, following up on students' interests and suggestions has proven to be a successful avenue for improving students' behavior, learning and listening skills. Here is an example:

Early in my teaching career, an elementary school pupil brought me her book, "Famous Afro-Americans" and asked me to read it to the class. Until that moment I had not taught any African-American history to my third-grade class of about ten African-American and twenty Spanish-speaking children. Finding the book too advanced for this grade level, I instead took it home and prepared a lesson on Harriet Tubman. The next day I told the class of her life as a slave, her escape, and how she led hundreds to freedom as a "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. As I

was telling this story, there was no fidgeting, no scribbling, no staring into space. It was the first time I had everyone's attention for the entire lesson.

The next day I reviewed the story by asking a series of questions to see how much they remembered. They recalled everything. When I left out a detail at one point, some children raised their hands and said, "But you forgot when…"

Before the end of the term we learned about many African-Americans and kept the information in special folders. I must say that every lesson was a success. The class was genuinely surprised to discover that Black people had accomplished so much (their textbooks were notably silent on the subject), the African-American children noticeably proud to learn more about their heritage, while the others were impressed.

All this indicates that if we can find meaningful courses of study for children, they will be much more eager to listen and learn, and we will avoid the frustration of trying to teach children who don't relate to what we say or ask them to do.

In addition, children come to have more respect for themselves and for others as illustrated by the change that occurred in Cynthia, one of my students.

Earlier in the year she had called another child "a white cracker" in the heat of an argument. One day, after we had had a number of lessons on African American history, she came over to my desk and the following conversation transpired:

Cynthia: *"I'm Black."*
Teacher: *"Yes, you are."*
Denise (who overheard all this): *Why sure. Everybody's colored except the white folks."*
Cynthia: *"Well, I guess it doesn't matter what you are as long as you are a human being."*

If you decide to have your class study a certain topic you think they will be interested in, a topic suggested by a student, or one required by your syllabus, it is a good idea first to find out what they already know. You can put their statements on a chart; older students can be put in small groups to generate information on chart paper that is later combined on a master list. This will give you an idea of where to begin, for invariably there will be misinformation offered by certain students. Those who know a lot can be a class resource.

On another chart you can list questions they have about the topic. Again, older students can, in small groups, list their questions. In some classes, putting names next to their questions can help perk up more interest as well as encourage others to think carefully about the topic and offer a question so they, too, can be publicly recognized and their questions answered.

To have a questioning approach to any subject is like presenting a problem that must be solved. Students' minds are more engaged when they are searching for answers to questions that they and their classmates have raised than if they are simply reading one page after another in a school textbook and only answering questions asked by the text or the teacher.

A lot of what passes for education in our schools does not require students to think deeply or creatively. There is a lot of superficial learning going on in social studies, science, math and other subjects. Students are still being urged to memorize facts – small bits of unrelated information which usually don't stay long in their minds or get muddled as children try to make sense out of them. What teacher hasn't asked his or her class basic questions and gotten answers that are incorrect or confused. This is discouraging to say the least.

We can begin to attack this problem by encouraging our students to inquire, challenge, examine and research. No serious query should be considered stupid or irrelevant. The free flow of ideas is key to keeping our students interested and involved.

Special Note

There are teachers who may be intimidated by opening up their classroom to such an inquiring approach to thinking and learning. They may ask themselves, "Suppose I don't know the answers to questions? Won't that weaken my authority leading to more discipline problems? The answer to this depends on how you react to difficult questions. If you say something negative such as "You should have learned that last year," or "Your question has nothing to do with what we are studying," you will definitely alienate students. However, if you say, "That is a very interesting question. I think we should look into finding the answer. I don't know everything about this subject, but I love to learn new information; maybe someone in the class knows something about this, or we can research this together." Most students will welcome this response because you are respecting them and their questions; you are indicating that learning is an on-going process; that adults need to ask questions and find answers too.

If students like me, won't that encourage them to work hard and learn?

While it is true that children will work harder for a teacher whom they like, simply being liked will never be enough to develop in children a love for learning. In his book, *The Quality School, Managing Students Without Coercion,* William Glasser suggests that teachers admit to their students "that your class is no different from most classes in that some of the material you will ask them to learn will be boring. But also tell them that when things get boring, you are willing to work with them to try to find a more interesting way to teach the material. What you are doing is preparing students to accept some alternative ways to teach, such as cooperative learning. They will be more willing to try new ways if they are involved with you in figuring them out.

"Ask for students' help and advice in any way you can. Don't struggle by yourself in anything that they could conceivably help you with. Nothing gives students more of a sense of power than advising the teacher….most students will accept that there are subjects that are very difficult to make exciting.

"What the students want is a school where it is apparent to all that the staff is constantly trying to make things better. This strong 'We care' message is the foundation of quality education." (p. 126, 132, 133)

Creating an Interesting Curriculum at the Middle School and High School Levels That Will Assure More Engaged Students

William Glasser's advice above is very helpful for teachers at the middle and high school levels especially because unlike most students at the elementary school level who readily raise their hands to participate in class activities and discussion, many middle school and high school students are reluctant to speak up during lessons and show no outward enthusiasm for their English, history, math, science and certain other classes.

There is justification for this when the subjects are looked upon as "boring" and "irrelevant" to their lives. However, there are dedicated teachers who try hard to create meaningful lessons who face the same problems as their less dedicated colleagues. It can be very frustrating to put in many hours creating what you think are good lesson plans and then face a class full of blank stares as you try desperately to ignite student interest and participation. Under these circumstances, it is hard to create a supportive classroom atmosphere and to keep up your enthusiasm.

What is going on and what can be done?

There ARE solutions for the alienation and disinterest in school which has led to discipline problems and low academic achievement among too many students. For example, here are 4 essays on my website which I wrote that can be helpful:

Every Classroom Needs a No Put-Down Rule

Students and the Power to Change

Using Current Events to Engage High School Students

Teen, Senior Oral History Builds Writing and Uncommon Friends

In addition, there are two books that provide excellent guidance which can help teachers out of this quandary:

Reading for Understanding, How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College classrooms by R. Schoenback, C. Greenleaf and Lynn Murphy, Jossey-Bass, 2nd Edition, 2012.

Adolescents on the Edge, Stories and Lessons to Transform Learning by ReLeah C. Lent, Heinemann, 2010. A DVD is included.

I single out these books because the authors describe successful strategies that are ignored or not emphasized enough in other books – research-based, classroom-tested, creative approaches that can turn a class of students who are not interested in reading and studying into one that is enthusiastic and actually understands what the books, articles and other reading material mean.

These approaches have led to higher test scores as compared to classes that do not use these methodologies because they engage the minds of their students helping them to think creatively and critically.

The solutions offered, which are clearly described, can provide much hope to students and teachers alike. They show how behavior problems abate as students become more interested in their classes and how defeated students and overwhelmed teachers can actually begin to find joy and self-fulfillment in teaching and learning.

The appeal of *Reading for Understanding* is that it describes teachers, collaborating together, who tried very hard to improve their students' reading comprehension and succeeded. A step-by-step description of how they did this provides invaluable ideas for others to adapt to their own classroom instruction.

The value of *Adolescents on the Edge* is that it focuses on short stories specifically written for adolescents by Jimmy Santiago Baca, He is a role model for young people in that he went from being an illiterate, young drug dealer, imprisoned for 5 years after a drug bust, to a celebrated Chicano non-fiction/fiction writer and poet. Against all odds, under horrific prison conditions, he taught himself to read, write and compose poetry, which was his salvation.

Mr. Baca conducts workshops for prisoners and at-risk youth to inspire them, by example and through reading and writing, of the real possibility of redirecting one's life from negative behavior and low self-esteem toward positive goals. The DVD that is included with this book shows him in action, and the book has a section on the many ways the DVD can be used in schools.

(There is also an excellent book and movie, ***A Place to Stand,*** which explores his journey that could be very inspiring to teenagers.)

Key Points Elaborated on in *Adolescents on Edge* and *Reading for Understanding*

Although there are many positive messages in these books for teachers, here are key points:

There is a crucial need to have a safe and supportive environment where students are not afraid of being ridiculed for comments and opinions they may express in class.

Teachers need to compose class rules with their students and not for them, asking what they think will work in getting all students to share their ideas and confusions without being made to feel stupid. The collaborative experience of creating rules together make it much more likely that students will want to be active class members. (See previous chapter for more details on this approach.)

In addition, it goes without saying that we need to be open-minded and respectful of our students so as to serve as role models for the behavior we want to see. We cannot expect them to be respectful and involved in our lessons if we make disparaging remarks or do not show interest in their opinions or their lives.

Adolescents on the Edge states:

"Students must know without a doubt that you know, care about them and believe in them." (p.8) Teachers must be "looking at students with new eyes, seeing their potential in place of their failures. Your belief in them will transcend their negative beliefs about themselves and help them, at first haltingly and then confidently, know they are capable of using literacy skills in any way they choose." (p.33)

To help reinforce efforts to have a positive and respectful class atmosphere, the authors of *Reading for Understanding,* describe their approach:

"In Reading Apprenticeship classrooms, teachers emphasize the value of talking about what one does not understand. To develop students' belief in the value of this kind of exchange, some teachers are quite direct: credit for class participation includes sharing reading confusion and questions. Students understand that the more explicit they can be about where in a text they got lost or why they thought something was difficult for them to understand, the more credit they receive. These teachers report that as this idea takes hold and students are acknowledged for discussing their reading difficulties, a noticeable change occurs for many of them.

"One Reading Apprentice teacher says, 'This class values thinking. The more you think, talk, and write about your thinking, the better your grade will be. There may be wrong answers, but there are no 'wrong ideas.'" Another teacher we know posts "It's cool to be confused!" in large print at the front of her classroom.

"As a matter of course, most Reading Apprenticeship teachers begin class discussion about a text by soliciting students' confusion or questions. In Will Brown's high school chemistry class, for example, it's not uncommon for students to be called on to explain what questions –not necessarily what answers – they have. (p. 68-69)

There is a need for a shift in how teachers communicate subject matter.

At the middle school and high school levels, most students can read the words in their texts, but many do not have the skills to understand what they are reading. Teachers need to act as guides to demonstrate to students specific strategies to make sense of readings in their subject area. They cannot just expect them to understand by "working harder."

These books clearly show strategies that work to enable students to comprehend subject matter more easily. With these tools, middle and high

school teachers become reading teachers in their area of expertise as they serve as guides for how to get meaning from difficult passages in their texts.

This may seem like something extra to add to all the work a subject area teacher has to do on a daily basis. However, once students master higher order reading skills, the teacher's work becomes easier and students learn and retain more.

There is a need for more cooperative and communal learning in pairs and small groups.

Students need to be taught step by step *how* to work collaboratively: the skill of listening to each other, organizing pair or group work, setting ground rules, taking roles to help make their work successful. Spending time to teach effective skills needed for small groups to work well together results in more interest, engagement and learning and will be amply rewarded in a more peaceful classroom and more student cooperation.

Adolescents on the Edge states:

"The advantages of communal learning are hard to ignore. Teachers working in community report increased morale, lower absenteeism, and sustained, transferable learning.

Adolescents say that they work harder, find school more interesting, and skip class less often when they are allowed to work collaboratively

These findings are not surprising. Although students have obvious academic requirements, their emotional and social needs are enormous. It is through community that they learn not only to respect others but to find respect for themselves. They learn how to disagree with each other while attempting to understand and have empathy for those who have different views, essential skills for their futures in a global setting.

"Relationships, the key component for successful communities, must be nurtured and given time to develop, but they will never form if the members of a class are not offered the opportunity to know one another beyond the superficial." (p.4). Adolescents on the Edge shows you how to accomplish this.

There is a need for teachers to coordinate *when* they teach certain topics in their subject area with teachers in other courses.

It is easier for students to understand and retain course content when time frames and themes in various subjects are related. For example, history teachers covering the U.S. colonial period can collaborate with English teachers so that colonial literature is taught at the *same* time as colonial history; science discoveries, music and art of this period can also be taught simultaneously.

To make this possible, school administrators have to build time into school schedules for collaborative planning within and among departments as well as time to share problems and successes. This may be hard to coordinate, but the effort will be well worth it.

There is a need to make every effort to create lessons and unit studies that are interesting and relevant to students' lives.

For example, in addition to the resources described above, there are two follow-up books to *Reading for Understanding* that can be helpful:

Building Academic Literacy, An Anthology for Reading Apprenticeship, A. Fielding and R. Schoenback, Jossey-Bass, 2003. This book is for students. Because of the high interest level of the stories chosen, it can appeal to advanced as well as struggling readers in grades 6 – 12.

Building Academic Literacy: Lessons from Reading Apprenticeship Classrooms, Grades 6 – 12, A. Fielding, R. Shoenbach and M. Jordon, editors, Jossey-Bass, 2003. This companion book to the *Anthology* mentioned above features five middle and high school teachers working with the "Reading Apprenticeship" approach as introduced in *Reading for Understanding*. They show how and why it has worked well for them and their students. These follow up books were published because teachers wrote to the authors of *Reading for Understanding* for help in finding relevant reading material and how to get started with the strategies described in their book. Teachers in all content areas can benefit from the suggestions offered and from up-to-date information at their website: https://www.wested.org/

Another great resource for learning how to teach in more relevant and interesting ways is *Rethinking Schools.* Their quarterly journal, their many publications and their invaluable website offer deep and clear analyses of our current educational scene, lesson ideas and ways teachers, administrators, students and community members can work together to make their schools more successful.

CHAPTER THREE

USING YOUR VOICE PERSUASIVELY

(Is there ever a time to yell?)

I conducted a series of interviews with teachers and parents at the K-6 levels to gather suggestions on how teachers can use their voices in more effective ways. (Some of the suggestions are appropriate at the higher levels as well.) The importance of using a moderate or soft tone of voice is highlighted by two stories.

Kazu Iijima, a family friend, had a son whose second-grade teacher yelled all day long. He would wake up every morning with a stomach ache and not want to go to school.

Kazu discussed this problem with the teacher. "Although you don't yell at my son," she said," he gets very upset when you yell at others."

The teacher responded, "You have such a wonderful son. I would never yell at him, but there are other children who need to be screamed at."

She never changed her behavior, and Kazu's son had a miserable school year.

Gloria Carlson, a retired 6th-grade teacher, remarked one day about a former teacher in her school:

"In our school we once had an art teacher with very creative and wonderful ideas, but the pitch of her voice was horrible, and she spoke in an angry, strident tone. Children did not want to go to her art class.

"I think there are teachers who scream and don't know they are screaming. They don't hear their own voices. However, if used sparingly, appropriate anger is justified in certain situations and is perceived by children as caring when they understand you have their welfare at heart."

As Ms. Carlson says, yelling can be helpful in certain situations, but only if it doesn't become a way of life.

Kathy Matson, 5th-grade teacher, raised her voice in the following situations:

1. If there was a fight in class, she sometimes yelled briefly to stop it. Then she returned to her normal voice and took steps to discover the underlying cause and how to prevent the fight from happening again.
2. To redirect wandering minds, she sometimes started talking very loudly and quickly slipped into a soft tone. The dramatic contrast in volume caught children's attention.
3. If a child yelled a question at her from across the room, she yelled the answer in the same volume as the child's. This made the child laugh and pointed out how unnecessarily loud the question was.
4. If there was an emergency such as a fire drill, and the class was not serious enough, Ms. Matson sometimes yelled to make sure they got out of the building in time.

Sometimes she used no voice at all to make a point. If the class was too noisy and wouldn't listen, she might use drama to get their attention such as walking out of the room, banging the door, counting to ten, and then returning. By then children were quiet and in their seats.

Some teachers use the phrases "inside voice" and "outside voice" when children don't realize how loud they are talking. They have children practice speaking quietly the way they should in class and then loudly as they might outside. Once children are clear on the difference, all you have to say is "Use your inside voice" to get students to quiet down.

Millie Fulford, in her first year of teaching, spent 90% of time yelling at her second graders. She realized that the children were not responding. She noticed that an experienced teacher next door didn't yell, and this teacher became her mentor.

She observed her class to learn more effective ways to manage her own. She asked her questions. She then made a conscious decision not to raise her voice unless the situation were very serious.

The following year she told her class that she didn't like to yell. She asked, "If I need your attention without yelling, what should I do?" Then they had a brainstorming session which resulted in students agreeing on calm ways their teacher could get their attention.

This system worked says Ms. Fulford "because the kids had a stake in creating the solution. 95% of children don't want to be yelled at."

In addition, Ms. Fulford says it's important to be well-organized, to be clear and specific about what you expect. She often deliberately speaks in a low voice to get the children's attention and says, "I'll only say this twice."

Another reason Ms. Fulford rarely has had to yell is that she became the trainer of student mediators in her school. She learned this skill from Educators for Social Responsibility, particularly from their recommended book *Creative Conflict Resolution* by William Kreidler. Mediators learn how to resolve problems in the lunchroom, playground and classroom through negotiation. They learn how to monitor each other positively, and as a result they are often able to solve their problems without the teacher's help.

"After awhile" explains Ms. Fulford, "resolving conflicts creatively without violence and yelling becomes who you are, a way of life. It gives the children the power to make choices on how to behave. This approach has opened my eyes. It has enabled me to treat kids firmly, fairly and upfront. If you are insecure or phony, older children can read right through you."

Here are some brief thoughts by various teachers I interviewed on how to avoid screaming:

1. Give each child a feeling he or she is important. This will cut down on the child's need to act up to be recognized. One way to do this is to have children draw a picture of themselves with positive words written underneath such as "intelligent, loving, easy-going." Then have children show their picture to the class and read the words they wrote about themselves.
2. Hug them. Tell them "I'm not mad at you, just at your behavior."
3. If a child is mumbling something negative about you, ignore it. If another child says "Did you hear that?" say "No, I didn't." If the mumbling and student remarks continue, take the disruptive student into the hallway. Have a private talk. Don't pounce on the student. Ask questions, listen, give the child a chance to settle down. Without an audience it is more possible to talk to them or to arrange another time to talk such as at lunchtime.
4. We teachers often talk too much, and students turn us off. Then we get frustrated and raise our voices to get their attention. One way to avoid this is to teach them that words can be signals. Instead of saying, "Now it's time to put away your things in your desk and go to the rug area for a meeting," you can simply say "Meeting time!," and everyone knows what that means.

However, you have to practice these signals, so children learn to respond as quickly as possible. Then you won't have to be constantly repeating yourself which can become boring, exasperating and cause you to yell.

An effective signal to quiet a noisy class is to flick off the lights. This, you tell them, is the signal to speak more softly. Let them talk loudly, then turn off the lights to see how quiet everyone can get. Children will enjoy the drill and learn the lesson.

Another way to improve students' listening skills is to practice giving directions. Begin with three directions at a time such as, "Get up. Go get a book. Give it to Mark." You can make them more complicated as children respond more easily to simpler directions. They will enjoy this, especially if you turn it into a game.

1. Be active and vigilant. Don't sit at your desk doing paper work. Walk around the room. Notice any budding signs of discord, so you can deal with them before they escalate into something serious.

   Example: Nereida Morales, kindergarten teacher, used this technique when a girl came into class one day with a patch over one eye under glasses. Anticipating that children might wonder what had happened, stare at her, or make disparaging remarks, she held a class meeting. The children asked the girl questions and she answered them.

   After the meeting they were very sympathetic and wanted to be her special friend. Ms. Morales said to the girl, "Are there things that you will not be able to do that you might need help with?" The girl mentioned a few, and the children had suggestions. The class was now her ally, ready to help her if need be. In this way, a potential situation in which a child might have felt harassed and ridiculed was averted, and Ms. Morales had no need to raise her voice.

2. Be well-prepared each day so you can feel comfortable with what you are teaching. Students are less likely to get into trouble if your lessons are interesting, interactive and they are kept busy.

3. Separate your school life from your home life. Give yourself time when you don't think about school. Focus on your family, a hobby, friends. Have some fun. This will nourish you, so you can deal more effectively with your students. Then the constant demands made on you in school won't be so draining and stressful.

4. Don't struggle alone with difficult class problems. Talk with other teachers. Get advice. The more suggestions you get, the easier it will be to find a solution. It is not a sign of failure but a sign of intelligence to consult with others. You may think you are the only one with a serious problem, but you are not, for developing positive human relations in your classroom is a skill that requires a lot of practice. It does not come naturally to most of us, but once you learn how, it becomes an intrinsic part of daily life, like breathing.
5. Communicate regularly with any other adult in your room. This is especially important to do with para-professionals who are there every day. If students see you talking together in positive ways, it is a role model for them. If you compare notes on how each day went – the lessons, the behavior of children and what can be improved – there will be more coordination between the two of you, and therefore more chance of successful collaboration. This time should be structured into each day and not left to chance.

If there is friction between the two of you, don't ignore it hoping it will go away. It won't work. It just leads to a build-up of tensions which the children notice and which interferes with teaching and learning.

You have to sit down and have a heart to heart talk. If that fails, you can call in someone from the staff to mediate. I had to do this one year when a paraprofessional and I were not getting along. The assistant principal listened to both sides and made a few suggestions. We agreed to try a couple of them; as a result, our relationship was better and the classroom environment for learning improved.

After so many years of teaching, encompassing many mistakes and victories, I still got a high when I saw poorly behaved, angry or depressed students change, knowing I was instrumental in achieving this, and knowing I helped them to become more positive and better students behaviorally and academically – all of this without any vindictive action

on my part. These times have been some of the most fulfilling moments of my teaching career.

Raising My Voice in a Literacy Class at the Brooklyn House of Detention for Men

I have many vivid memories of teaching in this jail. One that stands out was the time I actually yelled at a student/inmate in front of the class. Here's how it happened.

We had been reading poetry over the term, and an inmate came to the class one day with a poem he had written. I asked if it would be O.K. to make copies for the others to read – that it might encourage some of them to write poems too. He agreed, and the next day I brought in multiple copies which I distributed. Immediately, James dropped his copy on the floor saying, "I don't read other people's works." Students stared at him and I worried about a fight breaking out.

I was taken aback and asked, "Why?"

"Because I just like to read my own."

It was then that I lost my temper, and spoke louder than I ever had: "This behavior is totally unacceptable. Bruce has taken the time to write a poem, and I asked him to share it with us. It is very rude to drop his work on the floor. How would you like it if someone did this to your writing?

"You can either pick up the paper or leave the room!" I was talking so loud that two guards came running to the door. (There usually was one in the back of the room, but today there had been no one until then.) James slowly picked up the paper, and I quickly got back to the poetry lesson. The other twelve students were respectful as Bruce read his poem, and we discussed it. James sat silently with the paper in front of him.

Later the guards told me they were going to intervene, but since I handled it well, they stayed quiet.

Reflecting on this incident, I think that there was no need to yell. I could have spoken very firmly the same words without the volume. If James had refused to pick up the paper, I could have said that he had to pick it up in the next few minutes or he would have to leave. Then I would immediately return to the lesson without looking at him. This would have given him space to pick it up without everyone looking at him. If that had failed, I could have had him removed for this day only.

It would have been better for me to have made time to take James aside at some point and gently ask him more about why he only wanted to read his own writings, but I didn't. It might have meant a lot to James for a teacher to take such an interest in him, and even ask him to let me see a sample of his work.

At least I was glad that I had given him a second chance, something that rarely happens in a jail.

CHAPTER FOUR

SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

(What do I do now?)

Some students stand out as different from the others. These are the hostile, lonely, frightened, depressed and frustrated children who need our special attention if they are to become more successful academically and socially.

In this chapter, I will describe my experiences and those of other teachers when we were able to help such students overcome their problems. The approaches we used worked for us and are described here not as a blueprint, but as examples of how we took a creative leap hoping for a positive resolution of a difficult problem. I hope it will encourage other teachers to try out their own ideas on resolving a problem with a student or students before asking the administration to remove them from the class or calling on the guidance counselor to meet with them.

Topics include how to make the new arrival and the outcast become accepted class members; how to help the child who cries and the one who doesn't speak; what to do about frustrated children who have given up; how to stop the fighter from fighting; how to calm down the acting-out child who is constantly seeking attention; ways to reach students who are of a different race, class or culture than yours.

You will find out more about how teachers have used class meetings in which the teacher and students put their heads together to find a solution to a problem the teacher has failed to solve alone.

In addition, I discuss briefly the child you are unable to help – the one who continues misbehaving despite superhuman efforts on your part, and what you can do to see that they get help elsewhere.

The New Arrival – Elementary School

It is easy, because of all the things a teacher has to do, to ignore a new child. You find him a seat, give him some books and a hook for his coat, find out what level he has reached in reading and math and place him accordingly. Then he's forgotten if he's a quiet child, or soon becomes a problem in his attempt to get attention and recognition.

I've been guilty of this, too. My attitude changed one day when my third-grade classroom door opened and the principal brought in a little boy named **Miguel**, newly arrived from Puerto Rico. His mother stood timidly by, apparently fearful of how her son would fit into this strange environment. It struck me then that something must be done to help new children adjust and feel at ease.

I introduced Miguel to the class and explained that he didn't know one word of English. I spoke with great seriousness. I conveyed to them by my tone of voice and by what I said that being new was scary. I put myself in his shoes and asked them to do the same. I paused significantly and looked at the class intently, clearly showing that I felt great sympathy for a new student like Miguel. Children are very impressionable, and my third-graders became wrapped up in what I was saying.

"Can you imagine yourself," I exclaimed, "sitting all day in a class listening to words that have no meaning?" To engage the children further, I pointed out that Miguel needed a notebook, paper to write on and a pencil. In no time at all he was liberally supplied with both, as his new classmates vied with one another to meet his needs.

I further said there was something else Miguel needed: our new classmate had no friends at all. A voice from the rear shouted, "Now he do!" I thanked

Felix, and when I asked who else would like to be Miguel's friend, many hands shot up in the air.

I encouraged the children to help Miguel learn English and suggested several ways they could do this. Soon they were telling me what they had taught him at lunchtime, on the playground, after school, and I would praise their efforts before the entire class. Thus Miguel was immediately accepted as part of the group and the cooperative classroom atmosphere was strengthened.

Children love to be helpful, and by providing an opportunity for them to be of positive assistance to a new classmate, many of them will rise to the occasion.

Another way newcomers can be made to feel welcome is for the teacher to find out something of interest about their lives which either the teacher or the child can tell the class. If they can make something, have them teach it to the class. If they can speak another language, put some words on the board comparing them to English. Children can practice saying and even writing these new words. (See the story in Chapter 5 of Mee who was from Hong Kong.) Some way should be found to involve the class in welcoming new members, in helping to familiarize them with routines, and in making them feel at ease.

Aside from making a child feel comfortable, involvement of the class in their well-being will bring out the best in students, enabling them to go beyond their own needs and to focus on how to make another human being happier. If we teachers can create an environment where our students help each other to solve problems, then this can lay the foundation for their developing into responsible citizens who work to solve problems in the wider society.

The New Arrival – Alternative High School

Manuel arrived in the spring and was an unnerving and slightly scary presence in my literacy class at the Frederick Douglass Center, Brooklyn, New York. Each day, his tall, muscular form strode into my class usually dressed in a black sleeveless t-shirt, black pants and black boots with shiny studs embedded in the sides. He had strange scratches up and down his arms. He was the only Latino among African-American and Caribbean students and spoke to no one.

He was present when I invited a poet to our class to read his poetry and show students how to begin writing poetry themselves. Everyone tried, including Manuel.

I looked over student poetry after each session and was surprised to see the emotional extremes Manuel expressed. For example: a love poem to his girlfriend; another about how bleak and hopeless life is.

After he had written a number of poems, I asked if he would be willing to read one or more of them to the class. (This was my excuse to break the ice between him and the rest of the class.) He said he had to think it over.

Finally, he agreed. I think he was empowered as he saw other students read theirs with no negative remarks, due to the strict rule against put-downs in our collaboratively-developed class rules (explained in Chapter 1). I was anxious to see what the reaction of the other students would be.

When I announced that Manuel had offered to read two of his poems aloud, class attention was completely focused on him since he had previously isolated himself.

First he read a love poem while seated at his desk. A number of students said they liked it and wanted a copy (which I agreed to provide). Then he read one of his morbid poems, and what shocked me was how many students said it reflected how they have felt past and present. At this moment, they revealed a connection with him that previously seemed

non-existent. The ice had been broken, and he began to participate in subsequent class lessons and activities.

One day we went on a class trip, and as I was walking down the street next to him, I casually asked, "Manuel, I've been wondering why you have scratches on your arms."

Here I got another shock. He explained that he was a wrestler in rings with barbed wire along the sides instead of ropes and he liked to feel the pain when he fell or was pushed against them.

As I tried to process this admission, I gently suggested that life was full of enough pain without inflicting more on yourself; that he could get infections from the wounds he received. Why not, I asked, use poetry to express your pain as well as any happiness? He was non-committal.

Weeks later, I asked Manuel if he would like to be our class speaker at the final school assembly where certificates of appreciation were distributed to all students who participated in the Frederick Douglass Center program. He refused but thanked me anyway.

Although, he did not return to school in the fall, I hope that my interest in his poetry, in his overall well-being in and outside of school, as well as the support from his classmates, helped him to find a more positive road ahead.

In retrospect, I wish I had explored with my students their reactions to Manuel's poem about life being depressing and hopeless. A discussion of why they agreed with his theme could have provided a lively dialogue in which students learned more about one another. In addition to building our sense of community, it would have given me specific information into their world outlook that could have helped me understand them better and thereby choose more beneficial lessons.

However, Manuel's poem did make me think of developing an extended series of lessons related to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. It had occurred to me that if so many students felt a lack of hope, a

study of a period when students their age rose up against an entrenched system of legal segregation could be inspiring. These African-American students of the past had dreams of a more just society and persisted in their goals despite the violent acts used against them. I invited a civil rights leader and singer, Matt Jones, to my class and over a series of weeks, the materials I used and the first-hand experiences of Mr. Jones, were inspiring to my class.

See full story on my website: **Matt Jones, Inspiring Students with an Invited Speaker**

The New Arrival from Abroad – Alternative High School

During another term at the same school, a student from the Cameroons in Africa was placed in my literacy class with students reading at about the 4th- or 5th-grade level. She was much more advanced and ready for a GED program.

While the guidance office looked for another school placement for her, she remained in my class. Since she was a friendly, respectful young woman, I realized that **Desdemona** could provide my class with an opportunity to learn from and develop respect for a peer from another part of the world.

I introduced her to my students and asked her to tell them about her country. This was possible because she spoke English in addition to African languages from her area in the Cameroons. She pointed out where her country was located on our class wall map. (This was a Peter's Map that showed more accurate proportions of continents – revealing, for example, that Africa is much larger and the U.S. smaller than the traditional Mercador Map.) She gave a description of her daily life there and some of the history which greatly interested her classmates.

She became my classroom aide, helping students with assignments when appropriate, and when not needed, she read books on her own.

She had a great interest in poetry, so I gave her poetry books to read, encouraging her to write her own. At the time, my class was connected to Waterways, an organization funded to print small, stapled "chapbooks," for any student who submitted ten poems. She began to write poetry while the rest of the class was engaged in our regular curriculum. When she asked for feedback, I gave it to her, and when she had finished 10 poems (after discussing with me the best ones to revise or send in as is), I submitted them to Waterways.

She soon received ten copies, and each student in the class got a copy. We formed chairs in a semi-circle, and she read her poems aloud. Following each one, she asked if there were any questions or comments. (I pointed out that a pause was needed to allow time for students to think.) This led to interesting back and forth exchanges. Here is one of her poems:

My Mother
(I wrote this to my mother because I always thought she hated me and loved my brother more. But I realize she loves us all.)
How lovely,
How gentle,
And how sweet she is.
Why, why did I have to do
What I did to her?
Why did I have to fight her?
And give her all types of insults?
I love her and she loves me, I care for her and she cares for me,
What a kind mother she is,
Oh what a wonderful mother,
I need to go back to her for forgiveness,
For I love her,
No matter what she does.
Always love your mother,
No matter what she does to you,
Always love her.

This poem evoked respectful disagreement among some who agreed and some who disagreed that you should always love your mother "No matter what she does to you…"

After a month and a half, she was enrolled in another school and left, but not without inspiring many of my students to become more focused in their studies. They began to appreciate poetry more and to write their own, so a number of them had chapbooks made just as she did, and they presented their poems to the class in the same manner.

I was also grateful that Desdemona helped my students to unlearn stereotypes of Africans as uneducated people.

As a newcomer to the U.S., she benefited from her short time in our class by being in a safe, supportive environment where she was appreciated by all of us for her academic help, her focus on developing her poetic skills, and her kindness. I remember her fondly every time I look at her handmade burlap purse she gave me as a parting gift, embroidered with the words, "Glory Be to God."

This experience showed me how a situation that could be considered an added burden of planning for a unique student, or an experience that might have given me a guilty feeling by having Desdemona work on assignments that were too easy, could be turned into a positive time for all.

The Outcast

Some teachers feel it is inevitable that there are children who will be picked on and the butt of jokes or, in the most extreme cases, outcasts. These teachers feel that such children are just natural victims and that there is nothing you can do about it. Here are three examples of such attitudes:

Teacher A had a student who was mercilessly picked on by other children. Eventually this child stopped coming to class. One day another parent asked the teacher what had happened to the child because her own child had liked him. "Oh," said Teacher A. "Other children made fun of him and his parents put him in another school. Some children just ask for it."

Teacher B had a third-grade boy whom other students picked on from time to time. These students kept reminding this child of a few embarrassing incidents that had happened to him in previous years.

The boy's mother made an appointment with Teacher B to find out what could be done about it. The teacher's only observation on the suffering this child was going through was, "Well, what can I tell you? Some children are mean."

Teacher C was one of my 8th-grade teachers. I liked him but he never did anything to help Mary, the class outcast. None of the other teachers helped her. Either they did not notice, had no idea how to help or perhaps thought it was not their business to intervene.

Mary was a meek girl who always seemed worried that she would have no one to sit next to as we moved from room to room since we could sit wherever we wanted at double desks. My friend Carol and I were the only ones who did not say no when she asked to sit with us.

I remember how annoyed we felt that we always had to be the ones to sit next to her, but we could not bear to refuse her, so we took turns saying yes.

I don't believe that the victimization and resulting suffering of one or more students in a class is a given at any level. In my experience and in the experiences of other teachers, direct adult intervention in positive ways can bring this unhappy state of affairs to an end.

Juliana

Juliana (nine-years old) was a shy girl and very frightened when she first entered my 3rd-grade class. She had recently come from the Dominican Republic and knew very little English. I had enlisted the help of other children and soon her English greatly improved. But all was not well, as I learned from her mother some weeks later. Juliana, she told me, hated school, was miserable and cried almost every day. Investigation revealed that she had no friends and that two boys were writing nasty notes to her and harassing her in other ways, to the point where she could hardly pay attention in class. I spoke to the boys but decided that more had to be done.

I recalled that during a visit to her home I had seen her preparing a meal for her entire family of eight. I told the children that Juliana was a very good cook; that I happened to know she could prepare delicious chicken and

rice, a wonderful soup, and many other dishes. A general "Oooooohh!" arose from all sides, and I concluded by saying that if we were lucky maybe she would cook something for us.

Children began asking her when she would cook for the class. Juliana was pleased with the attention she was getting and one morning she appeared with all of the ingredients for preparing Spanish rice including a pot of beans she had already cooked. Everyone was very excited. We scouted up two hot plates, a pot, spoons and paper plates from the kitchen. Juliana demonstrated how to prepare the rice, and while it was cooking we returned to our classwork.

Finally, the rice was done. I explained how difficult it was to cook rice so that it came out perfectly. Everyone got a plate of rice and beans, and it was quite tasty. Juliana took some to the principal and assistant principal, both of whom came to the classroom to say how much they enjoyed it and how talented they thought Juliana was. Her prestige rose and the children gained a new respect for her.

Her life in school from then on was much more pleasant and she was much happier at home, too, according to her mother.

How Class Meetings Can Help Resolve Problems Including Helping Outcasts

Sometimes a teacher might want to have a class discussion, or a meeting with a small group of children, about how to help an outcast become accepted or to resolve another problem. A number of teachers I have spoken with about this method have told me they would not use class meetings to solve negative interpersonal relationships in their classes – only for minor issues like planning a party or a class trip.

These teachers say that if the child or children are in the room, it would be unfair to subject them to the possibility of public ridicule; if they were out of the room, you would be discussing them behind their backs which

would probably backfire: the children would find out and be angry with you. Therefore, the argument goes, teachers must take matters into their own hands, try every way apart from class meetings to find a solution, and if all this fails, contact the guidance counselor, the principal, or the school-designated administrator of discipline.

This has not been my experience, or the experience of other teachers who have tried this method–as long as you and your students have created and agreed upon class rules together that have led to a positive, respectful atmosphere among students and between teacher and class (as described in Chapter 1), and as long as you are careful how you conduct the meeting and discussion procedures are clear.

In fact, there are a growing number of teachers who hold class meetings on a regular basis because they believe they are a key component, "the missing piece," to furthering students' emotional, social, moral, and intellectual development. They believe that meetings help build empathy and respect for one another, leading to a safer environment which can prevent serious problems from developing in the first place and making academic learning easier.

If you do an Internet search for "Class Meetings," you will find a lot of resources to help ensure that your efforts will be rewarding. For example, I found an excellent article very quickly:

"Class Meetings: A Democratic Approach to Classroom Management" based on the book *Class Meetings: Building Leadership, Problem-Solving and Decision-Making Skills in the Respectful Classroom* by Donna Styles, a veteran teacher in grades K – 7 in regular and multi-age settings.

A pioneering organization providing materials and professional development workshops on how to implement this approach successfully is the Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility in New York City: https://www.morningsidecenter.org/

Their website provides information, materials and videos where you can see meetings in action and comments by teachers who use them successfully: https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/class-meetings-caring-school-community

They advocate having class meetings each week at a regular time when students can bring up issues of concern rather than holding them just for emergencies. In this way, simmering issues can be brought up before they escalate. (Students write their problem on paper and put them in a jar, or tell the teacher. The teacher looks over the submissions and decides on the most important ones to discuss.)

The Morningside Center's guide "Class Meetings for Problem Solving, A Guide for Teachers, Grades Pre-K to 5" explains step-by-step how to do this successfully and includes a DVD of class meetings in action which can be shown to students as well as an interview with the teacher leading these meetings on the great value it had been in turning her 3rd-grade children in conflict with one another into one where they strove to help each other.

Morningside Center has a program called **"Peace and Restorative Circles"** where students at the K – 12 levels share their feelings and experiences in a circle formation. Their website states that circle processes have been used "to encourage and practice group communication, relationship-building, empathy, democratic decision-making, conflict resolution, and problem solving." They provide "an alternative to the style of discussion that involves debate and challenging each other. Instead, circles create a safe and non-hierarchical place in which each person can speak without interruption. It encourages respectful listening and reflection."

These skills are as important as academic content learning if not more so. As the teacher models how to conduct class meetings, students learn to peacefully discuss and negotiate issues of concern as well as to appreciate, to compliment and apologize to one another. At some point, they are ready to take turns leading the meetings themselves with the teacher as

participant and guide (where necessary). They begin to incorporate what they have learned to problems outside their classroom, and conflicts in the cafeteria, hallways, bathrooms and playground are reduced.

The process of using and mastering these skills will stay with students and help them to become self-assured, non-alienated adults who are able to communicate better and to take positive action in their families, their workplace and the outside world. It helps to assure an understanding of democracy in actual process rather than just a theory, and in this way will help preserve it in our society.

A national organization, Educators for Social Responsibility, to which Morningside Center is connected, has similar goals, excellent materials and staff developers involved in improving school climates across the country. Their website describes their many activities, their books, their videos and has testimonials from school personnel on how ESR programs have benefited their classroom and school atmosphere along with academic learning.

I wish that I had been able to benefit from such resources and programs when I was a student. As a teacher, I figured out some of this on my own, but I would have done a much better job on an on-going basis if I had been lucky enough to be part of such an organized program and to have access to workshops and helpful materials to make such work easier.

More Information on Class Meetings

Class meetings as a way to solve problems and build a supportive community are most effective when the administration of a school supports this program in the entire school and makes this happen by creating special staff meetings with this as the focus and, if possible, by bringing in experts to help facilitate.

However, if your school is not part of a program like this, there is much you can do alone or with other like-minded teachers that will make your school day more peaceful, more productive and more enjoyable.

When I became the director of a student teacher program, I found videos and materials to teach about class meetings, and some of my students tried them out and began to see their value.

Since running class meetings is a challenge at first, it would be very helpful to read more about their value and how to approach them to maximize your success. There are certain pitfalls you want to avoid which will become clear as you learn more. Meanwhile, here are a few guidelines I have used and taught:

1. Tell the class you have a problem you want help in solving. This gets student attention at elementary through high school levels since it is a surprise to hear a teacher make such a request.
2. List a few rules for the meeting to make sure that no one makes a snide remark, name calls, or does anything disparaging.
3. Describe the problem and ask for help in solving it.
4. When students offer suggestions, don't show that you like some answers and not others. This will discourage contributions. "All ideas are on the table," you tell your class. You can take notes on their remarks or, at the higher levels, write them on a chart for students to see.
5. Students can vote on the best solution or solutions. If any suggestions are obviously outrageous such as "We need to have a party every week," you exercise your prerogative to point out how this one can't be voted on and why.
6. You try one. Check in the ensuing days at a class meeting to see if it is working. If it does, congratulations are in order. If not, you try another solution.
7. Throughout this process, stay on the alert to be sure the rules are being followed. If someone slips up, you stop and address it by a comment

such as "We will not be able to solve this problem unless we are respectful of each other. As you know, this is one of the class rules we agreed upon at the beginning of the year."

Examples of Class Meetings That Helped Resolve Problems the Teacher Could Not Solve Alone

Anthony

Anthony was a rather short and thin third-grader but a good athlete. Joseph was the opposite – tall, chubby, poor at sports but a good student. Joseph complained to me that Anthony was making fun of him all the time. I warned Anthony a number of times to leave Joseph alone, but this did not help.

One day I asked the children to clear their desks, saying that I had a matter of great importance to discuss. They were most attentive as I told the story of Anthony and Joseph, both of whom were present. I was very serious and straightforward.

"We have a problem," I said. "Some of you may know that Anthony is always picking on Joseph." All eyes on Anthony. "Now, I've tried very hard to make Anthony stop, but Anthony keeps laughing at him and calling him stupid just because he can't run fast. I have told Anthony that everyone can't do everything equally well. Maybe Joseph can't run fast, but he can write good stories, and Anthony has never done that. But Anthony is a good athlete, so at the moment that's where his strength lies. I just want to say that I hope Anthony will get over his problem. He may think he's having a good time by making Joseph unhappy, but he's wrong. No one can truly have a happy life by making someone else miserable. And we wouldn't want Anthony to go through life picking on other people, would we?"

After my short speech, hands shot up in the air, and children began expressing their feelings on the matter: "Yeah, Anthony, how would you like me to make fun of you all the time?" Other appropriate comments followed, and suddenly Anthony jumped up and shouted, "I told Joseph I wouldn't make fun of him any more." "No, he didn't," said Joseph. "Well," I said, "I'm glad to hear that Anthony is going to try to change for the better."

Later, Anthony, in a bid for approval, held up a page he had just written, saying, "Look, isn't this neat?" I showed his paper to the class and said, "This is so much better that we're going to put it up on the bulletin board." I ceremoniously handed him a tack, and he proudly hung up his paper while his classmates applauded. Thereafter, his classwork improved, and he left Joseph alone.

I never figured out exactly why Anthony had picked Joseph as a target, but it did not matter. The group showed they did not agree with his behavior and it helped him to change.

When I later described how I handled this situation to my supervisor, he thought I had made a terrible mistake in singling out this child for public criticism by his classmates, fearing that my action would make the other children hostile to Anthony and isolate him from the group. But that wasn't the case.

Children don't hold a grudge for long. My purpose, of course, was not to ostracize Anthony but to bring group pressure to bear to correct his behavior. Alone I was unsuccessful, for children are often influenced much more by the reaction of their peers. Also, by combining group pressure with immediate recognition and approval of any signs of positive behavior, the disruptive and destructive actions of problem children can often be reduced or eliminated.

Levancy

Levancy, although a skillful elementary school artist, did poor academic work and was socially awkward. As a result, he was the butt of jokes from time to time. One day he came to class with a very short haircut, and children began calling him "Kojak" after a bald-headed TV character. He became very upset.

I held a brief class meeting, in this case with Levancy in the room. "Levancy can't help that his hair is short. There is nothing wrong with short hair anyway. In fact, it is very easy to take care of. It's not fair for him to have to hear people making fun of his hair, and I feel badly that he's so unhappy. I think we all would feel sad right now if we were in his shoes." (I did not place blame because my tactic here was not to punish or single out anyone, but to develop sympathy for Levancy. In this way, those who had ridiculed him were more apt to become part of the solution.)

I continued, "Now I need children to look out for Levancy to see that no one calls him 'Kojak'." A number of hands went up, and Levancy felt better.

A few days later Scott confided to me, "David and Martin were making fun of Levancy. I told them to stop, and pretty soon they were playing with him." I congratulated Scott on his success.

However, the next day, I overheard Scott call Levancy "Highwater" (because his pants were short). I stared incredulously at Scott. "I just can't believe what I heard! Yesterday you stood up for Levancy, and now you ridicule him. Why?"

Scott looked at me and answered matter-of-factly, "I just felt like it." I spoke with him some more about this contradiction, and in the end, he said, "You know, you're right," and he walked off. Needless to say, he agreed to apologize.

To help keep the pro-Levancy movement going, I pointed out his artistic achievements and provided opportunities for him to share his drawing

skills with others. With a continuing vigilance by me and certain students, Levancy was subjected to fewer and fewer negative comments.

Gerry and Julie

Children called **Gerry** "Cry Baby." He had a cornered, frightened look as if he expected children to pick on him, and he cried easily. He was immature for a third-grader and couldn't read or bring himself to write anything down.

Meanwhile, there was **Julie,** a small, depressed child who could read anything and wrote well. Every now and then she would go in the closet and refuse to come out.

Both of these children were isolated from other students in my 3rd-grade class. I was tired of saying or yelling things like, "Come out of the closet," "Stop crying," and "Leave Gerry alone." Something had to be done.

I decided to ask Julie if she wanted to help Gerry learn to read. I explained that reading with me and his reading group every day was not enough. He needed extra help. He would be her special assignment. I told her this was a very important job, and that I was sure she could help Gerry. She agreed, and I changed his seat next to hers.

Then, one day, when Gerry was out of the room, I initiated a class discussion about how to help him. I asked for volunteers to look out for him at lunchtime when he often was ridiculed and would come in crying. I asked the children to put themselves in his shoes – to feel how unhappy and scared he was – and that we could make him happier.

There were many volunteers. Their job was to tell children to stop bothering him and to include him in their games. They would report to me any problems he had, and I would talk with any tormentors. At the same time, I always asked to hear of any successful experiences he had, and the volunteers, and Gerry himself, would tell me.

I gave Gerry very easy homework assignments, different from everyone else's and because he could do them, he was glad to take them home. I called on him to be my special helper from time to time, such as to help me choose children to do math problems on the blackboard.

Gradually, he lost his scared look. He stood up straighter; he began to look people in the eye, to raise his hand and to stop crying so much. Julie was a big help to him, and she herself cheered up some as she saw him begin to read, and as I praised her for her efforts. Every now and then the class and I applauded them for working so well together.

Gerry and Julie could have been considered lost causes, but because I had thought hard about their problems and enlisted children to help, our actions enabled them to change for the better and to function on a much higher level.

Over and over again I have found that miraculous results can be obtained by creating opportunities for students to be responsible for each other. The entire effort to help Gerry had a unifying effect on the class. Everyone felt better and successful.

Now, instead of bad vibes floating around the room, we all did our best to attack the problem at its roots: Gerry was insecure, and it was up to us to create an environment in which he could flourish, a more cheerful and cooperative setting that would be good for all of us.

Toward the end of the year, Gerry's mother came to pick up her son. She said to me, "My son has always been unhappy in his classes, and this is the first year he has wanted to come to school. My family and I are very grateful for what you have done for him. We are very sorry we have to move to Puerto Rico before the year is over. We want you to know if you ever come to our country, you will be welcome in our home."

Alice

Involving the class in helping a child become accepted can also be done with very young children.

Kindergarten teacher **Nereida Morales** had a girl with short hair, a low voice who only wore pants. Children were calling her "a boy." She would yell, "I'm not a boy. I'm a girl" and then she would cry. Ms. Morales realized that a class meeting was in order.

She put the child on her lap and said, "Boys and girls, **Alice** is very unhappy. Children have been saying that she is a boy because her hair is short, and she wears pants. Look at me. I have short hair, I wear pants and I'm not a boy."

Children began talking about this. They looked around the room and noticed that a few boys had a pony tail. They began to see that the length of one's hair was not important and that lots of girls wore pants.

Ms. Morales asked the children, "How would you feel if you were mistaken for someone you were not?" They all agreed they wouldn't like that.

As a follow up, she found stories to read aloud about a girl with glasses and another one about an interracial family to help develop the children's sensitivity for and acceptance of others who are different from them. As a result of her efforts, name-calling against Alice came to an end.[1]

Having class scapegoats is a miserable experience for the unhappy victims and unhealthy for the children who pick on them. The teacher must find at least one thing to celebrate about such children. A lot can be discovered simply by making an effort to talk to the child every day, and by creating opportunities for scapegoats to participate in important ways in activities which will help raise their status.

For example, they can help you as you teach a lesson by passing out papers, setting up an experiment, calling on other children to help out.

If searching for solutions within the class doesn't seem to be working out, perhaps the solution has to begin outside your room. For example, at the elementary level, hypothetical scapegoat Gloria is chosen to be a helper in a lower grade. The teacher she assists can write a note praising how helpful and cooperative Gloria is, and then this letter can be read to her class. Gloria can then choose someone to go with her the next time, so she can train her classmate how to be a helper too. The principal can even be called in to congratulate Gloria and the classmate she helped to train. As a result of such efforts, the class begins to see Gloria in a more positive light.

It is really amazing how many simple solutions there are for seemingly insurmountable classroom difficulties if teachers and students work together to solve problems.

Ms. Morales was determined to prevent any student from becoming an outcast. As the months unfolded, she encouraged each child to play with different classmates. If, despite this, children fell into ruts where they only wanted to play with the same small circle of friends, she chose partners for them on various days. She said to them, "You might not like this, and you might want to cry. It's O.K. I want you to learn how to make new friends."

According to Ms. Morales, if you stay with the ones who are upset and encourage them, they settle down and happily begin playing.

Here are more examples of successful class meetings described on my website:

Every Classroom Needs a No Put-Down Rule by **Jane Califf**

(a fifth-grade in which one child was tormented by being designated the class "cootie girl")

Class Meetings and Their Power to Change a Life by **Nivin Papa**

(A seventh-grade class where a student teacher got her English class to accept a rejected student who could not read)

Urvi Shah's Class Meeting, High School Social Studies (Unruly behavior in high school Social Studies class changed by class meeting)

Frustrated/Angry Students

The reactions of children to a frustrating situation can range from anger to complete passivity, and frequently the teacher is at a loss to know what course to pursue. However, there is a way out if the teacher carefully thinks about the situation and devises a plan (with the student whenever possible) to remedy the problem. If this does not work, consulting with colleagues for suggested solutions can help.

Lawrence

Lawrence wasn't satisfied with his writing, ripped up his paper, threw it on the floor and refused to do any more work. He was eight-years old, a foster child, the only African American in the class, and he required a lot of attention and encouragement. I asked him to pick up his paper but he refused. "What do I do now?" I asked myself. "They never taught me about this in college." (It was my first year of teaching.)

Finally, I said: "Who would like to help Lawrence pick up his paper and put it back together? Then we will see what's wrong with it so he can do better next time." Patty volunteered and, sure enough, bolstered by my moral support and the help of a classmate, they picked up his paper and pieced it together.

I explained to him that we all make mistakes and suggested that instead of erasing so hard that his paper tore, he could just cross out a word or two with one line, and the paper would still be neat. We agreed that the next time he felt like throwing away his paper, he would show it to me first, and together we would determine whether it was salvageable. It worked! He made many trips to my desk at first, worried about his mistakes, but gradually his confidence grew.

"Let's do it together" are magic words that frequently soothe a frustrated child. The task then doesn't seem so formidable and often the rebellious child will readily cooperate.

Robert

Robert sat in my third-grade class as if in a daze most of the day, seemingly thinking his own thoughts. No matter how much I encouraged him, he never went beyond writing his name on the paper. Since he could never finish an assignment, he had given up trying. After a month or so of trying to figure out what to do about this, I finally hit on an idea.

"Robert," I said, "I know you have a lot of trouble writing, so today all you have to do is write your name and the date." His eyes brightened. "That's all?"

The next day I said, "Today just write your name, the date, the class number, and the name of our school at the top of the page." He readily did this, and every day thereafter I increased the amount of work by one or two lines. Within a few weeks Robert was filling up an entire page. I exhibited his papers on the bulletin board, one on top of the other, so that everyone could see how much more he was writing.

One day, I brought children to the display of his papers. I dramatically pulled them up so they could see that on the first page, there was only his name. I slowly let the papers float down as I pointed out with admiration how each page had more and more words on it. Robert had a smile on his face. We gave him a round of applause. While his work from then on was far from perfect, he no longer was afraid to tackle the task of writing on a blank page.

Ralph

Ralph was an angry, frustrated child who, when he first entered third-grade, was frequently uncontrollable. His behavior would include crawling under tables and throwing chairs.

Two years later this child was promoted to Millie Fulford's fifth/sixth-grade class. By then, his behavior had greatly improved. What had happened?

When Ralph first arrived, Ms. Fulford consulted with her colleagues on what to do when he became violent. They decided that the key was to help him develop strategies to deal with his anger before he lost control. For two years they told Ralph it was O.K. to feel angry. This helped him to realize he was not alone. They also told him, "If you feel you are being picked on, you will feel angry. Then what can you do? Violence is one way of dealing with it, but how do you feel afterwards?"

His teachers told him that if he was very angry, he could tell them, and they would help him solve the problem. They also met with his parents to show them what the school was doing and offered suggestions on what they could do at home.

Ralph began to see that his teachers were his allies, not his enemies. They were there for him. He still got angry more than other children, but he could manage it without violence.

To show how far Ralph had come, Millie Fulford explained:

"Ralph has improved so much that he has internalized our school's attitude toward sports which is you are just out to be as good a player as you can and to have fun. When his baseball team played a game at the end of the year and lost, certain other children were crying and angry, but Ralph was calm. He had tried his best, and that was enough for him."

Sixth-Grade Girl Given a Second Chance

In a letter to the editor of N.Y. Teacher, United Federation of Teachers, June 16th, 1997, Janet Nadler wrote:

"A young girl whose parents were separated was put into a New York City orphanage. She was angry at her abusive, alcoholic father and her ignorant and illiterate mother.

"This girl's school work was always good. However, her conduct, which reflected her disappointment and belligerency at having been abandoned by her parents, was deplorable. She regularly received a U in conduct on her report cards. The punishment was that she couldn't attend movie night in the orphanage.

"In the 6th-grade she was handed a report card. Her remark to her teacher was, 'Well, I probably won't be seeing movies for a while.'

"Her teacher asked her for an explanation. The teacher then said, 'Look, I will change the U in conduct to an S, but you must make me a promise. You must live up to the S.' The young student was very surprised and she said, 'Finally, someone is paying attention to me and cares to help me. I won't let you down.'

The student never let the teacher down and still talks about the caring Mrs. Blum-Levitt after 55 years."

See my website for more stories of transformed frustrated/angry children:

Alexander, A Challenging Kindergarten Student by **Wafa Saed**

Kindness Transforms an Alienated First Grader by **Arlene Lackowitz**

The Kindness Jar (second grade) by **Nieves Lepore**

Reaching (fourth grade) by **Concetta DiGenna**

Sarah Gains Confidence (seventh grade) by **Mark J. Balaz**

The Angry Class

Bella had been teaching successfully for seven years. One year she had a class with many first graders who were always fighting and arguing. Every day for months, she would call them to the rug, sometimes multiple times, and say "My heart is singing sad songs." Children would ask, "Why?" Then she would point out the problem, and she and the children would talk about how to solve it.

Meanwhile, she instituted as many community-building activities as she could think of and pointed out every positive act that she noticed. Every Friday afternoon before dismissing her class, as exhausted as she felt, she said, "I will miss you over the weekend. I hope you have a good time and we will meet again right here on Monday."

It took a long time, but by spring, the children had calmed down and had turned into a largely cohesive group.

High School Student Curses Student Teacher

A student teacher in an English class, who worked very hard to have interesting lessons, reported to our Student Teacher Seminar the following: That week, she was attempting to help Paula, a student who was reluctant to do an assignment which was her usual attitude. Paula said, "You're such a bitch!" The student teacher remained calm, thought quickly and replied, "Yes, I am such a bitch trying to help you with your English assignment." The student did not respond, but the situation did not escalate and lead to her being removed from the class.

The student teacher reported that by not getting excited when this student was rude, but calmly responding with short, non-threatening remarks, the girl's behavior improved and she actually began to do more work.

Read other stories at the middle and high school levels about helping frustrated and angry students on my website:

Students and the Power to Change by **Jane Califf:** Rohan, alternative high school student who only wrote "It" on his paper and then went to sleep.

Acknowledging a Student's Demand for Power Does Not Mean Giving In by **Mary Welliver-Dillon:** Shaniqua, angry 8th-grade math student, told teacher not to look at her work during class time and to leave her alone.

The Value of an Extended Discussion with a Disruptive Student by **Tara Mansmann Romero**

Fighting – Elementary Level

"Ooooooooohh! Teacher! Boyd and Michael are fighting!"

Sooner or later this cry reaches the teacher's ears. There are those who become so distraught when faced with a fight and the often nerve-racking task of administering discipline, that they lose their self-control and lash out at the offenders with bitter words and even corporal punishment. Such a reaction can spell a teacher's doom, for the children who were fighting or creating the disturbance will conclude that they are all in the same boat, and it's the teacher who is the enemy. Thus they may begin to unite against her, and all respect for her is lost.

Another response is to pull the combatants apart and lecture them on the evils of fighting and the virtues of talking things over. As a beginning teacher, I soon learned how ineffective this technique is. Neither child listens, and the hostile words and gestures usually continue. I came to realize that in such an explosive situation the less said the better, and began taking a different tack.

First, I tried to maintain my "cool" even when the fight was violent, realizing that it would only make matters worse for me to get excited too. If the fighters were at the elementary level and smaller than I was, I would pull the combatants apart. Once the struggling and shouting subsided,

I'd attempt to find out the reason for the fracas. Usually the picture was cloudy, so I would say, "It's obvious that for the present you two can't get along, so I don't want you to talk to each other. Boyd, go to your seat, and Michael, we'll change yours so that you can be as far apart as possible. I'm sure that after a few days, you'll make up and be friends again." Then I would see to it that we got back to whatever we had been doing before the disturbance began.

Later on, after things had cooled down, and they could be more objective about the matter, I would talk to the two children, together or separately, depending on the situation. Sometimes I would have them write out their version of what caused the fight. We would discuss what had happened and how it could have been prevented. I would tell them that if they ever found themselves about to get into a fight again, to come to me, and I'd help them solve their problem.

A Kindergarten Teacher's Approach to Fighting

Lorna Justice, kindergarten teacher, described her approach to her class: "I tell my students, 'What you do is important to me. I'm here for you l00%. If you have a problem, we can talk it over.' I show the children that I really care about them: I listen to them and respect them. I try to be firm and fair."

She used this approach with Ned, a particularly difficult child. Ned had been in many foster homes. He hit, pushed and hurt other children. Pain had no meaning to him; he blocked it out.

One day he was playing in the block area and pushed another child because he wanted the child's toy dinosaur. The child cried. Ms. Justice removed Ned from the block area and consoled the crying child. Then she went over to Ned and said:

"You know the rules for the block area, and you broke them. I'm going to say what I think happened. Correct me if I am wrong. (He didn't correct

her.) It looks as if what I said is what happened. I don't like what you are doing. It's not helping you to make friends. What could you have done instead?"

Ned: "I could have asked him to pass me the dinosaur."

Ms. Justice: "That's right. Now I could tell you not to play in the block area, but I don't want to do that. I could tell your mother, but that would upset her and you too; I could take you to the principal's office, but I don't want to do that either. Now what can we work out together, so you can play in the block area?"

After talking it over, they decided that whenever he felt he was about to fight or push someone, he would tell her. This worked for a whole week. During this time, Ms. Justice looked for ways to reinforce positive behavior to show that he could get attention for cooperating. For example, when she noticed he was playing with children without arguing, she commented, "Why did everything go along so well?" "Because I shared," he replied.

At the end of the week, there was another incident. He punched a child in the block area. Another boy laughed while the punched child cried. Ms. Justice stopped everything in the block area and had a meeting. "I am very angry with you Ned for punching Joe and with you Barry for laughing. Neither of you can play in the block area until I get some answers."

She discussed what had happened with the other children. She said to Barry, "Put yourself in Joe's shoes. How would you feel if someone punched you and another child laughed?"

Ms. Justice decided that Ned needed a short cooling off period on a nearby chair. He behaved for the rest of the day.

She works with Ned's mom and gives her suggestions for helping her son. She tells her that she must be specific about how she wants him to behave. She can't say, "Be good." That is too vague.

In dealing with Ned, Ms. Justice said, "My experience with Ned and with other children shows that progress is not steady, but hanging in there with a child usually pays off."

A Fifth-Grade Teacher's Approach to Fighting

Kathy Matson, fifth-grade teacher, had a system that helped avoid fights. At the beginning of the year, she told her class, "If you fight in the classroom, you really don't want it to continue. You want the teacher to break it up. You are a coward." This, she says, usually stops the macho students from fighting in the room.

If a fight breaks out anyway, she separates the antagonists (without calling anyone a coward), sends them to their seats in different corners of the room to write down what happened. Their writing must include the following: who, what, where, when, why, and how can this be solved.

In one instance a boy said, "I know what to do. Send what I wrote to _____'s mother, and you can send what he wrote to my mother." Ms. Matson did this. One boy's mother was floored that her boy would be in a fight. The other boy's mother simply told him to be good. Both boys' relationship improved.

By taking students' suggestions for problem solving seriously and implementing them, there is a collaboration involved in searching for a solution which brings all the parties and the class closer together.

Once, early in Ms. Matson's career, she was teaching a 6th-grade class with two boys who fought every day in class. She and the students were getting tired of this. The administration was no help. She was getting desperate, and decided to ask the class what should be done. "They should fight it out with boxing gloves," they suggested.

She wondered if this was the right thing to do. As she thought about it, she realized that if they were allowed to fight for only one-minute bouts when they weren't angry, and since they were the same size and strength, no one would get hurt.

The day came, and there was great excitement. The class pushed back their desks, and a ring was created. The fight began. After three one-minute bouts, the fight was over. The boys got their licks in and were satisfied. Ms. Matson said, "I hope this is the end of the fighting. Nobody was the loser. It was a win/win situation." The class was dumbfounded at the whole event, and the boys never fought again.

Ms. Matson does not argue that this should become a routine way of handling chronic fighters. However, it does show that teachers must be very creative and sometimes do the unbelievable and amazing to solve serious problems.

On my website, find an inspiring second-grade story: **Fighting Student Becomes a Social and Academic Success** by **Joe DeRisi.**

Breaking Up a Schoolyard Fight

Elementary school vice principal **Lenora Bosley** had a special technique for breaking up fights in the schoolyard. She used a bullhorn, blew a whistle, and the crowd would scatter. Without an audience, the fighters were exposed and usually stopped, enabling her to begin to resolve the issue.

Letting Students Solve a Dispute by Themselves

Wafa Saed frequently models the behavior she wants to see in her first-grade students. She knows that they need to see concrete examples of how to solve problems without fighting. She knows she needs to demonstrate what kind of complaints she has to handle and which ones her students can undertake on their own.

The children know that if they are physically injured no matter how minor, they need to tell Ms. Saed who will get to the bottom of such an infraction. To show them how to take care of lesser problems, she uses a teddy bear to

act out common issues among her students. Using a different voice for the bear, she shows them various non-violent conflict resolution strategies.

For example:
Ms. S: "You took my pencil."
Bear: "I found it on the floor."
Ms. S: "But it's mine."
Bear: "I need this pencil. I don't have one."
Ms. S: "Do you want me to help you find one so I can have mine back?"
Bear: "Yes."

When the skit ends, Ms. Saed has a discussion about what happened. In this case, she points out how she did not have to fight with the bear because they found a peaceful way to end the conflict.

Here are three incidents in her class that could have led to fights between children but, because they had lots of practice choosing options for solutions to problems through Ms. Saed's skits, they resolved them without rancor:

Situation 1:
Boy: "She stuck her tongue out at me."
Ms.S.: "Did she hurt you?"
Boy: "Yes, she hurt my feelings."
Ms. S (to the girl): "You hurt his feelings. Both of you need to go to the library center and work it out."

They complied, talked it over and resolved it. Ms. Saed did not have to be involved.

Situation 2:
Boy: "He's looking at me."
Ms. S.: "What do you need to do?"
Boy: "I need to talk to him about why he did that."

The two boys worked it out without the help of Ms. Saed.

Situation 3: Children are returning to their seats from the rug, and one girl starts to cry. Ms. Saed asks what the problem is.

Liz: "Nicole jumped over me and touched me."
Ms. Saed: "Why did you do that Nicole?"
Nicole: "I said 'Excuse me,' but she didn't move." Then Nicole starts to cry.
Liz: "I didn't hear her."
Ms. Saed: "You know how to work it out," and she walked off.

The girls stopped crying, talked with each other, and went back to their seats.

Lenora Bosley, teacher and vice-principal, once had two fourth-graders who were not getting along. She brought them to her office and told them to talk it over among themselves and see if they could come up with a solution. She closed the door. When she returned, they told her they had solved their problem. Ms. Bosley believes that letting students solve their own disputes is a tool that many teachers don't use, but it can be very effective in certain situations.

Middle School and High School Level Conflict

Fighting at the upper levels could be dangerous to the combatants and also to the teacher. This is the time for calling the security guard or the administrator in your school responsible for helping in such situations. The school rules for fighting are then implemented.

However, when there is only a threat of violence and the fight has not begun, it is sometimes possible to resolve the conflict without calling for help.

There once was an incident in my alternative high school class. Students were packed up to go home, and everyone was ready to leave except Calvin. Derek got mad because he did not want to wait, picked up a desk and threatened to drop it on Calvin's head. I went over and said to Derek, "I can't believe what you are doing! Do you really want to hurt Calvin just because he is not ready to leave? Do you really want to get in trouble?" Voices from my class agreed with me.

Derek put down the desk. I told Derek and Calvin to stay behind as the rest of the class went home. We talked it over. Derek apologized to Calvin who accepted his apology. They shook hands and the incident was over. No one in the administration was informed. Why bring them in unnecessarily? To non-violently resolve a problem like this among ourselves is a good lesson for students.

The Quiet Child

The other side of having noisy disruptive children is the reality of very quiet children. They sit unobtrusively in their seats. No matter what the activity, they rarely speak to or bother anyone and are often isolated. We often overlook these children because there are so many others who actively demand our attention. However, just as the acting-out child needs help, the quiet child may be just as needy.

Many of these children may just need extra encouragement to bloom while others may have serious problems that need addressing. They need to be taken aside during class time, before or after school or when the teacher has a preparation period. During this time, as they help the teacher with a task or receive academic help, conversations take place in which the teacher can find out about any problems or special interests they have which will help her decide how to include the child more in the life of the class.

Not making a priority of helping such children can sometimes have tragic consequences.

Cliff

In first- and second-grade, Cliff Evans was described by his teachers in-grade school records as a "sweet, shy child; timid but eager." As the years progressed, teachers' comments changed to "dull," "slow-witted" and "low I.Q." By the time he was in high school, he had stopped talking. His literature teacher, Jean Todd Hunter, remembers that he came into the room by himself, left by himself, and never smiled.

One day he got out of the school bus, collapsed in the snow and died. No one had even known he was sick. Ms. Hunter was chosen by the principal to write his obituary for the school paper. She visited his family and discovered he had been completely rejected by his stepfather. She looked at his records. He had never belonged to a club, played on a team or held an office. It seemed to her that "he had never done one happy, noisy kid thing. He had never been anybody at all."

She imagined how many times he'd been chosen last to be on a team, how many whispered child conversations had excluded him. She said, "I could see the faces and hear the voices that said over and over, 'You're dumb. You're dumb. You're just nothing, Cliff Evans.'"

Ms. Hunter became convinced that the educational system had helped destroy Cliff. "When finally there was nothing left at all for Cliff Evans, he collapsed on a snow bank and went away. The doctor might list 'heart failure' as the cause of death, but that wouldn't change my mind."[2]

This boy could have been saved despite a depressing home life, but after second grade no adult took the necessary steps to help him. We must never be found guilty of ignoring the quiet, undemanding children who are rejected by their peers. Our actions in the classroom can literally help save or destroy their lives.

Altagracia

Altagracia was so quiet that for a long time no one in the class, including me, knew what her voice sounded like. She was a poor reader. She had a look of vague confusion, never having an opinion, never smiling, never causing any trouble. Her only known academic asset was an exquisite handwriting.

On the last day of school, I received some presents but not from her. (I had made it clear that gifts were not necessary even though our school permitted them.) As Altagracia was leaving the room, she asked me for a brown paper bag. An hour later, as I was packing up in my empty classroom, she appeared at the classroom door. She silently handed me the bag. In it was a small, old, plastic, red rose sitting on top of popcorn I had given out earlier. I almost cried.

I realized that all through the year I had not given her the attention she needed. This was in my early years of teaching when my skills needed honing. I was teaching in a school that gave no administrative or guidance support despite their knowing I was assigned a very difficult class.

I was so grateful she was quiet that I was busy paying attention to other children who made demands on me. I never thought of having casual conversations with her during a free period or asking her questions about

her life outside of school. As a result, I never got to know her or to make any breakthroughs that I was aware of.

The fact that she went out of her way to bring me a present was a sign she was reaching out to me. But what could I do now that the school year was over? I did not even think of searching out her new teacher in the fall to tell her of my failings and brainstorming how to help her.

Teddy

A similar experience by fifth-grade teacher Miss Thompson had a happier ending. **Teddy,** like Altagracia, had a "deadpan face; an expressionless, glassy, unfocused stare" and spoke in monosyllables. "Unattractive, unmotivated and distant, he was just plain hard to like." He was labeled by previous teachers as a slow learner. His mother had died when he was in third grade. In Ms. Thompson's class he was failing, and she had basically given up on him.

At Christmas he surprised her with a present wrapped in brown paper and held together with scotch tape. In it was a "gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume." At first the students giggled and smirked at his gifts, but Ms. Thompson silenced them by putting on the bracelet and putting the perfume on her wrist. She said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" and the children's condescending attitude changed to one of admiration.

After school Teddy hung around, slowly came over to his teacher's desk and said softly "Miss Thompson. Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother…and her bracelet looks real pretty on you, too. I'm glad you liked my presents."

This experience totally changed Miss Thompson who vowed never again to neglect any of her students especially the slower ones. She gave Teddy a lot of attention and help. By the end of the school year, he had caught up with most of the other students and surpassed some.

Teddy's gratitude to Miss Thompson was life-long. He wrote her when he was graduating second in his high school class; when he was graduating first in his university class; and when he became a doctor. He invited her to his wedding to sit where his mother would have sat.[3]

Alec

In an article entitled, "Miracle at PS 138" (New York Teacher, City Edition, 6/2/97) first-grade teacher **Christine D'Amico** described her dogged efforts to get a student to speak. He was labeled a "Selective Mute" meaning he could talk but chose not to. Whenever Ms. D'Amico tried to get him to speak, the children would all say, "He doesn't talk, Mrs. D'Amico. He didn't talk in kindergarten." **Alec** just looked sad.

His parents could not afford therapy which was what the School Based Support Team suggested. Mrs. D'Amico was on her own, desperately wondering how to resolve this problem.

Alec's father told her that he talked all the time at home. That gave her the idea of visiting him there. She asked Alec if he would like this. "We could have ice cream together and talk and play." Alec nodded. She made an appointment with the parents and to her surprise, Alec talked with her during the entire visit.

The next day Mrs. D'Amico said to her class, "Children, I have something to tell you. Last evening, I went to visit Alec's home. I met his mom and his sister and we played with his toys. Alec has a favorite dinosaur toy…" She asked him to tell the class its name. "Triceratops" he said. "He talks! He talks!" the children all exclaimed.

From then on Alec slowly but surely began to speak up in class, finally even raising his hand to answer questions. The children were happy that he was joining them in group games.

Here is how Mrs. D'Amico described the transformation: "I couldn't believe that one half-hour home visit could actually change a child's

perception of school and self so drastically. In November, Alec was even able to say a few short lines into the microphone during our class assembly show in front of about 300 children. That's a miracle!"

Yung Su

Kathy Matson, fifth-grade teacher, shared a success story about **Yung Su**, a new boy who never spoke for his first three months in class. After she found out that he was a gifted artist, she initiated a class project in which everyone made a robot. They had to design it, tell what the robot did, make an ad, decide how much it would cost and who would use it.

When the project was completed, everyone was encouraged to describe their robot to the entire class. It was then that Yung Su spoke for the first time. The children were very surprised to hear him speak. "He has a low voice," some said. They all appreciated his presentation and gave him a round of applause. From then on, Yung Su was willing to speak up in class.

The fact that Yung Su finally spoke was not a miracle. Ms. Matson had worked hard to create an accepting, supportive atmosphere. This made it possible for a quiet, shy child finally to speak out without fear that someone would laugh at him.

Getting Quiet Students to Speak Up by Enlisting the Help of Peers

Elementary School Level

A similar situation occurred in a second-grade class. I was observing a student teacher's lesson and I saw that she always called on Rose who yelled out "Me! Me!" for every question while vigorously raising her

hand. I asked the student teacher during our post-lesson discussion why she gave Rose so many chances to speak compared to her classmates.

"Whenever I don't call on her she gets angry and yells out, "You never call on me!"

We made a plan of action to address this problem. The student teacher met privately with Rose and said,

"Rose, I am proud of how you are very eager to answer questions and always raise your hand, but I have a problem that you can help me with. I feel badly that I never get to hear a lot of students' voices. They just don't speak up the way you do. I would like to call on you all of the time, but then other students won't have a chance. I need you not to call out while you are raising your hand, and not to get angry if I don't call on you. We need a signal I can use to remind you to give others a turn. What could that signal be?"

Rose thought for awhile and said, "If you pull your ear, I will see and I won't call out."

The next day, Rose forgot and called out with her hand up in the air. The student teacher pulled her ear and Rose quickly covered her mouth with her hand. The student teacher smiled at Rose.

Later on, she took Rose aside and told her how wonderful it was that the signal she had chosen worked and more children were speaking out thanks to their plan; that not calling out was a hard thing to do, but she was sure that Rose could do it. Rose did not always remember, but she gradually improved because she was included in the solution and the teacher complimented her ability to change.

High School Level

Miriam was a student in my alternative high school class. She always raised her hand and wanted to be called on. When I overlooked her and

called on others she got annoyed. One day I sat down with her with a compliment and a proposal:

"Miriam, I appreciate that you are carefully listening in class and often have comments to make about the subject at hand or have answers to questions. I wish more students would speak up the way you do. Have you noticed that a number of students rarely raise their hands to participate in lessons?"

She agreed.

"I think you can help me with this. When I call on you, and it is clear that other comments are needed, it would really be helpful if after you speak, you turn to the class and ask 'What do the rest of you think?' You would be giving courage to others who are afraid to speak up."

Miriam took up the challenge and would ask this question from time to time. She got less annoyed when I did not call on her and more interested in what others had to say. I made sure to thank her privately for her help in solving this problem. She was a student who needed more attention than most, and I was able to harness her need for recognition to improve classroom communication.

Another example of a student wanting to garner all the attention occurred when I observed a student teacher in a high school math class. I was amazed to see that during the entire lesson only one student raised her hand – the only one who spoke during the entire lesson besides the student teacher.

In the post lesson meeting, we discussed what to do about this problem. The student teacher did not want to call on other students who might become embarrassed if they did not have any answer. We talked about the value of wait time – that at the beginning of the next lesson she could say:

"I am noticing that many of you do not raise your hand when I ask a question. I am not looking for every answer to be correct. I just want to see you thinking or asking questions if the subject is not clear. From

now on, after I ask a question, I will wait longer before I call on anyone. Silence can be good. It will give you more time to think."

As our brainstorming continued, I pointed out that despite this message, some students may still not want to participate for fear of showing their ignorance. She could also try the following: when a problem is presented that could be particularly difficult to figure out, students can pair up to work out the answer. Then she could call on some of the pairs to report their results. This is more likely to be successful since collaborating can be more fun, and having the support of another classmate takes the pressure off being in the spotlight.

The student teacher reported that these two strategies led to greater class participation and more student learning.

The Attention Seeker

There are children who are used to being the center of attention in their home lives which can carry over to their behavior in school. Then there are unhappy, neglected children, desperate for recognition, who employ all kinds of attention-getting devices which, if not handled carefully, can drive a teacher up a wall. When teachers reach their wits' end, the confrontations that result can disturb the entire class and lead to a deteriorating classroom climate in which it is impossible for students or teacher to function normally. However, it is possible to turn such children around without yelling. Here are some examples.

Billy

Billy was one of thirty third-graders I faced in my first year of teaching. Every time I announced a new activity or made a suggestion, he would slam his hand down on his desk, roll his eyes and exclaim, "Oh no!" At first I tried to ignore him, but to no avail. I then tried giving him a stern look and ordering him to be quiet, but his unruly behavior persisted. My

self-confidence shaken, I began to wonder whether perhaps he expressed the feelings of the entire class.

After much agonizing, and after seeking the advice of other teachers, I came to the conclusion that he needed attention, and this was his way of getting it. Negative attention is better than none at all, and indeed I certainly reacted every time he went through his routine.

One day before class began, I engaged him in conversation. I asked about himself, his family, what he did after school, and other similar questions. His reaction was instantaneous. His face brightened, and he responded eagerly to my show of interest. I then made it a practice to speak to him before class whenever possible, and his impudent behavior soon disappeared. Although at first he wasn't quite sure he could trust me, it was the beginning of a friendly relationship between us.

John

John's record file described him as "very hostile and difficult to control," and he lost no time living up to that description. Although this 9-year old boy was a bright child, he was completely turned off by school.

Unable to read, spell or do arithmetic, he had to prove himself somehow, and this he attempted to do by annoying other children, ripping their papers, getting into fights, walking around the room, bouncing a ball, falling off his chair, and seeming to thoroughly enjoy his role in the spotlight. I found myself shouting "Stop that!" and "Sit down!" which only encouraged his misbehavior. In my frustration, I decided to enlist the aid of the whole class to cope with the situation.

One day, while John was out of the room, I frankly put the problem to the other boys and girls: "I think John is basically a nice boy. But he has problems. Do you know what they are?" They certainly did: "He bothers people." "He walks around the room all the time." "He hardly ever does any work."

After the problem had been spelled out, I asked what we could do to help him. There were many eager suggestions: "We could help him with his work." "When he bothers us, we could ignore him." "We can tell him to go back to his seat."

I complimented them on their suggestions. "Let's see," I said, "how many strong people there are in this room who will try to help John instead of arguing with him." With the problem posed in this way, the children were anxious to show what they could do, and eagerly awaited John's return.

Soon after rejoining the class, John leaned over Rafael's shoulder and said, "What's happening?" Rafael replied, "Go back to your seat, John. I am trying to do my work." I immediately said, "Very good Rafael. You are strong this morning."

I could see that the other children were waiting for an opportunity to prove themselves too, and they did. When he suddenly began swinging on the closet door, no one paid any attention. Instead of focusing on John, I spoke to the class: "I am proud of you. You are doing your math, and not swinging on the closet door. This shows that you are strong." Failing to provoke me and ignored by the class, he soon drifted back to his seat.

In addition to enlisting the help of the other children, I missed no opportunity to build up John's ego by complimenting him whenever possible on his work or improved behavior and choosing him to be my helper. (For example, sometimes I would let him choose children to write on the blackboard or to line up first to go to lunch or home.)

I also made an agreement with him that I would send a note to his mother when he cooperated and when he tried to do his work, even once delivering the message to his home personally.

(The key to success here was that the first day he only had to be "good" for five minutes, after which I wrote a positive note home that he could keep no matter what happened later. The next day I told him if he cooperated for at least ten minutes, he would get a note, and so on until he was able

to behave most of the day. In this way getting a reward for good behavior was not difficult, and he became prouder and prouder as each day he was able to do better for longer periods of time.)

The hostility between John and me disappeared. His mother, who had only been hearing complaints from teachers about her son, later voluntarily came to school to tell me how pleased she was with her son's improvement. (On the last day of school, John told me that I had to come to his house to see his mother. When I arrived, there was a complete meal she had prepared for me to take home for my family. I was overwhelmed.)

Brenda

Brenda's parents paid little attention to their children, who wore the same clothes for weeks on end and frequently went hungry. This 8-year old had everything against her – neglected by her parents, living in a dilapidated tenement, and never getting enough to eat; however, she paid attention in school and did her homework, often on a dirty paper for which I never criticized her. But she was starved for affection and often created scenes to attract notice.

Many times she would refuse to come into the classroom with the other children, remaining in the hall until she got a personal invitation from me to enter. Almost every day someone would tell me "Brenda is out in the hall again," and I would tell them not to worry, that she would come in when she was ready.

After the class had settled down to work, I would go out to discover what the problem was. Once she said, "Some people say my shoes is on crooked." When I assured her that this was not so, her face lit up, she came in and got to work. Another time the principal brought her screaming to the door; she had lost her pen. I gave her another pen, and she calmed down.

The worst incident occurred when she stole the perfectly kept notebook of Mary, one of the best students in the class. She denied it, but the evidence pointed to Brenda, and her classmates accused and condemned her.

Assuming she had taken it, I asked her privately, "Where is the notebook now?" knowing that if I came right out and said "Did you take it?" she would deny it. (I realized that to Brenda the notebook probably was a symbol of neatness and order, something she desperately wanted in her life and couldn't achieve.) A long lecture would have been a waste of time, so I simply told her that if she needed a notebook, she should have asked me, and I would have given her one.

She then admitted her guilt, but since her little sisters had gotten hold of Mary's notebook and had mutilated it badly, I took her to a nearby store and bought new notebooks for both girls. The next day Brenda gave Mary her new notebook, and the incident was closed.

I decided to visit her apartment to see first-hand her living conditions. Her mother was on a mattress on the floor holding a baby with a dazed look on her face, the place was dirty, and Brenda and a younger sister were clearly on their own.

I reported her as a child abuse victim, and eventually she and her siblings were removed from their parents and went to live with their grandmother who had to quit her job to take care of them.

Some teachers wondered how I could stand this child, but I came to love her and respect her ability to survive despite such great odds. I often put my arm around her, listened to what she had to tell me, and made a point of giving her responsible jobs in the classroom to show I had faith in her.

After she left our class, I invited her classmates to write friendly letters to her, giving them a few suggestions such as they hoped she would like her new home and school. The letters were wonderful, and I mailed them to her grandmother's home along with one from me.

Raymond

Raymond was a very immature second-grader who was constantly in trouble. While I was reading a story to the class one day, he amused himself by snipping a pair of scissors. I asked him to put them away and he did, but a moment later he was at it again. I then asked him to give me the scissors, saying he could have them back later. At this, he pushed them into the back of his desk. Tense moment. The room fell silent as everyone wondered what would happen next. I could have shouted at him and taken the scissors by force, but that would have brought on a tantrum.

Instead, I shook my head sadly and said to the class, "I'm very disappointed. When I asked Raymond to give me those scissors, I really expected he would put them in my hand." All the children looked in his direction as if to say, "What's the matter with him?" Slowly he took out the scissors and handed them to me. "That's much better, Raymond," I said. "I'll give them back to you before you go home."

Raymond's decision to give me the scissors was partly a reaction to my disapproval of his behavior, but was due in larger measure to group pressure from the other children. I had taken them into my confidence, thereby involving them in the problem. Raymond thought they agreed with me, and because he didn't want to be an outcast, turned over the scissors.

If a child will not turn over a toy or other offending object in spite of the disapproval of his peers and a statement such as the one I used, you can say "I'm sure Raymond will give me the scissors later," or have a brief confidential talk with him out of earshot of his classmates, assuring him that you will take good care of his toy and return it at the end of the day, is almost a sure-fire guarantee that it will be surrendered.

Johnny

In a first-grade class, **Johnny** was running around the room and banging on the piano. Not knowing what else to do, especially since I was a substitute, I addressed a note to the assistant principal asking her to take him from the room, reading the note slowly out loud as I was writing it. This had an immediate effect — Johnny hurried back to his seat. Eyeing him sternly, I warned that I would send the note the instant he misbehaved again, but I also complimented him for returning to his seat.

Before he could get into further mischief, I chose him to help me show the pictures in a book from which I was reading to the class. This gave him something to do, as well as a feeling of importance. For the moment, at least, I had this boy under control.

Some teachers feel that class jobs should go only to children who deserve them. I have found, however, that it helps to also give such responsibilities to difficult children because it often wins them to our side and gives them the recognition they seek. I once read of a teacher who put the class kleptomaniac in charge of taking the lunch money to the office. By giving him such responsibilities to show that she trusted him, while at the same time demonstrating in other ways that she liked him, he was soon cured of stealing — in class, anyhow.

Annie

In my early teaching years, I didn't realize that difficult children could be given important roles to play in the class. I remember a third grader, Annie, who left her seat at every opportunity, went to the front of the room and pretended to be the teacher. She would yell out orders, looking for my reaction from the side of her eyes. She was a very disruptive child, but I didn't help her any. I always yelled out, "Go back to your seat! You're not the teacher!" and other such comments.

In retrospect, she could have been my ally. She was a bossy leader, and the class had a number of discipline problems. By figuring out ways to let her help me, to win her confidence, to show her how to lead positively, she could have helped me solve classroom problems instead of create more.

Anthony

In an inspiring essay on my website, **No Time to Yell, Magdolen Guirguis Sleman** writes about a student in her 7th-grade class who had a history of misbehavior. Starting on the first day, he began continually drumming on his desk with his pencil. Knowing of his past problems, she thought fast and found an ingenious way to begin winning him over. Read her story on my website.

A Sixth-Grade Teacher's Approach to Discipline Problems

Ruth Daniels, special education sixth-grade teacher, explained that for the attention-seeker and for discipline problems in general, it's important not to overreact, but to give such children space to settle down and to think. She described an incident in which a student came into the class late and yelled, "Leave me alone!" Ms. Daniels went over to her and gently said, "What can I do to help you? Maybe something happened at home. I'll give you until l0:30 a.m. I'm sure we'll get along then." This approach worked for this child.

"It's crucial," Ms. Daniels said, "to speak in an emphatic, yet caring voice. Children need to be nurtured and to be given the feeling that they are important. At the same time they need structure and limits, and to participate in making decisions. For example, I sign a contract with each of my students. We both have to agree on one skill that should be improved. After a period of time, I sit down with each child to evaluate

together whether or not the goal has been reached. If it is, we decide on a new goal. If it isn't, we try to figure out what happened and to try again.

"Another way I help children improve their behavior is to involve them in classroom decision making. We discuss together what to study, what to write about and what books to read next. When students feel they are listened to and their suggestions taken seriously, they have a greater stake in being cooperative rather than disruptive."

The Poor Reader

Students who do not learn to read well and as a result don't understand enough of what they read become frustrated and can become discipline problems. At all levels, this can lead to feelings of inferiority, helplessness, anger and alienation from schoolwork.

Here are three examples:

Katharine

Katharine entered kindergarten knowing the letters of the alphabet and their sounds, but she didn't know how to make words. Her kindergarten was non-academic, so she didn't make any reading progress that year according to her mother, Theresa.

When Katharine began first grade, she was looking forward to reading. However, since the school's philosophy was "Whole Language," and there was no direct instruction in phonics, she memorized various simple books available in the class library.

With this approach, Ms. M., Katharine's teacher, gave her students a regular homework assignment of "reading" a book, and keeping a reading log. There were six possible questions to answer about each book they read, but students only had to answer two. Parents were told they could help their children read, but Katharine was very motivated and didn't

want any. It took her one and a half hours to read and write in her log each night.

Soon Katharine had memorized all the simple books and was choosing books with a more difficult text. Now it was taking her even longer to finish her homework. She would ask her mother, "Is this spelled right?" Theresa would tell her, and her work was always perfect. The teacher wrote a note to Theresa telling her not to help her daughter.

Theresa wrote back saying that Katharine was picking books which were too hard, and that she insisted on reading them herself which she couldn't do. Theresa asked Ms. M. if she could direct Katharine to easier books.

Ms. M. wrote a note to all parents stating that children had to learn at their own level and on their own. However, this was not working for Katharine who, although quiet in school, was becoming more and more frustrated at home – crying and having temper tantrums.

Her mother asked for a meeting with the teacher who refused saying, "Your child is doing the best she can. You have a problem. She is making progress, but you just don't see it."

Later in the school year during open school night, Theresa met with Ms. M. She said, "My daughter has memorized her books; she really can't recognize many words at all."

Ms. M. replied, "She can read. She is struggling; she is learning, but not at a first-grade level. She's doing the best she can. You must accept that she is slower than you want her to be."

Theresa became worried. She felt her daughter was capable of reading if only she were shown how to put the letters and sounds together to make words.

She bought a phonics book and began teaching her daughter at home. Other parents in this school, finding their first, second- and third-graders were having difficulty reading, hired tutors to teach them phonics. Once

they learned the letters, sounds and how to combine them, all of these children became good readers.

The unfortunate side to all of this, apart from the unnecessary frustration these students had faced, was that their parents did not tell the teachers that they were having their children taught phonics since they would have become upset at this interference. In this school, direct, systematic instruction in phonics was considered old fashioned and ineffective.

Mr. A's Experience

I spoke to the resource room teacher in this school, **Mr. A.,** who confided that his education courses had never taught him how to teach reading. After five years as a classroom teacher, he felt incompetent as he saw so many of his students reading poorly and making very slow progress. On his own, he took a number of courses on how to teach phonics and spelling sequentially and systematically rather than incidentally. He incorporated these techniques into his classroom instruction along with lots of good children's literature and writing projects in which children made their own books. He saw a dramatic improvement in reading ability.

He explains, "A lot of teachers like me never learned how to teach phonics or to realize how important direct instruction is. I firmly believe this is why so many children are falling through the cracks and into resource rooms. Some of these children are dyslexic, but most just need to learn letter/sound correspondence. Many of these children are behavior problems in their classrooms. Once they begin making progress in reading, their behavior usually improves.

"I had one girl who was doing strange things like going under her desk in her third-grade class and refusing to come out. She was a non-reader and was referred to me. After she began to read, she stopped this disruptive behavior."

A High School Teacher's Concern and Action

A high school teacher told me how she realized there were a number of students who could not read in her school. She thought about the suffering they had endured throughout their school career by being unable to read; how they had just been continuously passed to the next grade, each teacher hoping that during the next year reading would click with them. She convinced them to attend a class she set up in the basement (where no other students would find out) and she began to teach them phonics on a regular basis.

This was really too little too late, but she noticed their self-esteem rising as they began to understand the sounds of words, and that words can be broken down into syllables to help sound them out.

What is the Solution?

The concern of Theresa, Mr. A, the high school teacher and others about the lack of phonics instruction in developing literacy is part of a broader national problem expressed in a comprehensive report published in 2002 by the International Reading Association entitled *National Reading Panel Report, Teaching Children to Read*.[4] Their research concluded that systematic phonics instruction featuring a planned sequence of phonics elements makes a bigger contribution to children's growth in reading than non-systematic programs that highlight elements as they happen to appear in a text or no phonics.

Children who benefit the most from this are children of all socio-economic levels in kindergarten and first grade; at risk beginning readers below 2nd grade; poor readers between 2nd and 6th grades. The report points out that phonics is not an end in itself, but the goal should be to apply phonics knowledge in daily reading and writing.

They encourage direct and systematic instruction to other components that contribute to becoming a successful reader: spelling, fluency, vocabulary development and strategies to improve comprehension. They point out that cooperative learning activities are particularly helpful when students work together in practicing comprehension strategies; this promotes intellectual discussion that increases understanding of the material being read.

This research is supported by a report from the American Federation of Teachers: *Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science, What Expert Teachers of Reading Should Know and Be Able to Do*.[5]

It states: "Research indicates that although some children will learn to read in spite of incidental teaching, others never learn unless taught in an organized, systematic and efficient way by a knowledgeable teacher using a well-designed instructional approach." (p.7)

The report warns that once students fall behind, "few catch up unless they receive intensive, individualized and expert instruction, a scarce (and expensive) commodity in most schools."

It continues by pointing out that the incidence of reading failure among "poor minority children who attend low performing urban schools" is "astronomical and completely unacceptable." However, research shows that "the risk of reading difficulties could be prevented and ameliorated by literacy instruction that includes a range of research-based components and practices…" (p.9)

The big obstacle to success in reading instruction according to these two reports is the inadequate training provided by education departments at colleges and universities where it is common to have only a one semester, 3-credit course in the teaching of reading. In addition, college textbooks on reading instruction are often inadequate.

In my own experience teaching a one semester only Methods of Teaching Reading class at the university level, I became convinced that this is a totally inadequate amount of time to understand even the basics of

successful reading instruction. Such courses typically meet once a week during the semester. Students are sent out to a classroom once or twice a week for their practicum to learn first-hand what they can of reading instruction and to devise a few lessons to teach. The knowledge they gain in this short, limited experience is too superficial to prepare them adequately for improving literacy during student teaching and then as novice teachers.

The need is great and the cause is urgent. According to *Teaching Reading is Rocket Science,* "Scientists indicate that fully 95% of all children can be taught to read. Yet, in spite of all our knowledge, statistics reveal an alarming prevalence of struggling and poor readers that is not limited to one segment of society:

- 20% of elementary students nationwide have significant problems learning to read.
- 20% of elementary students do not read fluently enough to enjoy or engage in independent reading.
- The rate of reading failure for African American, Hispanic, limited-English speakers and poor children ranges from 60 -70%.
- 1/3 of poor readers nationwide are from college educated families.
- 25% of adults in the U.S. lack the basic literacy skills required in a typical job." (p.7)

I believe a national movement is needed of educators at all levels, teacher unions, parents and researchers to organize for a dramatic change in teacher preparation, especially in providing more time to understanding and practicing literacy development at the K – 12 levels. This effort would call for research-based texts and teaching methods, well-funded research-based staff development and expert on-going classroom observations and guidance to help teachers gain the expertise needed to make possible first-class literacy for their students.

If along with this national effort, teachers were given the opportunity and freedom to help create interesting and relevant curricula, results of such a movement would bring less frustration to teachers and students, better behavior, and the possibility of much more interest in the printed word.

The Child Who Is Not Learning

Teachers can become very frustrated with students who don't advance academically. No matter what you try—various techniques and strategies in reading, math, spelling and writing—they stay stuck. They may be quiet, noisy, obnoxious, well-liked or outcasts, but the one thing they have in common is that they do not show progress in their classwork.

There may be many reasons for this, but one that is raised by Herbert Kohl in his fascinating book *I Won't Learn From You* is the possibility that the student has made a deliberate decision not to learn.

Mr. Kohl says, "I have encountered willed not-learning throughout my 30 years of teaching and believe that such not-learning is often and disastrously mistaken for failure to learn or the inability to learn.

"Learning how to not-learn is an intellectual and social challenge; sometimes you have to work very hard at it. It consists of an active, often ingenious, willful rejection of even the most compassionate and well-designed teaching. It subverts attempts at remediation as much as it rejects learning in the first place. It was through insight into my own not-learning that I began to understand the inner world of students who chose to not-learn what I wanted to teach. Over the years I've come to side with them in their refusal to be molded by a hostile society and have come to look upon not-learning as positive and healthy in many situations." [6]

Mr. Kohl describes his own deliberate not-learning of Yiddish. His father's family spoke Yiddish and English; his mother and her family didn't speak Yiddish at all. Kohl did not want to be party to conversations unless his mother was included, so in solidarity with her he never learned to speak

Yiddish. In later years, he was sorry he had passed by an opportunity that would have enriched his life.

According to Kohl, children who are actively non-learning may be afraid of failure and rather than show their inadequacies, refuse to learn. Others are bored and decide to shut down. Some, even though they may know the work, reject the whole idea of being tested and measured against other students. There are those, particularly children of color, who may be alienated from insensitive white teachers or a curriculum that does not reflect their history or culture.

Kohl believes that until teachers carefully analyze such students to ascertain what is the real cause of non-learning, and then experiment with ways to overcome their resistance, no progress will be possible. Whatever the cause of students' active not-learning which Kohl also calls "creative maladjustment," it is possible with an open mind, serious efforts and creative thinking to break through the self-imposed barriers these children have created and to give them hope that they can learn and succeed in their studies.

A Helpful Resource

University students in my literacy development course found the book "The Multiple Intelligences of Reading and Writing" by T. Armstrong very helpful. It does not just describe the varied ways that students learn but gives many examples of how they can be implemented.

"Learning Disabled" Label: Beware

There are some children who arrive in our classes with the label "learning-disabled." Do not take another teacher's or even a social worker's word for it. We should beware of such labels for they may or may not be true.

Give the child a lot of encouragement and another chance at success. Try different approaches. Maybe one method will work and the child will begin to break out of his/her trap of academic failure.

Here is a story of a teacher who succeeded with a child, H. Stephen Glenn, who began life, in his words, as "a learning disabled child." He was dyslexic, and when he found that memorizing words would not be enough to learn how to read, that he would have to also learn letters (which to him were upside down and backwards), he became frightened. His first-grade teachers called him "learning disabled." In second grade, he was able to get the answers to math problems but couldn't tell how, so he became totally intimidated by the learning process. He developed a stutter. In third grade he couldn't speak, write, read or do math.

By the time he reached fifth grade, H. Stephen Glenn says "I was about to die intellectually." Fortunately, his new teacher, Miss Hardy, had a new approach. She told him he was not learning disabled but "eccentric":

"I've talked with your mother and she says when she reads something to you, you remember it almost photographically. You just don't do it well when you're asked to assemble all the words and pieces. And reading out loud appears to be a problem, so when I'm going to call on you to read in my class, I'll let you know in advance so you can go home and memorize it the night before, then we'll fake it in front of the other kids. Also, Mom says when you look something over, you can talk about it with great understanding, but when she asks you to read it word for word and even write something about it, you appear to get hung up in the letters and stuff and lose the meaning. So, when the other kids are asked to read and write those worksheets I give them, you can go home and under less pressure on your own time do them and bring them back to me the next day."

She continued: "I notice you appear to be hesitant and fearful to express your thoughts and I believe that any idea a person has is worth considering. I've looked into this and I'm not sure it will work, but it helped a man named Demosthenes." [Demosthenes, who lived in the middle of the 300s

B.C., had a serious speech problem and overcame it to become a great orator.]

Miss Hardy asked H. Stephen Glenn if he could pronounce "Demosthenes," but he couldn't. Then she said, "Well, you will be able to. He had an unruly tongue, so he put stones in his mouth and practiced until he got control of it. So I've got a couple of marbles, too big for you to swallow, that I've washed off. From now on when I call on you, I'd like you to put them in your mouth and stand up and speak up until I can hear and understand you." [7]

Mr. Glenn explains why this advice worked: "Of course, supported by her manifest belief in the understanding of me I took the risk, tamed my tongue, and was able to speak." [8]

A child who was destined for failure had his life turned around by one teacher whom he was lucky enough to have for two years. She was not deterred by terms like "dyslexia" and "learning disabled." She was creative and determined, and she even used her knowledge of history to reach a seemingly unreachable child. Mr. Glenn summed up her success as her ability to convince him and her other students that they were "capable, significant, influential people who had the capacity to make a difference in life if we would try." [9]

Bill

I met **Bill** in my Adult Literacy class where everyone was a beginning reader. He was a successful tailor, and I asked him why his reading skills were weak despite the fact that he was an intelligent person. He told me that he was a tall child and was always placed in a seat in the back of the room. He struggled to learn until 6th grade when a teacher discovered that he needed glasses. By then he was very far behind and never caught up. He had been labeled "slow" and possibly "stupid" by his teachers.

As he began to read in my class, his confidence grew and his spirits lifted. There was nothing wrong with Bill that a pair of glasses could not fix.

Although there are cases where students are placed inappropriately in our classes, using labels can provide an excuse to give up on them. As Herbert Kohl writes, "The inability of regular classrooms to educate all children (and in particular minority and working class and poor children) has led to the creation of a profession that depends on children being pushed out of 'normal' classrooms and made pathological." [10] He warns us that there is no physiological or medical condition common to all so-called "educationally handicapped" children who are often put in classes in which the curriculum and methods of instruction are not much different from what is taught in regular classes. He advises us to beware of the term – Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). He has a thought-provoking analysis of students who are labeled ADD:

"Students designated as ADD often refuse to sit still and listen silently when a teacher or another person in authority is talking; they resist following instructions blindly; they refuse to do boring worksheets and other assignments if they feel they already know the material. Interestingly enough, these conditions are positive qualifications for future participatory citizenship, and an argument can be made that ADD is one way that public school authorities are suppressing the spirit of democracy." [11]

(Kohl goes even further to call upon teachers to speak out against the tendency of blaming the victim and against the "institutionalization of stigmatization." He urges educators "to repudiate all categories and assume responsibility for changing their practice until it works for the children they have previously been unable to serve; to advocate for genuine educational choice within the public schools and to demand that teachers, parents, and other groups of educators should have the right to create small schools within the context of large public school systems, with the freedom and resources to operate effectively.") [12]

The Child Who Must Be Removed From A Regular Classroom

Teachers can face exhaustion, burnout and depression when severely troubled children who cannot function in regular classrooms of 25 to 30 students are nevertheless placed in their room. Despite the teachers' sincerest efforts, they are not trained and don't have the time to help such children.

Once I taught a combined 4th/5th-grade class where there was one child, Sam, who was totally out of control almost all of the time. In order to keep him calm, I had to hold his hand all day long as he followed me around the room, or have him sit right next to me with my hand on his shoulder. If I let go, he ran around the room getting into arguments and fights. (Amazingly, Sam behaved well when he was one on one with an adult, but there was no one to stay with him all day long.)

When I went to the principal for help, he just shook his head sadly and told me to do the best I could. After months of struggling with this problem, I was at an impasse. So much time was spent monitoring Sam that I was not able to teach effectively. Neither Sam nor my class was getting what they needed.

One day, in desperation, I said to the principal, "If Sam is in my class tomorrow, you'll never see me again." Sam was taken out the next day and eventually sent to a boarding school with specially trained teachers of disturbed children since there was no place in the local school system for him.

After Sam left, I was able to restore some semblance of normalcy to my classroom and to begin to turn things around. In retrospect I was sorry it took me so long to stand up for my rights, the rights of my students and for Sam's. I guess I thought that since I was an experienced teacher, I could eventually solve this problem, but I was wrong.

Getting The Help You Need

Long range solutions and the building of rapport between a teacher and a troublesome child can come from getting to know him and his family situation as far as possible, showing that you have confidence in his ability to improve, and that you don't dislike him, only his behavior. Involving him in the class in ways already described will also help.

However, teachers who encounter one child, or many children in the same room with problems ranging from mild to serious, face burnout unless they get immediate help and guidance from concerned administrators, peers, guidance counselors, social workers and parents or guardians.

An excellent book that goes into great detail on options for students who require high levels of support is *Behave Yourself! Helping Students Plan to Do Better, K-12* by Ambrose Panico. It calls for including the student's views in any improvement plan and posits a team approach to solving difficult behavior so the teacher is not struggling alone. This team can include school specialists, administrators, the child's parent, teachers who know her, i.e., anyone in the school or local community who knows the student and could provide insights on who she is and how she can be helped.

A key goal is to find out why a student is behaving badly and why she reacts the way she does. It minimizes or avoids entirely punishments and rewards, which are often ineffective, and describes instead core beliefs and behavior-change tools that can strengthen teachers' skills in solving serious disruptive behavior. These beliefs and tools can also provide students with confidence and guidance in overcoming self-defeating beliefs and actions as well as developing more confidence and self-control.

The book provides information-gathering forms that make it easier to understand the student, analyze problem behavior and to craft a humane and effective plan of action.

Another excellent resource is the book *Beyond Discipline, From Compliance to Community* by Alfie Kohn.

Watching Our Own Behavior

This chapter has focused on special challenges that teachers can experience in the classroom. What we also need to consider is our own behavior. Teacher friends of mine and I have discussed the need to be very patient, polite and caring but firm in our dealings with students, many of whom face very difficult problems in their lives and can lash out at their teachers and classmates.

But how are we behaving? We have all seen colleagues and administrators who may not yell, but use sarcasm and negative remarks in their interactions with students and school personnel. These are people who want students to cooperate but don't collaborate well with their own peers. They want students to be respectful, but they are not respectful and can be seen bad-mouthing students and others in the faculty lounge.

I once observed such a teacher of a 4th-grade class when I had come to watch a college student in my Methods of Teaching Reading course teach a lesson. Before she began, the teacher was getting her class ready for the transition. She told everyone to get out a notebook. Todd did not have one or any other materials he needed. The teacher rolled her eyes and complained out loud that once again, Todd was not prepared. "Who will give him paper and pencil?" she asked in an exasperated tone.

In the post-lesson discussion with my student, I asked about Todd. She said he lived in a homeless shelter and the teacher was always picking on him. We both were appalled; I never put a college student with this teacher again.

We teachers and administrators who find such conduct objectionable need to get together with like-minded staff to figure out a way to address this unfortunate behavior in order to see that these teachers get the help

they need to keep students from suffering in their classrooms. This is not squealing or going behind a colleague's back. What you are doing is helping to take responsibility for a fellow teacher who may or may not be able to improve, and if the latter is the case, should not continue in teaching. You are stepping up to improve the school climate that directly affects school morale and students' ability to learn.

If we find ourselves facing administrators who bully teachers and/or students, it is important to find other staff members and parents who want to solve this with you. The more people who make a plan to address this issue, the more chance there is of solving it despite fearing repercussions. A teachers' union can be of help or an organization like the American Civil Liberties Union.

A hopeful development is the Healthy Workplace Bill movement which began in 2001 to enact anti-bullying laws state-by-state. This effort is supported by the National Education Association (NEA) due to their findings that the number of school employees who report being targeted by bullies is nearly 3 times the national average. This is explained in their publication "Workplace Bullying, A Silent Crisis, A Resource for Educators."

Across the U.S., NEA affiliates are negotiating contracts with school districts that include language to curtail the intimidation of teachers and staff by school personnel including administrators. They encourage teachers to report harassment to their union and to go to healthyworkplacebill.org for information, resources and activities.

Even the most dedicated of us can slip up and say something hurtful to our students or a colleague. The answer to this is to monitor our own behavior and be able to apologize when we realize we have made a mistake. This will not weaken our image in anyone's eyes, but will model a thoughtful way to conduct ourselves in our daily lives.

Ofelia

This is illustrated by one of my former college students, **Ofelia,** who became an English teacher in an inner-city school. She reported to our New Teachers Support Group, which was held once a month for graduates of our Rutgers/Newark Urban Education Department, that one of her students had yelled out to her across the room, "What you did was not fair!"

Instead of getting defensive, Ms. P. (as her students called her) led a discussion with the student and the class; her students' decision was that indeed she had been unfair. She then said to her class, "I see what you mean. I had not seen it that way. I'll be more careful in the future."

This admission did not diminish her power in the classroom because she had established a good relationship with them early in the semester. In fact, it helped to solidify her students' view that she was a good teacher.

ENDNOTES

1. Interview with the author. (In this chapter, all other quotes not appearing in the endnotes were from interviews with the author.)
2. Canfield, Jack and Hansen, Mark Victor, *A Second Helping of Chicken Soup for the Soul, 101 More Stories to Open the Heart and Rekindle the Spirit,* "Cipher in the Snow" by Jean Todd Hunter, Heath Communications, Inc., 1995, pp. 204-207.
3. Ibid. "Three Letters from Teddy," by Elizabeth Silance Ballard, p. 216-218.
4. Highlights of this report can be found on line: *Summary of the (U.S.) National Reading Panel Report, Teaching Children to Read,* prepared by the Division of Research and Policy, International Reading Association, 2002, 19 pp.

5. This 40-page report, reprinted in 2004 can be accessed on line. It was prepared by Louisa C. Moats, Project Director.
6. Kohl, Herbert, *I Won't Learn From You And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment,* The New Press, 1994, p.2.
7. Canfield, Jack and Hansen, Mark Victor, Op.Cit., "Miss Hardy" by Glenn, H. Stephen, p.213-214.
8. Ibid., p.214.
9. Ibid., p.215.
10. Kohl, H., Op.Cit., p.150.
11. Ibid., p.149
12. Ibid., p.152.

CHAPTER FIVE

PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH PERSONAL ATTACKS, OFTEN SUPPORTED BY RACISM, SEXISM, HOMOPHOBIA AND BULLYING

(How Can I Help Overcome These Cultural Biases?)

Scapegoating, ridiculing and persecuting people based on their race/culture, gender or sexual identity, or bullying individuals based on ethnicity, religion, nationality, national origin or because they have a disability or a perceived weakness, has a long history not only in the United States but around the world. How can we as teachers begin to interrupt and change a tradition which is so ingrained in our society that it can truthfully be called "as American as apple pie"?

It will take much more than admonitions such as "Stop that!" "Leave her alone!" "That's not nice!" "We should all be friends." And ignoring hurtful remarks is akin to aiding and abetting negative behavior that damages perpetrator and victim.

The best way to create an environment where personal attacks are minimized is where an entire school's philosophy and actions are dedicated

to creating a safe, respectful and caring environment, and where it is clear to all what kind of behavior is expected of teachers and students.

When something goes wrong, the goal is not to shame, blame, punish, suspend or expel, but to work together to find out why it happened and how it can be prevented in the future.

Two books that clearly and quickly explain this humane approach were published by Good Books in 2005:

The Little Book of Restorative Discipline for Schools; Teaching responsibility; creating caring climates, by Lorraine S. Amstutz and Judy H. Mullet.

The Little Book of Circle Processes, a New/Old Approach to Peacemaking by Kay Pranis

Reading helpful books such as these can give teaching staff effective guidance, policies and practices that will create schools with lower levels of stress, frustration and teacher burnout – places where students, teachers and administration actually enjoy coming to school knowing that challenging situations will be handled in positive, not punitive ways.

Another crucial source of support can be found by joining coalitions such as **Teacher Activist Groups** or **TAG**. Its education platform, under the heading "School Climate that Empowers and Liberates Students," states on the TAG website:

"TAG believes in working for school discipline policies and a school climate where students and teachers can thrive. Schools must be institutions that support the holistic social and emotional needs of all students, help equip young people with empathy and conflict resolution skills, and work to interrupt and transform oppressive dynamics that threaten the safety of the whole school community.

"We support ending the practice of and reliance on punitive discipline strategies that push students out of school and into the military or prisons. Schools should remove zero tolerance policies, institute restorative

practices and restorative justice models, and create time in the curriculum for community-building practices and social/emotional supports."

A related organization is the Dignity in Schools Campaign, http://dignityinschools.org/ which calls for "a moratorium on out-of-school suspensions and the adoption of more constructive disciplinary policies."

The Positive Peace Warriors Network bases its approach on the philosophy, life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King which they call Kingian Nonviolence. It has had great success in transforming alienation and violence in middle schools and high schools to supportive and caring environments. Their longest partner, Chicago's North Laundale College Prep High School, has seen a 90% reduction in violence since 2009. A detailed description of how this was achieved is in the article "Chicago's Peace Warriors" by Kazu Haga in *Rethinking Schools*, Winter 2011-2012, Vol. 26, #2.

Educators who become active in organizations with goals such as these will be more likely to have success in creating more peaceful, respectful schools than by going it alone.

Examples of three peaceful and respectful schools I have written about can be found on my website**:**

A Middle School Based on Love

Willow School – A Model of Ecological, Educational and Social Excellence

Dr. Mindy Garber's K-5 School-Wide Discipline Plan, including her creative and humane approach to dealing with emotionally disturbed children.

Bully-Prevention Programs – Are They Effective?

The U.S. government has a website: https://www.stopbullying.gov/ It defines bullying as "unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged

children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time. Both kids who are bullied and who bully others may have serious, lasting problems."

This website goes into detail on how to detect bullying and how to address the problem including: types of bullying and cyber-bullying, their effects, relationship between bullying and suicide and how to develop school policies that, if implemented, would lead to a more peaceful and accepting environment. It stresses the importance of adults being role models for kindness and respect because "kids are watching how adults manage stress and conflict, as well as how they treat their friends, colleagues and families." (I explore this in Chapter 3: "Watching Our Own Behavior.")

In addition, the website encourages schools to reach out to parents and the wider community and provides information on approaches that can lead to success. It lists many forms of harassment based on race, gender, homophobia, ethnicity, national origin, religion, and categories called "verbal," "social," and "physical bullying."

According to Lyn Michel Brown, co-founder of the non-profit **Hardy Girls, Healthy Women,** we need to be careful not to label all forms of harassment under the general title "bullying." In her on-line article "10 Ways to Move Beyond Bully-Prevention (and why we should)," she states that there is no "one-size-fits-all" strategy to prevent bullying: that "the U.S. has a diversity of race, ethnicity, language, and inequalities between schools, and bully-prevention efforts here need to address that reality." She warns us that "Bully-Prevention has become a huge for-profit industry. Let's not let the steady stream of training sessions, rules, policies, consequence charts, and no-bullying posters keep us from listening well, thinking critically and creating approaches that meet the unique needs of our schools and communities."

Whether or not your school has an overall plan to address various types of racism, sexism, homophobia, and bullying, there is a lot that teachers can do in their own classrooms to help students become non-judgmental and

supportive of one another. You will find ideas in this chapter that include information and approaches that may prove helpful to you. These are not recipes for success. They are examples of how to deal with uncomfortable situations with compassion and creativity that may inspire your own creative ideas to solve problems peacefully, with self-respect and respect for your students

If we do our tasks well, our students will be more willing as adults to be non-judgmental and supportive of one another, thus making possible more positive and gratifying human relationships. Adults who do not belittle or scapegoat others are more likely to work more harmoniously with their neighbors or within organizations to create a better block, community, city and country.

A creative way one teacher transformed a 9-year old social and physical bully: See **Giving Back** by Jennifer Christiansen on my website.

Personal Attacks Based on Race

An epithet or act that ridicules a child's race is particularly hurtful. Not only is the child put down, but his or her entire race. It's a double blow. We should never let even one racial remark, no matter how minor, pass unaddressed. Even if you think the intended victims didn't hear it, you should speak to the victimizers and explain why what they did was unacceptable.

For your classroom to be a place where everyone is affirmed and has a chance to blossom, students must know that they cannot, under any circumstances, say or do anything that makes fun of anyone's race.

There are a number of books that can give you ideas on how to raise your students' consciousness on this issue. Two useful ones are Rethinking Schools Publications: *Open Minds to Equality, A Sourcebook of Learning Activities to Affirm Diversity and Promote Equity, 4th edition,* 2014, by Nancy Schniedewind and Ellen Davidson and *Rethinking Multicultural*

Education, Teaching for racial and cultural justice, Wayne Au, editor, 2009.

What follows are a few examples of how I dealt with hostile remarks and acts related to race in my classes.

Lionel

"Teacher! Teacher! She call me black!"

Eight-year-old **Lionel** was from Haiti, spoke very little English, but that day in my small English as a Second Language Class, he had mustered all he remembered to tell me angrily of the humiliation he had just suffered.

As the other children listened, I explained to him in very simple English that he was black, a beautiful color; that people are all different colors, and all the colors are beautiful. We compared our arms and saw that we had almost every shade from light to dark. I showed them the many-colored plastic flowers we had in our room and compared their variety of size, color and shape with those of people.

We decided to take a picture of the flowers in a bouquet with the children's hands all around. I stood on a chair to take a picture of this from above. The result was a beautiful slide which we projected on a screen. An enlarged print was made as well for a bulletin board display. The whole episode seemed to make Lionel more confident.

This lesson was not only for Lionel and my other black students, but for the rest of the children as well. It was only a first step, however, because racial prejudice is more than a matter of skin color.

Later in the year, we studied aspects of black history and culture, which further helped to improve human relations in the class.

Soon after this incident, I was passing a bookstore which advertised *Black is Beautiful* by Ann McGovern, a book of photographs with short, sensitive poems describing black in admiring terms. I bought the book and read it

to my class. One little girl was so excited that after the first few poems she exclaimed, "That's beautiful," clapping her hands, and everyone else joined in. The applause was repeated after each poem.

The following poem on the same subject was also favorably received. We made a large display of it, illustrated with pastel drawings, and put it up in the hall:

A Real Bouquet

by Edith Segal [1]

Everybody has two eyes,
Bright as stars they shine,
But their color may not be
Just the same as mine.
Brown or blue, grey or green,
What difference does it make?
As long as you can see the sun
Shining when you wake.
Some folks' hair is very black,
Some have blond or brown,
Whatever color it may be,
It's a pretty crown.
Flowers have so many shades,
And I'm sure you know
Many lovely gardens

Where such flowers grow.
Children in this great big world
Are flowers in a way,

Some are light and some are dark,
Like a real bouquet.

Did you ever stop to think
How awful it would be
If everybody looked the same?
Who would know you from me?

Roger

Among the many daily interactions we have with our students, there are the difficult ones that we may pride ourselves in having handled well. But did we? There is so little time to reflect, to consult with our colleagues, to decide whether an incident could have been resolved in a better way.

I wish I had made time to think more deeply about a situation that arose in a 4th-grade that I visited regularly as a "Title One Cultural Enrichment Teacher." My job was to prepare elementary school classrooms for special assembly programs, in this case a performance that would include songs of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

The lesson began with a discussion of what they had learned so far about the Montgomery Bus Boycott. All of the children were African American as was their teacher. Suddenly, Roger said loudly, "I don't listen to white ladies." All eyes shifted from Roger to me.

I decided on the spot to address the class: "I'm sorry to hear that Roger feels this way. How would it sound to say 'I don't listen to Black ladies?'" The children's comments seemed to agree that condemning all white or all Black women was not fair. I concluded this short discussion by stressing that you can find good and bad people in all races and by saying "I hope Roger will come to understand this."

The lesson proceeded; I took out my guitar and taught the class "If you miss me from the back of the bus" which continues "and you can't find me nowhere, come on up to the front of the bus, I'll be riding up there…" I chose Roger to give out the words to the song in his row, and he accepted. Soon he joined in singing with everyone else.

In subsequent visits, Roger was cooperative. I assumed it was due to the way I responded to his remark: I was matter-of-fact, did not tell him to leave the group nor give a long, boring speech, and no one had made fun of him. I had invited the class to comment on his remark, his view appeared outnumbered, and I did not hold a grudge.

I assumed that his teacher would have talked with me if I had done something wrong, but she didn't. I therefore thought my response was acceptable. However, I should not have assumed she agreed with my interaction with Roger and the class. After all, she was their teacher 5 days a week, and I only for 1-½ hours once a week. She was African American as was her entire class, and I was not. She could have provided insight on Roger's comment and how she would have handled it.

I also should not have assumed everyone in the class agreed with my comments just because no one publicly sided with Roger. As their teacher, I was in a position of authority, and anyone who may have agreed with Roger may not have wanted to speak up. An alternative to challenging Roger directly would have been to say, "I can understand why you feel like that, Roger, but I do hope that you will listen to me today, and maybe you and I can talk later about this." Why?

For me as a white teacher, the point of saying this would have been to show Roger that I was interested in his opinions. After the lesson, I could have asked the teacher if talking privately with Roger was a good idea. If she said yes, I could have learned something interesting about his life and outlook which could have helped me see racial relationships through his eyes. Whether or not Roger and I actually talked, a private discussion with his teacher could have helped me in planning future lessons (with her

input) that could have benefited him and others in his class, especially on matters of race relations.

Mee

Mee was from Hong Kong, a very intelligent girl who came to my third-grade class speaking no English but she picked it up quickly. Several times, I noticed some of the children trying to get a laugh from their friends by pulling their eyes back in order to slant them and speaking in broken English. These children were not specifically directing this "joke" at Mee; it was just one of the ways they had learned to be "funny."

Noticing Mee's distress and embarrassment at such behavior, I had to do something to combat this prejudice. I told the class about some Chinese cultural and historical achievements, showed pictures of their art work and described how difficult the Chinese language was to read and write, but that Mee could do it! I had her give a demonstration of how to write a Chinese word. Everyone was impressed with how deftly she drew the complicated characters. When asked if she would teach us how to write a few words, she eagerly agreed. The children were proud to be able to write in another language.

We went on from this to develop a chart showing words in Chinese and English, with Mee teaching us how to pronounce the Chinese symbols. Then Spanish-speaking children showed their classmates how to speak and write equivalent words in their language.

These activities helped to develop among the children more respect for each other and each other's languages.

I do regret one thing about how I handled this problem. I never shared this experience with the faculty of my school. I know that the remarks my students had made were not peculiar to my class. In fact, Mee knew that too.

One day we were going on a trip, and Mee's parents did not want her to go. When I suggested she sit in another class for the day, she refused, saying, "If I go into another class, the children will say, 'There goes a Chinese girl', and I don't want to hear that."

I didn't think to bring any of this up with other teachers because in general, most teachers are not encouraged by their administrators to share successes with each other. And we are so busy with everyday classroom matters that we don't make enough time to meet and strategize on how we can improve on what we are doing.

Bringing in Science

In other classes when children had negative comments on skin color or Asian eyes, I realized that lessons were in order to show why eyes and skin color are different. If you can show survival reasons for physical traits, then it makes it easier to look upon them as just different – not superior or inferior.

I would explain that skin color was related to the amount of melanin in a person's cells; that scientists think melanin developed long ago to protect people in hot climates from overexposure to the sun's rays; that people in cool climates developed lighter skins because the sun's rays were weaker, and the protection of large amounts of melanin was not necessary.

I also brought in the vitamin D factor – that the sun helps create vitamin D which leads to strong bones. Too much vitamin D is unhealthy and too little can give a person rickets. Long ago in the northern parts of the earth (before vitamin pills and fortified milk) people had to have light skin to let in enough sun to create vitamin D thus avoiding rickets. People with dark skin would have died out in cooler climates (lack of vitamin D would have led to rickets, making a person less able to provide food and care for their families.)

Any light-skinned people would have died out in hot climates because to hunt in the hot sun would expose them to severe sunburn and heat stroke. In these climates, the darker you were the better. Your greater stamina and endurance made you a good hunter and provider.

To explain the evolution of Asian eyes, I began by saying that Asians can see as well as anyone else; it's just a matter of another fold of skin over the eye; that scientists think this extra layer of skin developed in very cold climates to protect eyes from freezing and people going blind. It is also thought to have developed in desert and dry areas where sand and dirt blew frequently. If your eyes were more insulated and didn't open very wide, you had more protection and greater chance of survival.

Children are fascinated by these theories. Viewing skin color and eye shape in this straight-forward way takes the mystery and strangeness out of these differences and helps children see them as natural adaptations to varied environments.

I realize that if our students are to grow up open-minded and prejudice-free toward all races, it will take much more than handling effectively a racial incident, occasionally discussing a famous person of color or a science lesson. Ideally, what is needed is a comprehensive approach in the curriculum and textbooks showing the many significant contributions by African-Americans and other people of color to our country's history, as well as the achievements of Native Americans, Latin American, Asian and African civilizations.

Then this history can be related to the present by addressing such questions as "What can we learn from this person or historical event that will help us today?" "How can we follow in the footsteps of _____?" The teacher and class can develop an activity or project to improve the class, school or wider community as a tribute to the person or event studied.

Studying/Discussing Race and Racism in Adult Literacy and High School Classes

One semester when I was teaching a beginning reading adult literacy class, Nelson Mandela was freed after 27 years imprisonment in South Africa and soon after became its first Black president. After we studied about his life and conditions in South Africa, I asked students to write on this topic: "How the Freeing of Nelson Mandela has Affected My Life." They enthusiastically wrote two or more paragraphs committing themselves to fighting the drug epidemic in their communities, volunteering in a hospital or a homeless shelter, helping the elderly in their community and more.

They agreed with Kenneth who wrote, "If Nelson Mandela can make a sacrifice like going to prison for his people, then who am I to sit back and don't do nothing?"

We made a booklet of all of their writing and over two days, they read their essays to one another. It was quite inspiring and helped strengthen classroom ties.

There were instances of racial and cultural biases over the years which I never let pass uncommented on if I was aware that they had happened. Here are two examples:

Bias Incident #1

Maria (casually to her literacy class of African American, Latina and Caucasian students): I've noticed that Blacks are much lazier than Puerto Ricans.

Ms. Califf: What evidence do you have?

Maria: Oh, I've just noticed.

Ms. Califf: Does anyone else feel this way?

Class: (varied responses)

Ms. Califf: I'd like to put something on the board. (I wrote a long list of Black civil rights organizations and stirring events that Black people were an important part of. I pointed out the incredible role played by Black domestic workers in helping their families survive and contributing to the higher education of their children and relatives. I continued by saying "A similar list could be made for Puerto Ricans" and that there are no lazy races, only some lazy people within all the races.)

A student then summed everything up by saying, "I guess Maria was wrong on that one." Maria didn't say anything, but at least she listened.

Bias Incident #2

Sharon, from the island of Jamaica, had a history of making derogatory remarks to others. Each time I made a comment about how that was inappropriate. The worst incident occurred when she got mad one day at Marie from Haiti whom she called "an ignorant Haitian" in the middle of a heated argument. This was disruptive of the class, but Sharon wouldn't stop. Marie was in tears. I told Sharon to leave the room. I spoke to Marie who said she would never accept an apology from Sharon and would never speak to her again.

I then went out into the hall, and the following conversation took place:

Ms. Califf: In this class we have agreed to respect one another; no one can call anyone ignorant.

Sharon: But what she said was so stupid.

Ms. Califf: What will happen in our class if people start calling each other names?

Sharon: (silence)

Ms. Califf: Everyone will get nervous thinking they might be next. People can't learn in that type of environment. To call Marie ignorant was bad enough, but to call her an "ignorant Haitian" is much worse. How would you like someone to call you an "ignorant Jamaican"?

Sharon: I wouldn't like that.

Ms. Califf: What's the difference between telling someone she is ignorant and telling her she is an ignorant Jamaican?

Sharon: It makes Jamaicans look bad.

Ms. Califf: So you not only told Marie she was ignorant, but that Haitians are ignorant. How many Haitians do you know?

Sharon: Some.

Ms. Califf: There are millions of Haitians. You couldn't make a statement like that unless you checked out all of them and found they were all ignorant which is impossible. Remember how badly you told me you felt when family members called you dummy because you couldn't read? To call someone "ignorant Haitian" is a double blow. I would never allow any class member to call you a name.

What could you have said to Marie instead? (A short discussion led her to say "I don't agree with you.")

I told her that she could return to the class, but that if she ever said anything deprecating again, she would be dropped from the course. (We had the freedom to do this because it was an adult literacy program.) Sharon was willing to apologize, but Marie was not interested.

This was such a sobering experience for Sharon that she never again made any put downs in class.

I followed up this incident with a study of stereotypes. Months later, Sharon informed the class that she had heard a stereotyped remark that day. "I was in a taxicab and another car almost crashed into us. My cab driver yelled, "That's a Haitian driver!"

In addition to this heightened consciousness, Sharon wrote an essay after all of this, not meant for her teacher's eyes: "I have one of the most beautiful teachers. She is kind loving and understanding and patience. I think all my class mate love hers very very much. We all can depend on her. And we will not let her down. God Bless her."

A Different Approach to Studying Stereotypes

The students in the Frederick Douglass Center were ages 17 – 21, with reading levels from 0 to 5th-grade. They were the push-outs and drop-outs of Brooklyn, N.Y., almost all African American as well as immigrants from English and Spanish speaking Caribbean nations. In my class students were reading at about a 4th-grade level; my job was to raise their reading levels to at least 6th grade, so they could join a GED program in another school.

Our school gave teachers a lot of flexibility in creating lessons to achieve this goal. One term I introduced a study of stereotypes as a result of hearing students' stories of being mistreated by the public and police.

I began by putting on the board the question "What is a stereotype?" Since no one knew, we looked it up in our dictionaries. The definition we decided on was:

"A stereotyped idea is an unfair opinion about a group of people you don't really know. It means jumping to conclusions about who someone is before you really know the person. Stereotyping someone or a group can result in pain and suffering."

I said "Some of you have told us about how as teenagers and young people you have been looked upon with suspicion, fear and been physically beaten by police for no reason. Why do you think this is? Their answers included: "If we are standing on the corner with friends, the police assume we are drug dealers." "I was followed in the store because the owner thought I might be a thief."

Gilbert reminded us how the police had stopped him while he was driving his new van, drew their guns, patted him down and beat him before taking him to the local jail. (He was released without charges after they determined it was his van. Our class was going to explore how to protest this, but because he was in the country illegally, to protest would have subjected him to deportation.)

From here we learned about stereotypes of African American people in general, Native Americans, Asians, Jews (as a Jew, I addressed this) and Italians (An Italian colleague came in to help dispel myths about his ethnicity.)

The class and I decided to make a small booklet of personal experiences with stereotyping (which would include ways they could have been handled differently) and short essays on some of what they learned. Waterways, a wonderful, modestly-funded organization, printed up enough copies for the class.

We also decided to take our stories to the other nine classes in the school. To get ready, they role-played their presentation and read their own stories. We discussed the best way to do this, i.e., stand up straight with pride, look up now and then, read slowly, don't sway back and forth. They were all open to suggestions because of our rigid class rule that forbid any put-downs. (See **Chapter 1, Effective Communication** for details on how this and other rules were created.)

They each took turns in groups of three (for moral support) going to classes, writing the word "stereotype" on the board, asking for a definition and then writing down our class definition. This was followed by each one reading their short essay. In conclusion, they asked the class if anyone had personal or other experiences with stereotypes.

The teachers all reported that the presentations went well, and their classes were attentive. My students were happy about the applause they usually got, but were disappointed that very few students had spoken up in answer to their questions. However, I told them that their own message was so important that I was sure they made many in the audience begin to think in new ways.

This project created more support among my students as they gave each other helpful suggestions throughout the process and courage to stand up and read in front of their peers on a topic that had meaning to them.

Here are excerpts of their writing:

Curtis: "Last week I was speaking to one of my friends on the phone and he told me that he was on the elevator when a woman got on with him. When she saw him, she started to hold her bag and pocketbook and looked at him funny. So, he started to look back at her funny. He got off the elevator when it got to his floor and went on his way."

Marlon: "Here is a situation that could have happened: One day a woman and I were standing in the elevator. She grabbed her bag, so I grabbed my bag too, and I looked at her. She was on one side of the elevator, and I was on the other. She then asked me my name as she introduced herself to me. I think this is one way to stop stereotypes."

Randal: "One day I went to the store to buy a soda. I stepped in and opened the door. Two men watched me like I was going to take something. I walked up to one of them and asked him the cost. He said a dollar. I said OK. Then he asked me did I take something and I said 'no'! And I walked out of the store. I was angry and upset.

"If I had it to do over, I would have walked straight back to the store and said, 'Sir, you are wrong. You are a stereotyping person who jumps to conclusions."

Davon, Andre, Shervin and Phenton collaborated on solutions: "You can make things better only if you talk to somebody as a friend and give them respect. We should stand together as Nubian children, sisters and brothers to avoid any kind of stereotype. For example, don't make fun of someone's race.

"We could try to communicate with each other and help each other in struggle no matter if the person is Black or white, Chinese, Puerto Rican. It doesn't matter what race. All men and women must be treated equally.

"The way to end stereotyping is to stop judging people for what they got or who they are."

Patrick's poem:

Heal the World

Don't jump to conclusions
From one person's ideas.
To stereotype is not the answer.
As the sun passes you by
See the vision of the light.
We are all human beings
With different colors
Different states of mind.
Let's stop the discrimination
We are all beautiful from within and out.
Let's stop stereotyping
Live as a family.
Stop the segregation
And unite as one.

An amazing transformation occurred in Anthony during the project. He changed from a non-participatory, seemingly uninterested student with very poor reading and writing skills into a vibrant member of the class. When the project was completed, he told me he had written to Lisa Evers, the host of his favorite radio program, Street Warriors, and told her that his class had written an important booklet that she should tell her listeners about.

I was sure that he would be disappointed, especially because he had not asked me to look over what he had written for spelling and punctuation corrections. However, I was wrong. She contacted him and invited him and a few classmates to come to the studio to talk about stereotypes and to take calls from NY City listeners!

I was invited to be part of the conversation, but it was the holiday season in December and I was out-of-town. Ms. Evers arranged for a phone connection. I explained the project, students read their essays and many people called in with their stories, expressing gratitude for the program.

As teachers, we don't always know what will help an alienated student become an engaged one. However, an accepting, non-judgmental classroom atmosphere with a curriculum that is interesting and relevant to most of the class is an important ingredient to the solution of this common problem.

Personal Attacks Based on Sexism

Sexual harassment is part of everyday life in middle and high schools according to a 2011 report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) entitled "Crossing the Line, Sexual Harassment at School." This conclusion was reached after a nationally representative survey of 1,965 students in grades 7 – 12 conducted in May and June 2011.

The Executive Summary of the survey states:

- Nearly half (48%) of the students surveyed experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010 – 2011 school year and the majority of those students (87%) said it had a negative effect on them.
- Verbal harassment (unwelcome sexual comments, jokes or gestures) made up the bulk of the incidents, but physical harassment was far too common.
- Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed by a significant margin (56% vs. 40%).
- Girls were more likely than boys to say sexual harassment caused them to have trouble sleeping…, not want to go to school…, and change the way they went home from school…

- These negative emotional effects take a toll on students' and especially girls' education, resulting in decreased productivity and increased absenteeism from school.
- The prevalence of sexual harassment in grades 7 – 12 comes as a surprise to many, in part because it is rarely reported.

Later on, in this chapter, solutions to this crisis will be offered. But first, we will begin with a foundation of respect between boys and girls that elementary school teachers can build that can help prevent sexist and abusive behavior at higher levels.

Here are experiences other teachers and I have had showing opportunities we took to promote positive relationships between boys and girls and to expand their concepts of what their options are – whether they are male or female.

(For a focus on middle school and high school levels, see later in this chapter)

Who Should Play With Dolls?

Once, as a substitute in a kindergarten class, I decided to raise the question of who should play with dolls: girls and/or boys. I wanted to find out if 5-year olds could seriously discuss a sex role issue such as this one. I read the story "William's Doll" by Charlotte Zolotow. This is about a boy who wants a doll to play with along with his basketball, train set and other toys. His parents refuse, but his grandmother gets him one, so he can "practice being a father."

I asked the children whether or not William's grandmother should have given him a doll. They had many comments. One girl thought it was a bad idea. "If he plays with a doll," she said, "he will be a tomgirl." I asked if anyone else agreed with her. A serious-looking boy volunteered, "I play with my sisters and their dolls. They are all I have and I am all they have."

Other children expressed opinions pro and con. They were divided. We ended the discussion with a comment from a girl who hadn't seemed to be paying any attention; "I think children should play with whatever toys they want to play with."

I think I helped her arrive at that decision by posing a question earlier in the lesson: "Most girls play a lot with dolls, and in this way they get to practice taking care of children. The more you practice, the better you get at something, so if they become mothers, they will be more able to be good ones. If boys never get to play with dolls, how will they have a chance to practice being a good father so that they will know how when they grow up?"

I was surprised that these kindergarteners were able to discuss this issue so intelligently. And with a substitute too! It just proved to me again how often adults underestimate children's capabilities.

The issue of whether or not boys should play with dolls was not resolved once and for all, but the free flow of opinions opened up a lot of possibilities. Allowing children to present their views without permitting ridicule of any opinion is crucial to their finding a more positive way to listen and relate to each other.

Sexist Attitudes Challenged in a 5th-Grade Class

One term I was assigned to teach a 5th-grade class once a week for an hour. During this time, we were doing a study of pantomime to prepare for a mime performance that was coming to the school.

This was a difficult class with a number of hostile boys. When I asked for volunteers to pantomime an action, only boys volunteered. I took a few girls aside and asked why they didn't want to try, and they replied, "We don't want the boys to laugh at us."

I asked, "If I can guarantee that no boys will laugh, will you try?" They agreed and four girls volunteered. Then I picked two well-behaved boys

and two boys with behavior problems to meet with me in the hall. We all sat down, and I said, "Boys, we have a problem. The girls want to pantomime, but they are afraid some boys will make fun of them. I'm sure it would be fun to see what they can do, but they won't do it unless everyone is polite. What should we do?"

After a discussion, the four boys decided that they would position themselves around the room, and if any boy began to laugh, they would look at them and say quietly, "Shhhh" or "Be quiet!" I told them that this was a great idea and that I was counting on them. I thanked them ahead of time for their cooperation and suggestions.

Why did I include two behavior problems in this discussion? If I had only picked boys who were cooperative, it would have been obvious which children I thought I couldn't trust, and their poor behavior would have continued no matter what ideas the well-behaved boys came up with. By including two disruptive boys, I gave them a chance to be positive leaders (they would have the most influence over their friends), and to get the attention they craved by doing something good.

Their teacher agreed to let me take all of the girls out of the class for half an hour. Then I said, "Ella, Judy, Mary and Dianne want to pantomime, but they don't want to do it alone. What can they do together?" It wasn't long before everyone agreed upon a scene at a supermarket checkout counter.

The four girls practiced, and the other girls offered suggestions. Finally, they were ready. I explained that four boys had formed a committee to see that no one laughed.

They took their places in front of the class and rearranged some desks for their supermarket scene. The boys stationed themselves around the room. I introduced the performance. "Now we will see something new – a group pantomime. See if you can guess where they are and what they are doing."

The girls began. As soon as one boy made a derogatory sound, the guards sprang into action. "Shhhhh," "Be quiet!" After a few of these incidents,

all was calm as the girls carried off their mime without a hitch. When they finished, and someone had guessed what they were portraying, I led the class in clapping our appreciation. I also thanked the boys for helping to make their effort a success. Before I knew what had happened, these formerly shy girls and some others ran out of the room and disappeared.

When their teacher returned, I went out searching and found them in a kindergarten class. The teacher said they had come in and asked if they could put on their skit!

I was very proud of these children, and they were proud too. They had taken responsibility for each other, and helped one another break out of harmful ruts. Boys began to see that they should respect the right of girls to participate freely in class activities without fear of negative comments. Girls began to feel their power to achieve more than they thought they could.

As the teacher, I had played a crucial role, but I couldn't have had such a successful lesson without the creativity and cooperation of the children.

If you anticipate that a problem will arise, and then involve part or all of your class in figuring out what to do before it happens, very often a serious incident can be avoided. I can't underline enough how much more successful I was in preventing serious discipline problems when I invited the students to help me create a safe and supportive environment for learning.

Other Ways to Challenge Gender Stereotyping (Some are appropriate for elementary and others for middle and high school)

There are innumerable opportunities in everyday classroom activities to build better relationships between boys and girls. Here are some more ideas:

1. Don't have a boys' and girls' line, just have two lines. I found that when boys or girls stood in the "wrong" line, they were subjected to ridicule. It was worse, however, for a boy to stand in the girls' line than

vice versa. He was called names like "sissy" or "You're a girl." The boys' line was obviously a higher status line than the girls' line.

2. Since my students sat at tables, I would say, "Table l, line up in front of the room. Table 2 at the side," and so on. At first there was protest, but I just said that it was better for boys and girls to stand in the same lines and not to be separate. No other class in my school did this, and children noticed. I simply said, "Well, we just do it differently." Eventually they got used to it, and girls and boys began talking with each other more.
3. When a monitor is needed to go on an errand, pick a boy and girl to go together.
4. When children are playing a game or working on a project, make sure that some of the time only girls work together. In the report by the A.A.U.W. mentioned earlier, the authors discovered several studies that girls often learn better in single gender environments. It suggested that teachers include all-girl workgroups in their classroom planning.
5. In early childhood classes, be careful how you name and arrange the play areas. Herbert Kohl found that in his K-l class, the art and the cooking/dress-up areas were played in by girls; boys took over the shop (a workbench, saws and hammers) and the science center (experiments with electricity and magnetism).
6. He slowly got boys and girls to play in different areas by renaming the centers and activities. The cooking/dress-up area became "The Haunted House," "Fantasy House," or "The Theater." The library corner which had been used primarily by a few girls was renamed "The Bookmaking Center" with appropriate materials added.
7. He changed the location of classroom resources: blocks and toy cars were kept with the dolls; paints and crayons put in the science center; fancy men's clothes added to the dress-up area. These changes made it possible for boys and girls to begin playing more with each other and to play with materials they had previously ignored.[2]

8. Be alert for any sexist remarks and deal with them immediately. Here is what one teacher, **Chuck Esser,** did:
9. "There was a lot of talk in my class about how girls can't play on the jungle gym, and so forth. I had told the girls and boys that the things in the classroom were for everyone to use, that girls were as strong as boys. Then I decided to read to the class some books with girls as strong stars. I read *The Magic Hat* and *Mommies at Work.* The next day I heard one of the boys saying, 'They can too play here. You know they can be sailors just like in *Mommies at Work.'"* [3]
10. On a regular basis, include reading material, give lessons and hang up posters that celebrate achievements of women working alone and in organizations.

One source of lesson ideas, posters, books, CDs and DVDs is the National Women's History Project, https://nationalwomenshistoryalliance.org/

Combating Sexism and Gender-Based Violence and Harassment at the Middle School and High School Levels

The 2011 AAUW report mentioned previously includes a section on recommendations on how to make preventing sexual harassment a priority in middle school and high school. Their suggestions are crucial since only 12% of students felt their school did a good job of addressing this issue.

The most effective anti-harassment programs are those where school administrators take them seriously through strong leadership via actions that include:

→ a designated coordinator to handle official sexual harassment complaints and other violations of Title IX (a comprehensive federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in any federally funded education program or activity);

- time to train the coordinator, staff and students and to provide resources to handle the complaints and other gender equity issues;
- a way to anonymously report sexual harassment problems;
- teaching all students that sexual harassment is not funny. While both boys and girls can be harassers, boys are most often the harassers of both girls and boys. Male harassers claimed they were just being funny. Teaching kids that sexual harassment crosses the line and is not humorous is a crucial lesson.
- posting or distributing information on sexual harassment, i.e., what it is, what the school policy is and what students can do if they experience or witness it;
- organizing a school assembly and involving students in the planning and implementation;
- inviting students to create posters;
- using the American Civil Liberties Union's fact sheet "Gender-Based Violence and Harassment: Your School, Your Rights."
- providing students with assertiveness and self-defense training that could empower and equip them to challenge the behavior of harassers and stand up for each other.

The report has a section on what educators can do when students report sexual harassment:

- Listen carefully and respectfully without judgment or blaming the victim.
- Help find answers to any questions you don't know the answers to and share with the student.
- Advise student to record the incident in writing.
- Advise students about their rights and options.
- Assist or check up on students as they take the next steps.

In addition, suggestions are given on what educators can do if they observe sexual harassment:

- → Name the behavior and state that it must stop immediately.
- → Use the incident to talk to students about what sexual harassment is and why it is not okay.
- → Follow the school policy.
- → If necessary, send person to the principal or guidance counselor and notify families of the students involved.
- → Work to develop a culture of respect in your classroom as a prevention method. "One way to do this is by promoting activities that encourage friendship, cooperation, and sharing among all students, particularly among those who may not otherwise interact. Students are less likely to sexually harass people they respect, and they will be more likely to stand up for someone they know and like." (AAUW report, chapter 4, p. 34, quoting Sandler and Stonehill, 2005)

A key to success in this effort is to "incorporate subjects that encourage respect and tolerance for all individuals, such as studying the contributions of women and various racial, ethnic and sexual-orientation identity groups." (AAUW report, Chapter 4, p. 34 – 35)

Personal Attacks Based On Homophobia

Picture yourself. You take pride in being a teacher who doesn't allow put-downs in your classroom. You are careful to speak out against racist and sexist remarks, and to prepare lessons to counteract them. But what do you do when you hear a student call another "gay," "queer," "homo" or "faggot"? Many of us are not sure what to do. We feel uncomfortable with the whole subject of homosexuality, so we might say to the name-caller "Stop that!," or we might ignore the remark hoping that this type of name-calling won't happen again. However, neither of these solutions works. They don't help students understand why these epithets are as hurtful as any slur against a racial or ethnic group.

In 1983, the Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC)[4] published an issue of its Bulletin entitled "Homophobia and Education, How to Deal With Name-Calling" which is still relevant today. In this ground-breaking work to which classroom teachers, authors, librarians and a theologian contributed, the editors explained why they decided to devote an entire issue to this subject:

"First, homophobia oppresses at least one-tenth of our population, and we feel that education should be a vehicle for counteracting all forms of oppression. Second, homophobia is the ultimate weapon in reinforcing rigid sex-role conformity, and we believe that sex-role conformity oppresses all females and limits male options as well. Third, young people are generally appallingly misinformed about homosexuality, whereas education should provide accurate information about realities in this world." [5]

CIBC explained that statistical evidence indicated that there are probably homosexual children in almost every classroom or children who have gay or lesbian parents. However, such children usually have little support or guidance.

CIBC discussed the effect that homophobia can have on all boys and girls:

"Boys who fail to display prescribed 'masculine' traits are called 'sissy' – even before kindergarten, and any child will define a sissy as someone who is fearful, a crybaby or who 'acts like a girl'. Later they're called a 'fag.' The fear of such name-calling makes boys toe the gender line and refrain from any display of caring and nurturing emotions. That fear also encourages them to develop aggressive, domineering behaviors.

"Similarly, name-calling – from "tomboy" to "lezzie" – inhibits girls from developing their strengths or acting as equals to boys. Homophobia thus prevents the broadening of sex-role options. In fact, the women's movement is frequently attacked as 'just a bunch of lesbians.' This attack

is calculated to make women toe the gender line. Until such time as non-gay people defend the rights and humanity of gay people and learn to shrug off homophobic labels, such name-calling will continue to oppress and inhibit everyone." [6]

Luckily, today, there are a number of national organizations that can give guidance on how teachers and administrators can address homophobia in their classrooms and schools.

Here are some of them and examples of their publications:

Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network: Their "Safe Space Kit" increases teachers' knowledge and skills regarding issues faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students.

Hardy Girls, Healthy Women: A resource – "Ugly Ducklings: A National Campaign to Reduce Bullying and Harassment of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) Youth."

American Civil Liberties Union: a 2 page handout: "Know Your Rights, LGBT High School Students."

Human Rights Campaign: "Growing Up LGBT in America," a survey of 10,000 LGBT-identified youth ages 13-17.

Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality, Edited by Annika Butler-Wall, Kim Cosier, Rachel Harper, Jeff Sapp, Jody Sokolower, and Melissa Bollow Tempel, (Milwaukee: A Rethinking Schools Publication, 2016)

AND a film produced by New Day Films: "It's Elementary, Talking About Gay Issues in School," includes a Viewing Guide that outlines why gay issues are appropriate for discussion at all grade levels, provides tips on how to use the film for in-service trainings, and addresses concerns that parents and educators may have about how this topic is handled at school.

Discussing Homosexuality with Very Young Children

At a meeting of a pro-equality, multi-racial network of educators and parents in New York City, the following question was asked: "Don't you think first grade is too young to explain homosexuality to children; don't you have to explain homosexual sex to children for them to understand about gay and lesbian people?"

Answer: "It is never too young for there to be an environment of acceptance of the diversity of human kind. You do not have to talk about sex for children to understand that two people can love each other. Young children understand mothers' and fathers' love for each other without knowing about heterosexual sex. Yes, two men or two women can love each other and want to live together. They also sometimes raise children together."[7]

Jaki (Williams) Florsheim, a friend of mine, was a kindergarten teacher who chose to confront the issue. It developed naturally one year because one of her pupils had two mothers. Since she wanted Mark to be an accepted class member, she invited his parents to come to school. One of them read the book "Heather Has Two Mommies" aloud. The children listened matter-of-factly and asked questions that the parents easily answered. It was clear that these two women were loving and conscientious parents. The children simply accepted Mark's family. When one of the mothers came to school to pick him up, the children said, "There's Mark's other mommy."

Subsequently, a child brought up the following:

Child: There are two men who are living together upstairs and my parents don't like them.

Ms. Florsheim: How do you feel?

Child: I like them.

Ms. Florsheim: So you disagree.

And she left it at that.

Ms. Florsheim believed that it is much healthier to have these issues out in the open so that children don't sublimate negative feelings about homosexuality which may surface in later years as self-hatred or as irrational hatred and even violence against gay people.

Once at a P.T.A. meeting, a parent criticized Ms. Florsheim publicly because she was "teaching homosexuality." Ms. Florsheim justified herself saying that teaching homosexuality is not her goal. She just wanted all of her students to be validated and varied life styles respected. Other parents stood up at the meeting and said, "We are glad Ms. Florsheim is doing this. We want our children to learn tolerance."[8]

Indeed, a number of classes in Ms. Florsheim's school had a chance to engage in a public discussion of intolerance against homosexuals when one morning a teacher found "Mr. _____ is a faggot" written on his door. He offered to speak before an assembly of older children who knew this had happened, and the administrator and teachers agreed.

He spoke about his life and how he had at a certain point realized he was gay. He said he was proud of who he was and glad to be a teacher. However, he explained that it was hurtful for that sentence to be on his door. He invited the person who wrote it to come and speak with him because it seemed the person was angry, and he wanted to hear their grievance.

During the give and take after his presentation, some teachers stood up and supported him saying that about 10% of the U.S. population was gay, and that given this reality, 10% of their school population could be gay.

Students listened. Many who were sympathetic went up to Mr. _____ and said they were sorry about what had happened.

As a result of this incident, the school's Diversity Task Force, which previously had concerned itself only with issues of racism and

sexism, added to its statement of purpose their members' belief in "No discrimination based on sexual orientation." They held a series of open discussions with teachers and older students on issues of homophobia. Teachers brainstormed how to teach tolerance of a variety of life styles. They realized that one natural place to include this subject was under the subtopic "Families" in their Health Curriculum.

Endnotes

1. Segal, Edith, *Be My Friend*, Citadel Press, N.Y., 1969, p. 14.
2. Kohl, Herbert, *On Teaching*, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1986, p. 88-91.
3. Judson, Stephanie, editor, *A Manual on Nonviolence and Children*, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 39.
4. The Council on Interracial Books for Children (CIBC), in existence from the late 1960s to the early 1980's which I was fortunate to work for and with, was a leader in challenging stereotypes and misinformation in children's trade and textbooks.
5. *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, "Why the CIBC is Dealing With Homophobia," Vol. 14, Numbers 3&4, 1983, p.3.
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7. Lee, Ntanya, Murphy, Don and North, Lisa, "Sexuality, Multicultural Education, and the New York City Public Schools," *Radical Teacher*, #45, p. 15.
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CHAPTER SIX

COOPERATIVE LEARNING CAN REDUCE ALIENATION

(How can I get my students to cooperate?) (How can teachers collaborate more with each other?)

One reason many students find school so tedious is the isolation they feel during their 6 hours in school each day. They are often told to work individually to "look at your own paper," "mind your own business," "do your own work."

Authors of *The New Circles of Learning, Cooperation in the Classroom and School* present convincing evidence of the value of cooperative learning as a way to help counteract this sense of alienation as well as exploring the psychological, social and academic toll this has taken on them, their families and on our society as a whole.

They show step by step the advantages of students working together at any educational level to learn almost any subject; they demonstrate how this method can improve morale, learning and critical thinking skills, break down the depressing aloneness many students feel in their efforts to learn by teaching them how to help one another and to give each other encouraging support; it is more fun and exciting to study when you can talk to each other, debate issues and work toward a common goal:

"Since the 1950s, over 80 studies have compared the relative impact of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic experiences on self-esteem. Research demonstrates that cooperative experiences help students believe they are intrinsically worthwhile and viewed by others in positive ways, compare their personal attributes favorably with those of their peers, and judge themselves to be capable, competent, and successful…. (They) perceive themselves and others in a differentiated and realistic way that allows for multidimensional comparisons based on complementarity of individuals' abilities. Competitive experiences tend to be related to conditional self-esteem based on whether one wins or loses. Individualistic experiences tend to be related to basic self-rejection." [1]

This doesn't mean that all competition is bad and should be avoided; however, for maximum mental health and academic success, the need is for cooperation to predominate.

For any teacher wanting to use this methodology effectively, *The New Circles of Learning* will provide a secure base from which to begin. For example, it describes step by step in detail how to prepare students to work effectively together and procedures for structuring cooperative learning into your curriculum. This information is essential because cooperative learning will not happen naturally. It must be taught and practiced.

An organization that helps teachers improve their ability to implement cooperative learning effectively is The International Association for the Study of Cooperation in Education (IASCE). Its membership of teachers and education researchers come from many countries. Over the years, their research and classroom practice has focused on:

- "setting the stage for cooperative learning, class climate and team-building
- establishing the task structure and positive interdependence
- structuring the discussion and interaction
- identifying and teaching interpersonal skills

- attending to group processes including issues of grouping, roles, status, observation, and intervention
- developing a balance between individual and group accountability and the implications for assessment." [2]

They explore how to make cooperative learning successful in heterogeneous and multi-cultural groupings. They see this way of learning as promoting higher academic achievement because "when students are engaged in a creative, open-ended task, the more they talk and work together, the more they learn." [3]

They also say that cooperative learning can lead to more collaboration and support among teachers and administrators thus making success more possible, more respect among students for one another, greater interracial harmony and democratic practices that can translate to more cooperation in society as students become adults.

Author and educator Elizabeth G. Cohen has advice for teachers embarking on cooperative learning strategies: "I would urge you to move slowly and carefully in attempting to make changes in the mode of instruction. Go step by step with adequate opportunities for observing each other's classrooms and for reflection. Start with trying out some of the recommended skill builders and/or team builders in preparation…Work together to create or adapt some group tasks that center on important concepts in the curriculum. Try them out, critique them, and keep notes on how to revise them. The stance of the staff developer and teacher should be both self-evaluative and self-critical. Take advantage of the extensive research that has been carried out on cooperative learning and its implementation. Take advantage of the curricula that have been developed specifically for cooperative learning." [4]

To learn the latest on this research and classroom pedagogy, visit their website: http://www.iasce.net/ There you will find videos of experts speaking on these issues, links to their newsletter, research, conference

reports and papers, and to other organizations involved in cooperative learning.

Examples of Cooperative Learning at the Elementary Level

Kathy Matson, retired 5th-grade teacher, was inspired after attending workshops in cooperative learning to give her class specific lessons on how to work together. For example, she created groups of 3 or 4 children and invited them to talk about monsters with each other, specifically how they look. Then she gave them an assignment to create a monster together with the art materials provided.

Everyone had to contribute, and everyone had to agree on each part of the monster. If they reached an impasse, for example, on what color it should be, they put the suggested colors in a hat and picked out one. When they were finished, each group selected one person to describe its monster to the class.

When students became used to working together, she expanded cooperative learning to social studies, science and other subject areas. She would give a small group a reading assignment or a research project. She reminded her class how to work together successfully by a chart she created placed prominently on the wall:

WORKING TOGETHER COOPERATIVELY

There will be one paper per group.
Each member must agree with the group answers and indicate this by signing the completed assignment.
Each group member has a say.
Assist all members to understand the material.
Express your ideas and don't change them unless you are logically persuaded to do so.
Complete the task and do it well. There is no Reward for finishing first!

As students applied themselves to their work, Ms. Matson found they learned more and enjoyed the work more.

She didn't only use cooperative learning, for she felt students learn in many different ways. Sometimes she directed a whole class lesson or assigned reading to do alone. She did a lot of art in groups or individually, as did a colleague, 6th-grade special education teacher Ruth Daniels. They felt that art is an important part of any curriculum.

They both agreed that children who have experienced difficulty in reading and writing can raise their morale through varied art projects in which they may feel more successful. This is possible since in art most students haven't experienced failure. They enjoy working with their hands and often feel comfortable talking about their work. It also gives them another avenue to help them learn.[5]

Gloria Carlson, another retired 6th-grade teacher, used cooperative learning in her classroom. She says, "In today's media society, one teacher standing in front of the room all day teaching doesn't work." She describes a successful project her class completed:

"In cooperation with the Prospect Park Urban Environmental Center [in Brooklyn, N.Y.], my class met with a guide in the park three times to study marshes, lakes and ponds. When we got together with the guide the fourth time, it was in our classroom. She presented this problem: Make believe there are plans to build an amusement park in Prospect Park. How would the following groups react to this: construction workers, community residents, small businesses, legislators and environmentalists?

"The class broke up into groups representing each constituency to answer "Will your group want the amusement park? Why or Why not?

"The children, who had been learning the skills necessary to work in a group, had to decide on a position, write it down together and make a poster to represent their point of view. When they were finished, one child in the group was chosen to present their point of view. While this was going on, the guide and I circulated around the room giving suggestions where needed.

"The class was totally absorbed in this undertaking. They listened carefully to each group's speech. Their discussions and presentations gave them a deeper understanding of the needs of people, animals and plants. They taught each other."[6]

Peer Tutors

Students can be encouraged to teach each other on a one-to-one basis. For those who are successful in their schoolwork, a tutoring role helps them to feel responsible for others by sharing what they know to help their classmates catch up. In this way they get double recognition: one for their achievement and one for helping a classmate.

The student who is being tutored is also aided in two ways. He or she begins to understand the schoolwork better and receives positive support and friendship from a fellow student.

This certainly was true of Theresa and Karen.

Theresa entered my elementary school class two months after the term started. She didn't understand much of the work and mechanically copied things into her notebook. She rarely smiled and didn't participate in classroom life.

I asked one of my most advanced students, Karen, to help Theresa with her class work. Karen undertook her task with enthusiasm and great seriousness, reporting to me regularly on Theresa's progress and showing genuine pride when Theresa did her work well. I pointed out to the class what a good teacher Karen was, how attentive her pupil was, and how proud I was of both of them.

Karen's interest in Theresa spilled over into the playground, where she made sure she was included in games with the other children. Theresa became a happier child, and because of Karen's concern, other children began to notice her and invite her to play with them.

Encouraging students to help one another doesn't always work, as when one child claimed her classmate/teacher had called her "stupid." In that case I had a talk with both parties and decided to change the instructor. The offending pupil/teacher was given another chance and another student.

I always kept careful track of who was teaching whom, and I would check to make sure that the information being taught/learned was correct. (Of course, tutors have to be clear about what it is they need to teach their classmates. This means that the teacher has to take time out to show them ways to explain a subject so that the child they are working with will learn.) At the elementary level, when there was a successful relationship going and progress being made, I would mention this to the class.

It is a good idea, however, to see to it that no student is always on the receiving end. Attempts must be made to discover something they are good at or something positive they have done which they can demonstrate to others, or a way they can help another pupil. The general rule I followed was to encourage students who did well in math, for example, to try to help other children learn it. At the elementary level, rewarding moments

would come when, after observing tutoring in action, children would ask, "May I be a teacher?" or say, "I need someone to help me."

Too many teachers stress the competitive aspect of schoolwork with unhelpful remarks like: "Sandra keeps getting l00 percent on spelling tests; what's the matter with the rest of you?" Thus, Sandra's star keeps rising while others stand on the sidelines, frustrated, wondering why they can't get themselves together enough to get l00 percent too.

A better approach is to say: "Sandra has been doing very well, and I'm sure everyone else can do much better too. Even if you just get one extra word right next week, that will be fine. In the next test we will see who is trying to improve." Then Sandra is given a small group of poor spellers to work with. This approach also keeps resentment from growing against Sandra and puts her on the side of those who may have called her names or worse out of jealousy.

In this way, an atmosphere of cooperation develops in which the children are encouraged to feel responsible for one another. The good students are not continuously getting all the glory while the poorer ones struggle along bringing up the rear, their feelings of inferiority constantly reinforced. Everyone is given recognition because there is always something good to say about each child. The emphasis should not be on individual grades or comparing one child's work with that of another, but on how the child has done relative to his or her past performance.

Group Evaluations

Another method of institutionalizing cooperation is for a group of students to be evaluated or praised for how much it improves. For example, if someone in a math group gets more answers right this week than last, and the teacher has noticed that he or she was helped by group members to understand the work, this can be pointed out, and the group can be given a positive recognition for this achievement.

Some teachers may argue that there will be students who don't do their part for a number of reasons: too shy to participate, not understanding the work, feeling marginalized, not interested, or poor work habits. However, this should not be a serious problem if students are taught from the beginning how to work together and are carefully monitored by the teacher who talks privately with any student who has a problem to ask what needs to happen for them to cooperate with the others. Then a plan can be made on how to achieve this change which could include sharing the plan with the group.

This type of personal attention and eye-to-eye contact almost always gives students hope that they can do better.

A Simple Group Evaluation of an Activity in an Alternative High School

I was assigned a class in a literacy program in an alternative high school. Students, aged 17–21, were reading on a 3rd- or 4th-grade level and they had trouble sounding out words they had not seen before. I got lists of words organized phonetically from the Fortune Society in New York City which used them in teaching formerly incarcerated people how to read better.

I informed my students of the value of these lists; that they had sounds in common to help them learn and remember pronunciations. I assured them that they would benefit from reading these words and explained that the best way to do this was to work in small groups with members taking turns saying the words and helping each other when someone got stuck. They would underline words they did not know or pronounce correctly to review the next day.

This activity would go on for about 15-20 minutes. Since this is not the most exciting classroom activity, and many students were discouraged readers who might resent this drill, I said that I would watch each group

carefully. At the end of the session, I would give an A in my grade book to everyone in a group if I saw that all were paying attention, trying to do their best and helping each other.

The idea of getting an A so quickly enabled this daily activity to be accepted by all. One day a student laughed out loud; she said to her group, "I can't believe I am actually enjoying this!" Since our class rules stressed cooperation in the effort to improve reading skills, no one had to worry that they would be ridiculed if they missed a word.

I am usually not a fan of giving out grades so easily as a tool to get students to focus, but these students had a history of failure and their experience was a lifetime of low grades. This gave them a chance to redeem themselves and to see others making mistakes as they had always done.

This became so routine that after awhile, they did not need the grades. They were hooked on the challenge of developing their word attack skills.

It is well known that when students are asked about their favorite subjects in school they rarely pick academic ones. High on the list are gym, sports, art, "choice time" (in which they can choose what to do in the classroom). All of these are activities in which it is legitimate to talk, interact and cooperate with each other. If cooperative learning can extend beyond these limited areas to subjects like math, reading, social studies and science, there is a good chance that more and more students will include these subjects, too, as their favorites.

(More information on cooperative learning can be found in Chapter 2 entitled *The Importance of an Interesting Curriculum,* specifically the section entitled "Creating an Interesting Curriculum at the Middle School and High School Levels That Will Assure Engaged Students."

Also, see my website essays entitled **Matt Jones, Inspiring Students with an Invited Speaker** and **Teen, Senior Oral History Builds Writing and Uncommon Friends.**

How Can Teachers Cooperate More to Improve Their Teaching Skills? Learn From the National Writing Project!

As mentioned earlier in this book, many teachers operate in isolation which can negatively affect their mental health and self-esteem but, like their students, they can benefit from regular and on-going collaboration. Even though "professional development workshops" are held during the year to help teachers improve their practice, they are often too few, unconnected with one another and don't stress the need for systematic interaction and cooperation.

Teachers are not given time to process this information, to discuss it in an on-going way with colleagues, to implement what they have learned or to share their experiences with one another to improve their teaching skills.

These workshops are often presented in a top-down way where classroom teachers are passive recipients of educational research, policies, curriculum and practices from universities, corporations and boards of education. The expertise and experiences of the classroom teacher are not incorporated in this paradigm.

An organization that has successfully challenged this approach is the National Writing Project (NWP). It is a model of how a school's culture can change from everyone on their own to a collaborative one where teachers work together to help one another improve their teaching methods, as well as relationships with their students and each other.

Their core principles include the following:

→ "Writing can and should be taught, not just assigned, at every grade level. Professional development programs should provide opportunities for teachers to work together to understand the full spectrum of writing development across grades and across subject areas."

- "Effective professional development programs provide frequent and ongoing opportunities for teachers to write and to examine theory, research, and practice together systematically."
- "Teachers who are well informed and effective in their practice can be successful teachers of other teachers as well as partners in educational research, development, and implementation. Collectively, teacher-leaders are our greatest resource for educational reform." [7]

The effect of implementing such principles is highlighted on the NWP website in an article entitled *Transforming Writing: Teacher-Consultants Lead Change in Their Schools* by Linda Friedrich. She quotes a participant in one of their training programs:

"Hopefulness is a rare commodity in today's classrooms. I've learned that it's the conversations and the shared work that help teachers grow in their practice."

Ms. Friedrich summarizes the achievements of this organization with these words: "Encouraged by their involvement in the writing project to work collaboratively and go public with their successes, these teacher-consultants adopt a stance of being both leaders and learners. In their own schools, they work to recreate the sense of community and to establish opportunities for the kind of collaborative learning that they experience with the writing project."

To learn more about the NWP, you can find inspiring stories on their website of teachers who, through collaboration with one another, have been able to nurture creativity, build camaraderie and boost their confidence. The NWP offers retreats that last for long weekends or for weeks during the summer for teachers at all levels and subject areas.

Teachers do not have to be involved with the National Writing Project to begin to collaborate more. For example, you can suggest to one or more of your colleagues who are your friends and whom you trust that you take turns observing each other to improve teaching skills and classroom

management. Each teacher can ask that the observer(s) focus on one or more points such as to look at how you are dealing with a difficult student; to see if there are students you have overlooked during the lesson or who were not engaged and what you could have done differently; if they think you reached the goal of your lesson; to tell you the strengths of your lesson.

Your small group can provide moral, emotional and academic support that will make long term teaching and enjoyment of the profession more achievable, especially if you combine your classroom support with readings and resources you share with one another and at staff meetings. Your model of collaboration could spread as other teachers decide to work together more. (An added bonus: to cut down on the hiring of outside consultants, thus saving school funds.)

As you and your colleagues become closer, your concerns could expand to focus on school-wide problems such as standardized testing abuses, which many consider a nation-wide crisis. (Google "standardized testing protests" for more information.)

Teachers who have this kind of support will be less stressed, teach more effectively and be more able to develop positive connections with their students.

Endnotes

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2. Brody, Celeste et al, "The Past and Future of Cooperative Learning: Perspectives from Leaders in the IASCE," Panel Session at IASCE Conference, Singapore, June 2004; http://www.iasce.net/
3. Cohen, Elizabeth G., "Cooperative Learning and the Equitable Classroom in a Multicultural Society," Plenary Presentation for IASCE Conference, Manchester, England, June 2002; http://www.iasce.net/

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6. Interview with the author.
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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEED FOR A CURRICULUM ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

(Why?)

From the time they are very young, children are exposed to racist, sexist and other derogatory remarks and actions. They see or hear about injustices such as homelessness, unemployment, poverty, discrimination, drugs, and crime. These are social justice issues that pervade our society and cry out for discussion, solutions and action. A classroom that avoids these topics is a classroom divorced from the real world, and one that can be seen as increasingly irrelevant the older children get.

The history of the United States is one long drama of ordinary men and women, low income, racial and ethnic groups struggling for equality and respect, for a chance to live their lives with dignity and security. Native Peoples had and still have to fight heroic battles for the right to survive and to maintain their cultures against a policy of violent discrimination by local, state and federal governments. African-Americans suffered, revolted against and worked to end a most cruel form of slavery, Jim Crow laws enforcing segregation, and have continued to this day to struggle to end racist policies and practices. Other racial and ethnic groups and women, working class people, senior citizens, LGBTQ communities, and physically-challenged people tired of being marginalized and oppressed and lacking opportunity, have organized to improve their lot.

All of these people grappled with the questions "What is fair? What is unfair? What can be done about it?" – questions of intense interest to children and older youth. (Perhaps their relative powerlessness in relation to adults, and to the fact that they often feel oppressed by grown-ups, makes for their interest in these questions.)

With a few exceptions, the groups mentioned above are absent from social studies books, children's literature and the curriculum in general.

In addition, students are rarely given an appreciation of the absolutely fundamental contributions made by working class people, women, people of color and various ethnic groups, the poor and working people of America to the building of the United States. After a study of U.S. history, children usually erroneously conclude that the major contributors to the development of our country were a relatively few wealthy white males. The standard curriculum portrays a history of these men fighting wars and making bold individualistic decisions which determined the destiny of our country, not a history of ordinary people working hard every day, of poor and working people forming organizations to fight for justice and equality.

As a result, history and social studies usually turn children off. It is often dry, unemotional and boring. It does not provide much hope that ordinary people can cooperate to change their world for the better. It can lead to a sense of powerlessness, of relying on leaders to solve society's problems, not ourselves.

Our society is in crisis and our leaders have been generally ineffectual in solving the great problems we face. As children grow older, the future looks bleak and they can feel helpless to do anything about it.

However, this does not have to be. Teachers can provide students with a "people's history" of the U.S., let students hear the traditionally silenced voices of individuals who took risks, and most importantly, groups of people who worked together to create a socially just and equitable society.

Here are three books that embody this focus:

The People's History of the United States by Howard Zinn; there is also an abridged teacher's edition.

A Young People's History of the United States: Columbus to the War on Terror by Howard Zinn and Rebecca Stefoff

A Different Mirror for Young People: A History of Multicultural America by Ronald Takaki and Rebecca Stefoff

Studying the past and the present in this way can be disturbing, shocking, and challenging, but also exciting, thought-provoking and inspiring while providing hope. It can enable students to feel empathy for groups other than their own as well as pride in what their own group has accomplished. It will show that problems were solved in the past by ordinary people and can be solved now.

The process of teaching in this way means that the teacher will have to include in her class readings and discussions the reality that our history has been one steeped in conflict from the time Europeans set foot in the Americas. People had to unite together against those who held power over them and work for social, political and economic change because their lives were so difficult and sad. Issues of racism, sexism and other types of discrimination and injustice will inevitably arise as different views of historical events are read and discussed – as the voices, usually silenced in our history books, begin to speak.

However, many teachers feel reluctant to include such issues for fear that they will create arguments and conflicts in their classes. It is easier, they feel, to gloss over or avoid such topics so as to try to keep peace in their rooms.

I would argue the opposite: that including the discussion of controversial topics in the curriculum can, in the short and long run, lead to more excitement and interest in school, and more harmony and understanding among students. As they learn about injustices faced by various groups

and what actions people took to change their lives for the better; as they put themselves in others' shoes; and as they try to understand another point of view, they are less likely to be disruptive or mean to each other.

Crucial to such an achievement, however, is to have developed a classroom environment in which students genuinely listen to each other and respect each other's right to express opinions without being ridiculed. This is not at all an impossible goal. (See Chapter One, **Effective Communication** and my article **Every Classroom Needs a No Put-Down Rule** on my website).

Including social justice themes in the curriculum should not stop with reading, writing and discussion, but go even further to encourage students themselves to take on a project, and decide on an action to help change their world for the better. Taking action together can be exciting and provide a feeling of power and of purpose in life beyond one's own small circle. It enables their abundant energy to be funneled in positive directions.

The major problem in teaching this way is that most of us don't know the real history of our country. Much of what we learned was just a list of dates, wars and deeds of "great men," mostly white. We have to reeducate ourselves by finding books, films and other sources that can fill in the yawning gaps in our understanding of the past and present. We need to demand in-service courses and time off to decide with other teachers how to implement newly-discovered information and resources.

Fortunately, we do not have to begin from scratch. A growing number of teachers have been searching for more meaningful lessons and have been creating new curricula. They have been writing about their experiences which can serve as a guide for others who want to follow in the same direction.

See a suggested list of resources in the **Postscript.**

In this chapter, I will describe some lessons and role plays I and others have used with our students to develop respect for different cultures and

explore the historical questions "What is fair? What is unfair? Why? What was or can be done about it?"

Elementary Students Critiquing Books

Reviewing and critiquing books for stereotypes and omissions was a successful activity for my 3rd/4th and 4th/5th-grade classes in an East Harlem, N.Y. school. (I continued with most of the same children the second year.) We looked at a number of books that were related to what we were studying. After the children had some knowledge of the subject, we would look carefully at library books that I brought in to see if we could recommend them or not.

To explain what a book review was, I started with a simple picture book, *This is New York,* by Miroslav Sasek. Every one or two pages showed a different part of the city. I explained that to review this book, we would have to see if it accurately described New York City as we knew it, if it was interesting, if the illustrations included various races and if these races were portrayed in a variety of jobs. I told them that just because information was in a book did not make it right; that the author might have made mistakes, and that the reader had to read it carefully to decide whether or not to recommend it to anyone else.

Since our school was in Harlem, I began by turning to the one page labeled "Harlem," which was a drawing of a street scene. I held it up and said, "All of you are experts on Harlem because you live here. What do you think of the illustrations on this page?"

They looked carefully and found many mistakes: "There is almost no one on the stoops. Lots of people sit outside in the summer." "Only girls are playing in the street and all of them are jumping rope. Girls play other games and boys play in the street too." "The girls are only wearing dresses. We don't wear our best clothes when we play." "These girls

are not looking at each other and they all look alike." They found other mistakes, and they were angry.

I asked, "Why do you think the artist didn't draw an accurate picture of your neighborhood?" That was a hard one. Finally, someone said, "Maybe he doesn't live here."

The discussion continued as follows:

Teacher: Do you have to live in a neighborhood to draw it?

Child: No, but you should go and look and talk to people.

Teacher: Well, why do you think he didn't come up here and do that?"

No one could answer for awhile until one child said, "Maybe he didn't feel like it."

Teacher: If you are an artist, and your job is to draw New York City, is it your responsibility to have a clear picture of what a neighborhood looks like and how the people look before you draw it?"

Class: Yes!

I explained how a publishing house works – that an author and illustrator don't write and draw alone, but that there are editors and artists who look over your work and correct it before it is published.

Teacher: Why do you think that not one editor, artist or the publisher noticed that the section on Harlem was wrong?

Child: Well, maybe they just don't want to come up here, and maybe they are all white.

Teacher: Do you think a black artist would draw black people the way this artist did?

Class: No!

Teacher: Why not?

Child: Because he is black and he knows how black people look and where they live."

I told the class that they had made very good points and that as a matter of fact many publishing houses had very few black employees. I put the words "discrimination," "prejudice" and "racism" on the board. A few knew "prejudice," but no one knew the other words, so I defined them.

I explained that organizations were working to end this discrimination, so that publishing houses would have not only African-American writers and artists, but Asian, Native American and Hispanic. I congratulated the class on understanding that a person from a group would be more likely to know that group best, a concept many publishing houses did not appreciate. However, we discussed that if someone wanted to write about a group that wasn't theirs, they would have to do a lot of research and talk to a lot of people before they would be qualified. Even then, their work should be checked by someone who is from that group.

We analyzed the rest of the book and found other errors: The only working African-American was pushing a clothes rack in the garment district; Chinatown had only two children who were yellowish-green with slits for eyes. Everyone else throughout the book was obviously Caucasian, but the children were annoyed that even they were painted orange.

I asked, "Is there anything we can do about this book?" After a discussion, some children decided to write to the author pointing out the book's flaws. Here are some excerpts:

Dear Mr. Sasek,

Your rude in your book This is New York. I hate your book especially the page of Harlem because all girls are on the block and no boys. All the girls have the same hair style and none of them are looking at each other. All of them are wearing dress. Harlem is mad at this page. Chinatown has a lot of people but only two boys are in Chinatown in your book. You only show white people working and you don't show black people working.

Sincerely,

Stephan Taylor

Dear Mr. Sasek,

I looked at your book and I do not think it is fair because you put a lot of men working but not a lot of women. I live in Harlem and I go outside. I see a lot of women working but in your book there is not a lot of women but a lot of men. I do not like your book.

Sincerely
Your friend,

Nancy Lee Lauriano

Garrick Brown noted:

Look at page 21. It is nothing but girls on that street. Look at the road block. It says Play street closed. That is not the way the road block is in Harlem. There are no boys on the street.

P.S. Write back if you have time.

I sent a cover letter to the author and the editor at Collier Books urging them to respond since the children spent a lot of time writing them, but we never received an answer. I asked the children, "Why do you think we didn't hear from the author or the editor?" They had all kinds of ideas: "Maybe they were too busy." "Maybe they don't care what we think." "Maybe they do not like black and Puerto Rican people." They were disappointed.

I said, "I'm disappointed too. You worked hard writing your letters, correcting them, copying them over. It was obvious to anyone that you were serious. Even if the author and editor disagreed with you, the least they could have done was to write back, thanking you for your concern. Even though you didn't get an answer, you made them think about important things, and maybe in the future they will write and publish better books."

This whole experience was an important one for the class. It made them begin to think more critically about books they read and to see that their ideas are important, and they have a right to express them. They were amazed to discover that a book could be inaccurate and that they could find the errors.

One day, 4th-grader Kim found a reader with a collection of short stories in our class library. She came over to me and said, "There's no black people in this book." "What can you do about it?" I asked. She wrote the following letter to the children's textbook editor of D.C. Heath & Co.:

Dear Editor,

My name is Kim. I am reading the book Lost and Found. Why is it there are no black people in this book? I don't think it is right to have only white people and no black people in this book.

I am black and I think you should do your illustrations over.

Your friend,
Kim Thomas

It wasn't long before she got a reply:

Dear Kim,

We thank you very much for your letter of May 20 and for your comments about *Lost and Found*. You are right in saying that there are no black people in the book you are reading and that is very sad. You must remember, however, that "Lost and Found" is a very old book. In those days, many people were not as knowledgeable as they are now about all of the different peoples that make America such a fascinating place. I guess you would have to say that people's eyes are open wider now.

I am sending you one of our newer books. and I believe you will find that it includes all kinds of people. I hope you enjoy reading it. Thank you for writing to us.

Sincerely yours,

Brian K. Mclaughlin
Executive Editor
Language Arts

Kim showed the class her new book, and we all appreciated the fact that an editor had answered her letter. The children looked carefully at the illustrations and said that this was a better book. However, they did not think that there were enough black and brown faces.

I asked the class: "The editor says that in the past 'many people were not as knowledgeable as they are now about all of the different peoples that make America such a fascinating place.' Do you think this is a good reason not to put Black people in books?

Child: "No. Everybody should know that there are Black people."

This sentiment was echoed by a number of other children.

Toward the end of the year with the 4th/5th-grade class, I told them that when school was over, I was going to join a group on a three week trip to China. I asked them what they knew about Chinese people. It was very little and some of it stereotyped: "strange eyes," "talk funny," "have laundries and restaurants."

I developed a number of lessons to challenge their inaccurate perceptions, and one of them was to compare "The Five Chinese Brothers," written and illustrated by two people who were not Chinese, with children's books from China that were translated into English.

I told the class that "The Five Chinese Brothers" was the only book about Asians I could find in our school, and that this was the case in many other libraries as well.

The children enjoyed the fanciful story, but our discussion brought out that almost all the Chinese people looked alike (we compared that to the book about New York City in which all the Harlem girls looked alike), and that these Chinese were not normal. They had superhuman powers and were able to do weird, impossible things. "If this is the only book you ever read about Chinese, what might you think about them?" I asked. The main points to emerge from our discussion were that you could conclude

that they were not like us, they were very yellow, and their eyes were just slits.

We were lucky in that our assistant principal was Chinese. I invited him to talk to the class about China and to teach us how to write and pronounce some Chinese words. The class could see that he was not yellow and that his eyes were not slits. (We discussed how they simply had an extra fold of skin.) He helped the children realize that the Chinese language he spoke was not weird, just different. They enjoyed learning to form some Chinese characters and how to pronounce them. (Their assignment was to teach these to their families.)

I read to the children some books from China in which normal people were portrayed, each looking very different from one another. Even in one book, which was drawn in cartoon style, the people's features varied.

The children came to understand that just as it is important to have black people involved in creating books about Black people, the same is true for Chinese people and any other group.

(They wrote letters to Chinese children which I put in a binder. I added photos of our class in action. When my tour group visited an elementary school in China over the summer, I delivered the binder as a gift to the school. To my surprise, that very night there was a knock on my hotel door with another binder of letters from a class of children in the school we had visited! The following fall, I gathered the students together who had written letters and gave them copies of all of the replies. I showed them slides I had taken while there; they were impressed.)

Our greatest success came while we were learning about Native Americans. After studying about aspects of their lives, customs and their history in relation to European settlers, I asked the class to critique the book "The Cruise of Mr. Christopher Columbus." The children discovered an appalling succession of stereotypes and misinformation. "What should we do about this?" I asked once again.

They decided to write to the publisher, Scholastic Books, and to our amazement, the children's editor agreed with their criticisms and had decided not to include this book any more on its recommended list! What a victory! The children cheered! They all got a copy of the Scholastic Book response as a souvenir.

For further discussion of how this unit of study was developed, see on my website: **What One Teacher Has Done, Part II: Sensitizing Nine-Year-Olds to Native American Stereotypes.**

The DVD "Unlearning 'Indian' Stereotypes" is a good resource especially because it is narrated by Native American children. It can be found on-line.

Having students critique books is a wonderful way to help sensitize them to racist, sexist and other stereotypes, to discuss how harmful these are and that they, even as children, can take action to try to get authors and publishers to produce better books.

A valuable resource to help teachers critique books is the "Guide for Selecting Anti-Bias Children's Books," which you can find on the Internet.

Even very young children can critique books. A group of 5- and 6-year olds at the Wang Child Care Center in Chelmsford, Mass. looked at books on families. They discovered that one of the books did not have any Asian families in it, which was of particular concern to Asian children in the class. [1]

My classes not only wrote letters criticizing inaccurate books, but also wrote to authors of books they enjoyed.

Over a series of days, I read aloud to my 3/4th-grade class the book "Sidewalk Story" by Sharon Bell Mathis. It is a story of an African American child who was angry that her girlfriend and family were evicted from their next-door apartment. She then successfully took action to have them returned to their home.

The children loved the book. They wrote moving letters of appreciation to Ms. Mathis who in turn sent them a tape of herself commenting positively

on each child's letter and on the points they made! In addition, she included a beautiful photo of herself which we immediately hung up in a prominent place. We were overwhelmed.

I pointed out to the children how important it is to show our gratitude to anyone who helps make our lives better; that people feel happier when the good things they do are noticed.

Jackie took this message seriously. She wrote to John Steptoe about how much she enjoyed his book *Uptown*. Mr. Steptoe sent her a 4-page handwritten letter in response! It gave us all much food for thought and discussion.

Role Plays

It is hard for children to identify with events that happened long ago or other peoples' experiences that are different from their own. One way to remedy this is to include role plays as a regular part of your classroom curriculum. This enables children to put themselves back in time, to feel what an event might have been like; to put themselves in another's shoes. History and current events come alive with emotion and drama; excitement builds as children watch their classmates as actors and actresses.

In the role-plays I will describe below, children were not completely on their own. We discussed the story thoroughly, and then I suggested that it be acted out. I listed the characters on the board. I explained that whoever volunteered would have to put themselves in the characters' shoes and imagine what they would say as the plot unfolded. (Sometimes we acted it out a couple of times to give other children a chance to participate.)

Once the drama began, I would be right there to give a child a line to say if he or she were stumped, suggest where a person could stand, ask a pertinent question if something said didn't make sense. In other words, it was never a polished work, just a spontaneous exploration of a current or historical event. If the role-play got off track, I would stop it and ask the

class what the actors and/or actresses could do instead. These little dramas were never a failure. Children loved them. And they remembered what they learned.

In preparing for them, I anticipated children who would feel frustrated if they weren't chosen so I did one of the following: picked them to play certain characters, chose them to lead a class discussion when it was over, made an announcement that the skit would be done again, or explained that we would do different ones later so that all would have a chance to participate in some way.

Here is a description of a few role plays to show some of the possibilities for including this teaching technique in the curriculum.

Role-Playing Native Peoples' History, Past and Present

I once had a job as part of a cultural enrichment program. We invited cultural performers to various elementary schools, and my role was to develop lesson plans for teachers around every event and to teach one or two classes in each school in which the artists performed in order to prepare the classes beforehand and to do follow-up lessons.

The Thunderbird American Indian Dancers was one of the groups, so I had a chance to try out different approaches to helping children understand some of the histories and cultures of Native Americans. One successful technique was role-plays.

A first grade was frightened to hear that Native People were coming to their school. I had not planned on countering the "wild Indian" myth with 5- and 6-year olds, but I changed my plans when I saw how thoroughly they believed that the "Indians'" main occupation was scaring and killing people. Role-playing the cause of a conflict between early settlers and Native Peoples helped dispel this myth. See on my website: **What One Teacher Has Done, Part I: Role Play in the Classroom**.

I also tried to bring the subject of Native Peoples up-to-date. A lot of children thought all of them were dead, so I felt it was wrong to dwell on the past and ignore the present.

I brought in copies of *Akwesasne Notes,* a publication by the Mohawk Nation in upstate New York (now out of print). I showed them that Native Peoples were still around, many living in ways similar to ours, but also trying to maintain their cultures and to fight against discrimination.

In a fifth-grade class I read aloud a short article about a boy who wore his hair long as was his people' custom. The principal of his school called him to the office and told him he would have to cut his hair because its length didn't conform to school rules.

I asked, "What do you think? Should he have to cut his hair? Do you think the principal was right in what he asked? Why or why not?"

After a lively discussion in which most thought that the boy should be allowed to keep his hair long, I suggested we act out the confrontation between the principal and the boy. We discussed what were some possible comments each could make. There were many volunteers. Most wanted to be the boy, not the principal.

I picked Jimmy, the most disruptive boy, to play the Native American child. Another child, "the principal" sat in a chair in front of the room. There was a knock on the door; the "principal" said, "Come in," and in walked Jimmy in his new role.

He was terrific. He was an angry child anyway, and here was his chance to funnel this anger in a positive direction. He thought of many things to say defending his right to long hair. The "principal" droned on about rules and regulations and issued some threats. Jimmy stood his ground. (He got carried away at one point and said, "You will not turn me into a bald-headed kid!" much to the laughter and applause of his classmates.)

We did this role-play about 3 times, and each one was effective and thought-provoking. By the way, Jimmy's behavior began to improve

after his chance to perform. We had all acknowledged what a good job he had done; he felt recognized and appreciated, which is what he had been wanting all along.

In a 4th-grade class I read aloud excerpts from an article in *Akwesasne Notes* about how Native Peoples were criticizing the recently-released Tom Sawyer movie. The main objection to it was that only one Native person was portrayed, "Injun Joe," and he was the total personification of evil. He had absolutely no redeeming qualities. He was scary; he spoke pigeon English; he helped perpetuate the stereotype that Native Peoples are less than human—wild and crazy. Since we already had been studying about Native Peoples for awhile, it was possible to put this movie in historical perspective.

Native Peoples and their allies had decided to picket theaters showing this film. I described what a picket line and boycott were, and how it is one method to express your views about something you feel strongly about.

I asked what they thought of a movie like this: if it was fair to Native People; if they thought people should go to see it or not. I explained that it was based on a famous book by Mark Twain.

Most students thought it was a shame to have a movie like this one; that it might make people "hate" Native Peoples even more; that if they were a Native person, they would feel badly to see a movie that showed their people in such a negative light.

I suggested we role-play a picket line in front of a theater with the picketers confronting movie goers with reasons not to patronize the film. The movie-goers were to be of two types—those who become convinced and those who don't.

The picketers held up imaginary signs. (They had to decide what theirs said.) I was a reporter covering the event with my tape recorder. I asked questions of the picketers and the movie-goers for my TV newscast.

The children assumed their roles. Their dialogues included the following:

Picketer (to a prospective movie-goer): You shouldn't go to this movie. It makes fun of Native Americans.

Movie-goer: Well, I got my money, and I want to see this movie. (She buys a ticket and enters the "theater.")

Picketer #2: (to another child about to buy a ticket): Don't you know how important Native Americans are? This movie doesn't show how important they are. Why, if it wasn't for Native Americans, we wouldn't have fried chicken!

Movie-goer #2: Well, I didn't know that. I guess I'll go to another movie.

Previously we had discussed many of the foods that European settlers had learned about from Native Peoples. In our evaluation of the drama, I pointed out to the class that although we received many foods from Native Peoples, fried chicken wasn't one of them. They remembered some of the foods: corn, turkey, pumpkin, beans, squash and tomatoes. I congratulated the "picketer" on trying to educate the movie-goer to the fact that our diet is richer because of Native American foods.

The point about this role-play was not to convince the class to boycott the movie. It was to ask questions, to see this movie from the perspective of a Native person, to put oneself in someone else's shoes, to discuss what type of movie would be able to portray a fair account of lives of Native Peoples.

Generally there isn't enough questioning of historical or current events – seeing them from different perspectives. Hearing different voices throughout the curriculum, engaging in serious discussions and debates on opposing points of view in a democratic manner (each opinion is given respect, but anyone can agree or disagree with it) enables children to begin building a foundation for understanding the various problems we face today, and developing the ability to listen to often-silenced voices that are critical in the search for solutions.

Role-Playing in the Teaching of African-American History

Here is a detailed description of one role-play I helped a fifth grade create as part of a series of lessons on African-American history.

We were studying about Frederick Douglass. I showed the class his very thick autobiography written late in life, and I read excerpts from it. I gave them handouts to read of various statements he had made. The children were amazed that a former slave could have accomplished so much and then have written about it.

One scene in the book was especially dramatic. In it he describes how he entered a train and deliberately sat in the white car which was more comfortable than the one reserved for Black people. When told to leave, he refused. Police were called, and he was dragged out. He held on so firmly to his seat that it was pulled out with him!

We decided to act out this scene. Philip was the only white child in the class, all the rest were African-American, and he wanted to play the part of Frederick Douglass. Other children said he shouldn't because he was white. I pointed out that in a skit or play, an actor can qualify for any role.

I chose Philip to be the first child to play Frederick Douglass, one child to play conductor and two to play the police. The latter went out in the hall.

Philip entered the "white car." The conductor told him to get out. He refused. Philip was eloquent: "I have a right to be here. It's not fair for Black people to go to a separate car. I don't care what you do to me. I will never get up!"

The conductor called the police. The classroom door opened and in they came. They also ordered Philip to move. Once again, he refuses, and he and his chair are dragged out into the hall. The class applauded and cheered. In the discussion that followed the children agreed that Philip

played his part very well, as did the others. We role-played this scene again with different children, and it, too, was successful.

I was glad to have had a chance to help Philip become more comfortable in school. It is never easy to be the only child of a particular race in a class, and it was clear that Phillip had felt isolated and alienated. This skit helped him to become more accepted by the other children, and to begin to understand the discrimination African-American people have experienced.

There is always the danger that with the pressures of all that has to be covered in a year's time, teachers who have limited exposure to African-American history will feel satisfied to include only two or three African-American heroes in the course of the year, especially in February—Black History Month.

I used to feel that way. However, that leaves the impression that no one else is worth mentioning and that the two or three are superheroes whose achievements are above and beyond what the average person of any race could do. This can lead children to think that ordinary people are powerless to have any influence over what happens to them.

I believe children need to understand that throughout history there have always been many people and groups who have worked to make our society and the world more just and equitable. When they learn about African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians, women and European-Americans who stood up for a just cause, they will see that these individuals and groups were never totally alone or the exception; they will begin to understand that ordinary people have a long history of committing their lives to change their communities to ones that would bring more happiness to greater numbers of people.

In teaching the above-mentioned fifth-grade class about Frederick Douglass, I explained that many other African-Americans were involved in the fight against slavery; that he and Harriet Tubman were not the only ones. I told them that as a matter of fact, hundreds of free African-

Americans in the North held conventions to plan how to end slavery and the discrimination they faced as so-called "free people." I even read excerpts of resolutions carried at one of these conventions which I found in the classic book edited by Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Vol.1.*

I made sure to explain to the class that there were white people in the abolitionist movement who championed the end of slavery; that African slaves and their descendants did have some allies in the white community who spoke out and took the risk of being ostracized from their communities for taking a stand for justice.

However, it is very important that in our zeal to promote harmony between the races that we do not give European-Americans credit for things they did not do.

Herbert Kohl describes a visit he made to a fourth-grade class which was acting out the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. A boy playing Martin Luther King gave a speech in which he said that African-Americans and European-Americans would boycott the buses until everyone could sit where they wanted. One picket sign a child carried said "Blacks and Whites Together."

Mr. Kohl pointed out to the teacher that this was a serious misrepresentation of the facts; that whites were not involved in the boycott. It was a highly organized, disciplined movement run by African-Americans only. To portray it as otherwise is to take the power and credit away from the Black community.

The teacher agreed that the play wasn't faithful to the facts, but because he had an integrated class, he thought it was better to show the movement as integrated. To do otherwise "might lead to racial strife in the classroom."

Mr. Kohl strongly disagreed. He said, "by showing the power of organized African-Americans, it might lead all of the children to recognize and appreciate the strength oppressed people can show when confronting

their oppressors. In addition, the fact that European-Americans joined the struggle later on could lead to very interesting discussions about social change and struggles for justice." [2]

Mr. Kohl's point is a crucial one. We do our students a great disservice in our social studies lessons if we avoid or misrepresent facts that are essential for understanding the past and present because they make us uncomfortable, or we somehow perceive that they will "stir up" our students.

Students who don't know the truth about the past will become adults who have no real understanding of how to deal with the present or to prepare for the future of their communities. They will be doomed to repeat the mistakes of their forbears because they will have no real understanding of how their ancestors dealt with their problems, how they organized, what worked and what failed.

As a white teacher, having been taught the traditional, European and American history from a wealthy white male perspective, I was ill-prepared to teach anything else. Realizing this, I made an effort to study the histories of the students I taught – mainly African-American and Puerto Rican – so that I could create more meaningful and interesting lessons.

However, I now believe that the histories of people of color, women, labor, immigrants, as well as the fight against all forms of oppression, is knowledge all students should have regardless of their race. It will enable them to hear a conversation among different voices and help prepare them for the road ahead.

Social Justice Lessons at the Middle and High School Levels

There are many opportunities in grades 7 – 12 to bring in social justice issues past and present – to go beyond the standard, often dull school textbooks through use of DVDs, primary sources gathered on-line and

from books, talks by invited guests, and comparison of mass media coverage of an issue with alternative media.

A growing number of teacher organizations and publications are focused on kindling student interest in current events and history related to war, peace, race, health, politics, environmental and other issues as they relate to human relationships and decision-making at community, state and national levels. These topics can be addressed in a variety of ways in English, math, history/social studies, art, music, drama and other classes.

On-line resources are available that can help teachers make their courses more relevant to students' lives and interests; to develop their questioning and critical thinking skills; to open their minds to a variety of views; to encourage them to become involved citizens rather than bystanders, thereby helping to ensure a truly democratic society. For a list of some, see the Postscript at the end of this book.

Here are four of my essays about bringing justice issues into the high school classroom which you can find on my website:

- **High School Class Studies Homelessness and Poverty**
- **Matt Jones, Inspiring Students with an Invited Speaker**
- **Students and the Power to Change**
- **Social Studies Teacher Includes Various Points of View in Different Historical Periods**

Implementing a Curriculum on Social Justice for Very Young Children

Teachers who begin implementing a social justice curriculum may feel that it is inappropriate for very young children. However, there are teachers who strongly believe that it should be an essential part of their education, beginning in kindergarten and first grade.

Jaki Williams Florsheim was such a teacher in a New York City private school whose student body was mainly middle- and upper-income white children. Her overriding concern was for her kindergarten pupils to know and feel they could make a difference in the world. This was always a priority as she planned her lessons each week.

"It's a truism," she said, "that children form a lot of their values and cognition between ages three and five. So why not respond to what they observe and ask about? They can learn that they don't have to wait for grown-ups to tackle a problem. They can come to a decision and act too."[3]

A successful approach was to ask her kindergarteners what they would like to change in the world to make it a better place. She listed all of their ideas. Then they chose one at a time to explore. Ms. Florsheim's question is always, "What would you like to do about this problem?"

One year it was getting rid of drugs. There were two main suggestions on what they could do about it. "Let's have a parade outside the school and carry signs." and "Let's make signs and put them up around our school for the big kids and grown-ups to see." They decided on the latter, and when this task was completed, they felt pleased that they had played a part in trying to stem the tide of drugs in their city.

Later they wanted to deal with the homeless situation. A speaker from Partnership for the Homeless visited their class to answer their questions. Teenagers who had done service in shelters and soup kitchens shared their experiences. The children decided to cook rice and beans in their classroom each week to donate to a local soup kitchen. This, of course, combined reading and math with social action. One child dictated a letter to the mayor:

Dear Mayor Dinkins,

Did you know there are a lot of homeless people in this city? People go to bed hungry at night, and some people are dying.

This is a dead person. [He drew a picture of a man on the ground.] You should give everybody a bank card, so they won't be poor any more.

Love,
Dan

One year, Ms. Williams Florsheim decided to connect the slavery period with the Montgomery bus boycott. For two weeks she read to her pupils from a book about Harriet Tubman. They discussed the evils of slavery and the efforts of abolitionists, Black and white, to end it through such means as the underground railroad.

She explained that even when slavery ended, there was segregation. To illustrate segregation, Ms. Williams decided to dramatize the Montgomery Bus Boycott – an idea she got from *Young Children* magazine, a publication of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. She told the story of Rosa Parks up to the point she was arrested. She then set up chairs like a bus. Children got to choose tags which told who they were: Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, bus driver, police officer, white person, African American. (One child cheered when his tag said "white person." Later Ms. Williams brought this up with the class, "Why do you think Billy cheered?")

After "Rosa Parks" was arrested, she got one phone call which she made to the Montgomery Improvement Association (M.I.A.)

Later in the day, the children held "a meeting of the M.I.A." Ms. Florsheim explained that they would have to decide what to do about the segregated buses. Since "Martin Luther King" didn't know what to say to open the

meeting, Ms. Williams prompted him, "Say, 'Brothers and Sisters, the buses are unfair. We want this to change. What should we do?'"

Child #l: "Let's get a gun and shoot those white people."

Ms. W.: "I know you are angry, but this is a non-violent movement. Besides the other side has more guns."

Child #2: "Let's go to the police and say, "Please let us sit where we want."

Child #3: "Let's ride in our cars."

Ms. W.: "What about people with no cars?"

Ms. Florsheim taught this lesson and skit for three years, and each year was different. One time a child thought of not riding the buses. Other times Ms. Florsheim had to suggest it. She explained, "People walked miles and miles and those with cars gave others rides. The bus company lost money, and finally, after a year, the laws were changed and people could ride anywhere."

Each year, upon hearing this victory, her students spontaneously yelled "Yea!!" and jumped up and down. Ms. Florsheim would get out her guitar and sing "If You Miss Me From the Back of the Bus," a freedom song from the Civil Rights Movement, and children quickly caught on and enthusiastically joined in.

Some made a deeper connection: "Martin Luther King wanted people to be free just like Moses and Harriet Tubman did."

The next day she would go further with another idea from *Young Children* magazine. She wanted children to experience discrimination first hand. She gathered them together and said, "Today we are going to do things differently. I made new signs for our activity areas. This one says 'No Buttons'," and her assistant teacher hangs it up. She then reads other signs: "No tie shoes" and "No collared shirts." These too are displayed. (Since most children couldn't read, she put symbols next to each sign.)

As each sign went up, the children's faces got longer and longer. "Now go play," says Ms. Williams, "but pay attention to the signs."

The children, perplexed, began to try to figure out where they could play. This is what happened one year. They began saying, "This is not fair." A girl became so upset she said, "I'm telling," and she dictated a letter of protest to the school's headmaster. Another child started crying, "I'm not going to do anything today." Other children spent time comforting one another and helping each other find some activity they would qualify for.

After 20 minutes, Ms. Williams called a class meeting. Children discussed how they were feeling. Ms. Williams pointed out that Amy had refused to play at all. "Wasn't that like the Montgomery Bus Boycott? Didn't African-Americans refuse to ride the buses which were unfair?" Amy, who had by now stopped crying, now smiled as she realized that she had had her own boycott.

Some children didn't understand why the signs had been put up, but others did such as the child who said, "Those signs you put up were like the Martin Luther King signs." Another continued, "They were like the ones that said Black people couldn't drink at the water fountain." Then these two children began to explain to the others what had happened, with added comments by their teacher.

Children told their parents about this experience, and reactions were positive. As a mother said, "My daughter was angry, but it helped her to understand what it feels like to be discriminated against."

During class discussions of these experiences, several white children protested that they would never be like the white people in Montgomery. That led Ms. Florsheim to find books to read on white allies. She read *Follow the Drinking Gourd* to remind them that whites had helped on the underground railroad. She read *Teammates* which told how Pee Wee Reese openly befriended Jackie Robinson when he was enduring racial epithets and other hostilities from baseball players and crowds.

Ms. Florsheim found that even very young children are affected by the news they hear on radio and TV, and she kept an ear open for the "teachable" moment. When she overheard children's conversations or a child asked her a question on a current events topic, she immediately began to think how to address the issues they were concerned about in a way that they could comprehend.

Her school was in session the day the verdict in the Rodney King case was to be reached. (This was the trial of white police officers accused of brutally beating a Black motorist, Rodney King.) Some parents, fearing a riot might break out on nearby Brooklyn streets if the police officers were found innocent, took their children home early.

Her students did not understand and asked why. She explained what had happened, and they were very upset that police would injure someone. She encouraged them to tell how they felt: "I'm so mad." "I wish I had a gun. I'd shoot them." "I feel sad that happened to one of my people," said one of two African-American children.

The class talked about their feelings for a long time. Ms. Florsheim told them, "I am upset too, and there are a lot of other grownups who feel as I do. People are looking into what happened to see if anyone else should be punished and to try to see that such a bad thing doesn't happen again."

She invited a member of the local police department to class, and he agreed to stress that police officers are not supposed to use their guns indiscriminately or beat people up. One boy asked, "Do police officers ever get put in jail?" "Yes," was the reply.

It was therapeutic for the children to air freely their fears and concerns over the course of a few days, and to know that there are caring adults, including police, who are against violence and others who were working to see that justice was done in the Rodney King case.

The issue of war and peace also was a part of Jaki Florsheim's kindergarten curriculum. She, like many other teachers, was influenced by the book

Creative Conflict Resolution by William Kreidler. Through a number of its lessons and class activities, her students learned alternatives to fighting: to talk things over when problems arise and to respect each other.

When the war in the Persian Gulf broke out on January 15, 199l, her students brought it up in class. They were puzzled and distressed by it. Some of them were worried that bombs would start falling in their neighborhood. They couldn't understand why they were told to use words instead of fighting, but the president of the United States, George Bush, and Sadaam Hussein didn't.

"What do you want to do about this?" she asked. They decided to write to President Bush asking him why he didn't stop the war and talk to Mr. Hussein instead. They dictated what they wanted to say, and Ms. Florsheim wrote it on a large piece of chart paper. Later she copied it, and mailed it to the White House. They received a reply with photos of Mr. and Mrs. Bush which stated something to the effect that the children may not understand the importance of this war, but it was very important for the security or our country.

Some children said, "He didn't answer our questions." "I noticed that," said their teacher. A few students decided to dictate another letter to him. They received a similar answer this time, but the photo was different: it was his dog. Children wondered why he had sent this photo and still hadn't answered their questions, but they weren't upset. One child was philosophical, "I guess he must like this war."

Since social action was an intrinsic part of their curriculum, students came to understand that you don't always get results, but you do your best, and then you are proud of yourself for trying. Ms. Florsheim says, "Kids are more realistic than we realize. They can understand that things move slowly and that there is a lot of injustice. They never get tired of writing. It's a way for them to try to change their environment. Parents and teachers always advise children to tell them if someone is touching them inappropriately, or being mean to them, so it's not surprising for

them to want to 'tell' the President or some other person they perceive as powerful if they think something is wrong."

During this war one child received a letter from his uncle who was a soldier stationed in the Persian Gulf and shared it with the class. It described how difficult the conditions were, how tired, hot and thirsty he was a lot of the time. The child was proud of his uncle and passed around his picture. Ms. Williams was glad that the boy felt comfortable enough to do this, thus bringing a different perspective to the discussion.

John, another student, said, "My parents like this war because the Iraqis are bombing Israel, and we're Jewish." Ms. Florsheim thanked him for sharing that information with the class. Although most of the children had thought it was wrong to fight, they were open and interested since they learned early in the year that people do disagree, and that's O.K. as long as you respect each other's right to an opinion that may be different from your own.

(Earlier one child had said, "I hate President Bush."

Ms. F.: Tell us more.

Child: He's taking money from poor people.

Ms. F.: Is he robbing people?

Child: No, he's spending money for war instead of helping them.

Ms. F.: Where did you hear this?

Child: My mommy told me.

These remarks were simply part of their discussion, an open floor where children know they can speak freely, knowing they will be listened to and their ideas considered.)

Later John's mother came to class upset about the letter to the president. "You and I don't agree on this war," she said. Ms. Florsheim pointed out that "We may disagree on an adult level, but I think we can agree on the importance of encouraging children to question. The letter was

a questioning one generated by the children, and they have the right to answers."

The mother said, "Well, thank you. I see what you mean, but this is a very emotional issue. My son may have different comments than some of the others." "That's O.K." assured his teacher.

Another parent did not like the fact that her daughter signed the letter. "If my daughter ever wants to sign another letter, I want to see it first." Ms. Williams' answer was similar to the one she had given to the other parent, assuring her that "I take what you are saying seriously." In this way, Ms. Williams did not alienate the parent and kept the channels of communication open.

Believing that this war should be discussed school-wide, Ms. Williams displayed the original dictated letter in the school lobby for all to see – teachers, parents and students. It generated a lot of discussion. Some older students disagreed because they had heard support for the war at home. When one fourth grader said to her, "I don't like your class letter," she encouraged the boy to write to the president and gave him his address.

It was a bold move for Ms. Florsheim to put the letter in the school lobby. Although there was a lot of objection in Congress and around the country to U.S. involvement in a Middle East war, after it began, and every evening's news featured U.S. planes dropping bombs all over Iraq, most of Congress and the country supported it.

However, Ms. Florsheim is also a peace activist, and knowing that a hallmark of any democracy is the right to dissent, she felt that her children's feelings against fighting should be honored and action taken. Writing a letter together to the president made her pupils feel less helpless and taught them that it is good to take a stand, to act on what you believe.

Another year her class wrote to President Clinton in favor of gun control. He answered with a letter describing what he was doing and asked them to keep on working for change. Children felt encouraged, especially when

the Brady (Gun Control) Bill became law. They believed they had helped get it passed.

Ms. Florsheim kept the parents of her students up-to-date on what the class was studying through a bi-weekly letter. At the beginning of the year she explained that her philosophy of education includes teaching children social responsibility, and that in the course of the year, the class might have discussions and take action that parents may question. If this happens, she encouraged them to contact her. "I listened to parents," she says, "explained that I help children answer their questions in the same way that parents do, told them that I took their concerns seriously and that we would continue to talk."

In addition to constant communication with parents, Ms. Florsheim was chair of a "Diversity Committee" at her school in which teachers strategized on how to deal with controversial issues in the classroom. This committee decided that listing children's questions about an issue on chart paper is an effective approach. (Teachers could add theirs too.) Then children picked a question to research. This was done in a variety of ways: inviting a speaker, looking in books, making phone calls to people who may know the answers, going on a trip or a neighborhood walk. In this way the teacher is not imposing her or his political stance, doesn't have to know everything, and pupils will be taking responsibility for finding answers to questions that really interest them.

If they found different answers to their questions, they learned that issues can be complex and there are not always clear-cut answers.

At Diversity Committee meetings, Jaki Florsheim explained, "Teachers would try out different ways to discuss these issues and report on class discussions. They might come with questions on how to deal with a specific topic or report difficulties, even 'flops'.

"We began to develop a sense of pride in having tried, having taken a risk to tackle a difficult issue. Naturally it was extremely important to have the support of administrators and parents. The result is that children felt

empowered by having worked through and learned from the lessons we created." *

If, like students in Jaki Florsheim's school, ours are given practice in listening to and discussing various points of view on historical events, and in the case of current issues of the day, reaching conclusions and sometimes taking action, there will be hope that future generations will have more success in solving our many social problems than we have had.

* Another early childhood teacher, **Paula Rogovin,** has written books on how she has successfully introduced her students to societal issues: *The Research Workshop: Bringing the World into Your Classroom* (Heinemann 2001), and *Classroom Interviews: A World of Learning* (Heinemann, 1998).

Endnotes

1. Campbell, Patricia, "Helping Young Readers Become Book Critics: Here's How," *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin,* Vol. 14, Number 15, 1983.
2. Kohl, Herbert, "The Story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott Revisited," *Should We Burn Babar? Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories,* The New Press, N.Y., 1995, pp.30-33.
3. Interview with the author.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SAVING THE ENVIRONMENT AND THE CLIMATE

(Should this be included in every subject?)

During the week of March 15, 2019, at least 1.6 million students on all 7 continents in more than 125 countries and in over 2,000 places walked out of their classrooms to demand that world leaders take action on the climate crisis. They were inspired by the Swedish high school student, Greta Thunberg, who had begun skipping school on Fridays in the previous year when she was 15 and instead sat outside the Swedish Parliament. She was pointing out that the world is facing an ecological crisis that could make much of the planet uninhabitable for her and future generations.

Striking students have formed an organization called **Fridays For Future** to keep up the pressure on politicians and world leaders.

In recent years, I have become convinced that teachers need to be thinking seriously about how to include environmental education in all subject areas, so I was inspired by this dramatic action by students and their organizing a **FridaysForFuture** movement.

Research by earth scientists and environmental organizations is revealing the increasing degradation of our planet: depletion of fish in the oceans, growing numbers of wildlife threatened with extinction, shrinking open spaces for recreation, pollution of air, water and land, and global warming/climate change. We are living in a more and more compromised

environment where political, economic and social changes will be necessary to ensure the survival of humanity and other living things.

Teachers are in a key position to take part in this world-wide effort and to help guide their students in becoming stewards of their community, state and national environments as well as in the wider world.

Educators have been trying to address these problems, but according to David Sobel, in his short, eye-opening book, *Beyond Ecophobia, Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education,* these efforts have contributed to what he calls ecophobia – a fear of ecological problems and the natural world.

"If we fill our classrooms with examples of environmental abuse, we may be engendering a subtle form of dissociation. In response to physical and sexual abuse, children learn distancing techniques, ways to cut themselves off from the pain…My fear is that our environmentally correct curriculum will end up distancing children from, rather than connecting them with, the natural world. The natural world is being abused and they just don't want to have to deal with it." [1]

He proposes another approach: "No tragedies before 4th grade. Tragedies are big, complex problems beyond the geographical and conceptual scope of young children. Rainforest destruction is an environmental tragedy. The Valdez oil spill and the genocide against Muslims in the Bosnian war are tragedies. As subjects for curriculum, these topics should not be considered before 4th grade, and in most cases, well beyond that. The defining question should be: 'When do children have the emotional and cognitive readiness for dealing with overwhelmingly sad and complex issues?'" [2]

Instead of focusing on the negative at the elementary school level, Sobel and other environmental educators encourage what they call "place-based education" where you study the environment in the school neighborhood to connect with nearby nature and develop a love for it. They decry the fact that children often learn about flora and fauna in far-flung places,

i.e., redwood trees, rain forests, endangered species such as lions, tigers, elephants and whales, while they learn almost nothing about insects, animals, plants, trees and aquatic life in their own community.

Children and adults who are alienated from the natural world will not notice or care when it is threatened. "To protect anything, you first have to love it. To love anything, you first must get to *know it."* [3] The goal should be to implement curricula that get students out of the classroom and into the outdoors, and to choose experiences that will engender awe, wonder and respect for the land, plants and all living things as well as a dedication to preserve them.

An essential book for all parents and educators is *The Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* by Richard Louv. In this pioneering work, he describes "nature deficit disorder" as "the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses. The disorder can be detected in individuals, families and communities. Nature deficit can even change human behavior in cities, which could ultimately affect their design, since long-standing studies show a relationship between the absence or inaccessibility of parks and open space with high crime rates, depression and other maladies." [4]

However, the book emphasizes that this deficit can be reversed as we "become more aware of how blessed our children can be – biologically, cognitively and spiritually – through positive physical connection with nature." [5] It provides information for teachers at the K – 12 levels on how a connection with nature can calm down hyperactive children, improve behavior, school attendance and students' ability to think, thus improving their academics and test scores. There are many suggestions for parents and teachers on how to provide opportunities for the natural world to become part of a child's life, whether they are in rural, suburban or city communities.

What Teachers Can Do: Some Examples

Teachers are taking their classes to public parks and community gardens. Schools are getting community support to help convert rubble-strewn lots into gardens and open green spaces for recreation. Drab land around schools is being planted with native plants and trees that will attract native insects, birds and other wildlife. Teachers and students are designing and building raised beds on school property to grow organic vegetables that are used in school lunches.

At the most basic level, teachers and students in a city environment can walk around the block and find trees and plants to monitor during the year, i.e., changes that happen during the seasons, and insects and birds that live on them. There are even teachers and students who identify plants growing through cracks in the sidewalk, and marvel at their amazing ability to survive in such difficult circumstances.

A kindergarten teacher in Newark, New Jersey, whose school is surrounded by concrete, takes her class to a nearby park where they "adopted" a tree. They visit it regularly during the year to note any seasonal changes and any insects on the bark or birds in its branches. They search nearby ground for signs of life. Her students come to love their tree and its environment, and they look forward to their visits to the park to check on it.

Excellent examples of what can be done to develop curricula related to environmental education at the K – 12 levels can be found by subscribing to the *Green Teacher* magazine and purchasing books they have published that are relevant to your grade level and subject area It is amazing what projects teachers and students have undertaken in cities and towns across the U.S. and Canada and what they have accomplished.

Approaching the Subject of Global Warming/ Climate Disruption

You have seen the gloomy reports of human-caused global warming due to our dependence on fossil fuels as our energy sources – oil, coal and gas – which has been leading to severe climate emergencies including wide-spread droughts, flooding, huge wildfires, stronger hurricanes and tornadoes. This has been documented by organizations such as the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The latter includes 2,500 scientists, including many of the world's top climate experts from 192 countries.

As people leave their homes in areas that are no longer livable – in our country, for example, think of devastating Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Maria, hugely destructive tornadoes and our drying and burning west and southwest which are getting less and less rain – teachers will be finding climate refugees in their classrooms while they, themselves, may be a climate victim too. The emotional trauma of such experiences call for strategies to help ourselves and our students, including how to deal with anxiety, anger and depression, all of which will make teaching more difficult. (Luckily, there are organizations that can help provide guidance on how to go forward, such as the **National Child Traumatic Stress Network** Its home page states that "One out of every four children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior." This is a shocking number that is likely to continue or get worse.)

The subject of global warming, climate change and extreme weather events is scary. Children can be made to feel that their future is insecure and full of danger. Therefore, teachers who do the important work of including environmental education in their curriculum have to be careful not only to present the problems but also the solutions in order to give their students hope.

Teaching about how to preserve a livable planet presents a huge challenge because of misinformation circulated by the fossil fuel industry, which seeks to maintain its massive taxpayer subsidies and huge profits. It has funded a small number of research scientists to "prove" that climate change is a natural process that the earth periodically goes through and which has nothing to do with the exploration, extraction, transportation and burning of oil, coal and gas.

This propaganda has influenced some school districts to require science teachers to give equal time in the curriculum to the climate change deniers or to avoid the topic altogether.

The National Center for Science Education is counteracting this trend by focusing on the science that proves human activity, in its dependence on fossil fuels, is driving a dangerous spike in greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide and methane, that is negatively affecting the climate. Its website provides documentation of human-induced climate change, and lesson plans that include solutions to our fossil fuel addiction through massive funding for clean, renewable energy research and development of solar, wind, geothermal, tidal energy and other clean energy sources.

More Activities and Actions for You and Your Class

(These are adapted from the Teacher's Guide that I created with input from other educators to accompany the 26 minute DVD – *Unlimited: Renewable Energy in the 21st Century* produced by Daniel Califf-Glick. This movie has great potential to awaken older elementary through high school students to the need for a clean energy revolution. It features well-informed 6th-grade students in an environmental club as well as adults who are passionate about stopping and reversing global warming. Google the title. It can be watched on YouTube or purchased. The Guide gives specific ideas on how to use *Unlimited* in classes but also includes

activities and actions, most of which can be done whether students see the movie or not.)

1. **Form groups to find out more about solar, wind, tidal, geothermal and biofuels.**

   Refer them to websites listed under resources. Give them an outline of what to look for, i.e.:

   Describe this form of energy and how it is produced.

   What are the pros and cons of this energy source?

   Where is it being used in the U.S. or other parts of the world?

   What is needed to develop more of this type of clean energy?

   Note: Nuclear power was not mentioned in this movie. Is it a renewable resource? Is it clean? What are the pros and cons? Information supporting nuclear power is on the federal government's **Nuclear Regulatory Commission** website.

   Opposing arguments can be found at the websites of **Beyond Nuclear** and the **Nuclear Information and Resource Service.**

   Students can report their findings to their classmates in varied ways: an oral report; a public service announcement; a poster; a song and/or interpretive dance. (**Note:** Prior to their presentation, check their work for accuracy.) Consider sharing this research with other classes – one class at a time or at a school assembly.

   After oral presentations, have students take a paper and pencil test (multiple choice, short answer, fill in the blank, matching and/or a short essay, i.e., describing 2 or more things they have learned from this study and at least one question they have). Assessment based on their answers will determine whether to revisit information/concepts.

2. **Investigate how your school can become more energy-efficient.**

   For example, are lights left on, fans and air conditioners running when no one is around? Is there poor insulation? Your class can write a

collaborative report and give a copy to the principal, the Board of Education and the town government detailing the problems and suggesting solutions. In addition, you can explore the possibilities of getting an energy audit for your school. An energy audit is when an energy expert comes in, examines the school and makes recommendations on how to be more energy efficient. You can contact your local or state government to find local energy auditors.

The Center for Green Schools has information and services that go beyond energy efficiency. Their website shows how schools can be remodeled or newly constructed with environmentally friendly materials and with clean air and sunlight, free of toxic materials and harmful chemicals; how energy efficiency can lower utility costs and how such schools can conserve resources, reduce waste, improve student health and learning, and show students "from an early age the importance and benefits of acting as responsible stewards of their communities and the larger world."

3. **Invite a volunteer from an environmental organization fighting climate change to speak to your students.**

   (See Additional Resources page toward the end of this chapter for a partial list of national organizations that may have local branches.) Find out about a particular cause they are advocating and decide if you and your students should support it.

4. **See renewable energy in action.**

   Visit a home or office building with solar panels, a wind farm, a geothermal operation, an effort to capture the energy of the tides or another form of clean energy production. Have an expert explain how these alternative energies work.

   To find out places to visit near your school, contact your town council, state assembly and senate representatives, state Department of Environmental Protection, the Chamber of Commerce, and/or a local environmental organization.

5. **Implement a recycling program in your school with children in the leadership.**

   (A difficult fifth-grade class that was seen as a problem became positively transformed when the children were given the responsibility for collecting recyclables in their school.)

6. **Learn about the exciting efforts to create millions of green jobs:** The website of Green for All can inspire students to see that unemployed people including parents and relatives can be retrained for these new jobs, and high school and college students can consider them for a career choice.

7. **Learn about mountain top removal.**

   Visit the website of **I Love Mountains** to find out about this controversial practice in W. Virginia., Kentucky and Tennessee and the efforts of this organization to stop it. The tops of 500 square miles of mountains have been blown up looking for coal – causing grave environmental damage, destruction of 1,000 miles of streams, and pollution of the air and water. Correspond with this organization to find out how you and your class can support their efforts to stop this.

8. **Start an anti-idling campaign.**

   The air outside of many schools is severely polluted at the beginning and end of the school day by cars and buses delivering and picking up children. Pollutants include carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and soot that can lodge in the lungs. A growing number of states and towns have passed anti-idling ordinances, stating that motors can only run briefly after stopping – from 10 seconds to 3 minutes.

   There are students from the elementary school level through high school who have mobilized in different towns and cities on their own, even with no law in place, to convince parents, care-givers and bus

drivers to turn off their engines rather than keep them running while talking to others or waiting for children to exit the building.

You can find anti-idling resources and how to organize by going to: https://www.stopthesoot.org/ Although this site focuses on NJ, it has relevant resources for any state or local campaign.

You can also go to the website of the **Sustainable Jersey, Anti-Idling Education and Enforcement Program** which mentions students in the Switlik Elementary School in Jackson, NJ in their successful effort to get their town council to enforce the NJ anti-idling law. A description of this success is under the heading "What N.J. Schools Are Doing."

9. **Write to local newspapers.**

   Encourage your students to write letters to the editor of the local newspaper(s) discussing the need for people to take global warming and/or other environmental problems seriously and describing actions they can take. Most local papers print all letters to the editors and would be particularly interested in the views of children. (If you send letters and none of them are printed, call up the editor or visit the newspaper. Explain that the paper should be helping your students to become active citizens by printing their letters, which will encourage them to continue to be involved. This type of advocacy often works.)

10. **Get active!**

    If you hear of a conference, rally or public meeting for an important environmental issue, consider inviting your students, their families, other teachers and students to attend with you.

11. **Investigate electricity:**

    Find out how it was discovered, what it is in general, what it is at the electronic level; why it can travel through wires; how it is converted to work radio, TV and other media; the varied ways it is produced; why some forms of production are cheaper at certain points in time than others and why some forms of energy are safer and cleaner. You can

also find out what energy sources are used in your state and country, as well as other countries, to compare.

Helping to demystify electricity can stimulate wonder and awe, scientific thinking, and curiosity about how other things work in our modern society.

12. Investigate public policy:

Find out if your local and state governments have passed a clean energy bill. If you have one, see what its main features are. Since these bills are often long and complicated, contact an environmental organization which will have this information summarized. You can also contact your state representatives and ask their office staff to investigate the bill for you.

Once you learn about the bill, it is important to find out if it has been implemented or not. If it hasn't, or only to a limited extent, your class can write letters to elected representatives and to heads of government agencies urging them to activate this bill and to vote for financing, pointing out particular sections of concern. Without public pressure, even good bills are often only partially enforced or not at all.

If your state does not have a clean energy bill that addresses climate change, read a summary of a bill from another state. Have your students write letters to their state representatives asking them to sponsor such a bill. They can state what they want included in the bill such as subsidies for the installation of solar panels, particularly on school roofs. (The school district of Bayonne, NJ, for example, has no electric bills because they have solar panels on the roofs of their schools and therefore produce their own energy.)

Find out the main contents of the latest federal energy bill. See if it has mandates for local and state governments. Your class can write to their U.S. Senators and Congressional representatives with questions, requests and comments.

You can set up an appointment for you and your students to visit the offices of politicians and/or heads of environmental agencies to make the case for a bill or for strengthening an already existing one to fight climate change.

This activity can accomplish some important goals including: teaching the concept of an active citizenry, taking a stand to help save the earth for future generations, and learning about how a bill becomes law. The latter is especially important since few students and many adults are not clear on how laws are passed and the role of citizens in making our leaders accountable.

A final point: the need for public policies to move away from polluting fossil fuels and toward clean, renewable energy is crucial to avoiding catastrophic climate breakdown. Actions such as recycling and changing light bulbs to more efficient ones are important, but do not get to the root of the problem.

13. Discuss global consequences of unabated fossil fuel use:

Initiate a conversation about the potential for wars and conflict over the limited amounts of fossil fuels that exist under the ground. Your class can discuss this with questions such as:

If every country continues to use fossil fuels as we do today, and demand continues to grow worldwide, what will happen when they start to run out?

Many people say that wars have been fought for oil already. Can you think of any examples? Are their claims valid?

Do you think we could avoid wars fought over limited resources? How?

Additional Resources

I. Ten inspiring, detailed teacher/school stories related to environmental education can be found on my website. Here are the titles:

An Education Worth Quoting by **Michael Chodroff.** (A fifth-grade teacher's hobby of collecting proverbs helps him create a positive classroom community, culminating in an amazing 50 day environmental project.)

The next essays on my website are a result of my interviews with teachers and environmentalists:

- **Detroit Teenagers Transformed by Nature**
- **Educators Partnering with Non-Profit Organizations to Help Develop Environmental Literacy**
- **Greater Newark Conservancy and School Gardening, Newark, New Jersey**
- **High School Biology Classes Restore an Eco-System's Shoreline**
- **High School Outdoor Club's Four Day Trip to Yosemite National Park**
- **High School Students' Farm Visit**
- **High School Teacher's Surfing Hobby Translates into an Anti-Pollution Project**
- **Vocational Teacher's Dream of a Green Energy Academy Comes to Life**
- **Willow School – A Model of Ecological, Educational and Social Excellence**

II. A Sampling of Websites:

A. General Up-to-Date Information on global warming, renewable energy and related topics:

- **350.org**
- **Grist:** (Invested with a sense of humor.)
- **Alternative Energy News**
- **Friends of the Earth**
- **Chesapeake Climate Action Network**
- **Greenpeace**
- **Friends Committee on National Legislation**
- **Union of Concerned Scientists**
- **Beyond Extreme Energy**

B. Environmental Education Related to Schools:

1. Rethinking Schools

A People's Curriculum for the Earth edited by Bill Bigelow and Tim Swinehart, Rethinking Schools Publication, 2014, 410 pages. Provides a wealth of background information and creative environmental lesson ideas for K- 12 teachers that include history of climate change and other issues, role plays, projects, and successful classroom stories with activities that are engaging and do not invite despair; instead they encourage students to question, empathize and take collective action to help resolve environmental problems they care about.

2. Sierra Club

Environmental outings described around the country; search "Environmental Education" and you will find many web links for teachers including "Tomorrow's Planet, A newsletter for kids who want to make our world a better place." You can read back copies and subscribe.

3. **Facing the Future**

   Curriculum units for middle school and high school on climate change, sustainability and other topics.

4. **Sunrise Movement**

   High school and college students taking action for a clean energy future.

5. **Birdsleuth.org**

   A project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Birdsleuth K-12 creates innovative resources that build science skills while inspiring young people to connect to local habitats, explore biodiversity, and engage in citizen-science projects.

6. **National Wildlife Federation**

   Resources that include lesson plans, webinars to educate students about wildlife, biology, life sciences, conservation and to investigate climate change.

7. **Edible Schoolyard**

   Information/publications on turning part of a schoolyard into a vegetable garden, teaching the importance of growing local, organic foods. Includes lesson plans.

8. **Children and Nature Network**

   Building a grassroots movement across the country and the world to reconnect children and nature. Website provides extensive research on the value of the natural world to our physical, mental and emotional health as well as actions parents and teachers can take to participate in this movement; the DVD, "Mother Nature's Child, Growing Outdoors in the Media Age" is a valuable resource.

9. **No Child Left Inside** (Healthy Parks Healthy People Central):

   This coalition of over 2000 groups, representing 50 million Americans, is seeking to amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to

ensure all children achieve 'environmental literacy'. The bipartisan No Child Left InsideAct, H.R.882 — 114th Congress (2015-2016), seeks to support the environmental education movement, improve student achievement and prepare students for jobs in a green economy.

10. Alliance for Climate Education

Provides curriculum materials including lesson plans, teacher guides, student books, and short videos describing dangers and solutions to the world-wide problem of climate change. Specific actions and activities for students are suggested.

A Warning on Choosing Books for Students on the Environment

In choosing books for classroom use on environmental issues, particularly global warming/climate change, teachers need to be careful not to scare students into helplessness and hopelessness.

For example, *The Future of the Earth, An Introduction to Sustainable Development for Young Readers* (Yann Arthus-Bertrand, photographer, adapted by Robert Buleigh) is aimed at middle school students that may frighten them into disinterest and inaction. The many amazing, vivid and very large photographs powerfully drive home almost every environmental crisis the world faces; in fact, most pages are devoted to crises and only a few provide anything hopeful.

This book could be used wisely by teachers to help emphasize a few issues that students could study and take action on; however, for many children it is not one to be read page after page, as the environmental destruction depicted is overwhelming.

In contrast, *How We Know What We Know About Our Changing Climate, Scientists and Kids Explore Global Warming* (L. Cherry and G. Braasch)

provides many photos and information on climate change but always includes successful actions that scientists, teachers, and students are taking to help solve each problem. Like the previous book, it is aimed at middle schoolers but could be adapted for younger or older grades. A Teacher's Guide provides interesting lessons related to science, language arts and math. Its call to action and the many varied resources that are described indicate positive paths that teachers and students can take in confronting specific climate problems.

An uplifting website is https://www.youngvoicesfortheplanet.com/ where students can watch inspiring short videos about young people who have taken successful action in addressing climate and environmental crises.

Endnotes

1. Sobel, David, *Beyond Ecophobia, Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education,* The Orion Society, 1996, p. 2.
2. Ibid., p. 27-28.
3. Louv, Richard, "A New Generation of Environmentalists: Fighting Global Warming by reconnecting people to nature," *Children and Nature Network*, Nov. 12, 2012.
4. Louv, Richard, *Last Child in the Woods, Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008, p. 36.
5. Ibid.

CHAPTER NINE

PARENTS

(How can they become our allies?)

Most parents are intimidated by the schools their children attend. They don't feel free to ask questions, to suggest changes, or to sit in on their children's classes, especially important at the early childhood and elementary school levels, to find out what their children do each day so they can better support their education at home. It is a rare school that welcomes parents to join together with teachers in a relationship of equality in a search for improved teacher/parent communication and for educational excellence.

In many schools, parents are welcome as long as they engage in minor activities such as baking cookies for school fundraisers or going on class trips. As soon as these same parents raise questions about the school curriculum or ineffective teaching, for example, they are immediately looked upon with suspicion.

I know of a parent who, as part of a P.T.A. curriculum committee, asked a lot of questions about how reading was taught in her child's elementary school, raising the issue that non-reading students may need systematic direct instruction in phonics. (The school had adopted the "Whole Language" approach in which phonics is indirectly taught as part of a literature-based reading program.) One teacher became very irate saying, "Are you questioning our professional judgment?"

When it came time for her to observe her own child's class as part of open school week, her child's teacher panicked, considering this parent a spy

to find out who is or is not teaching phonics, and asked the principal to sit next to the parent during the class observation, which he did.

Rather than seeing this parent's concerns as an opportunity for dialogue and discussion, this teacher, the principal and other teachers became defensive and hostile, thereby alienating a potential ally in any effort to improve the school's reading program.

This parent's questions and the serious questions of other parents, are often dismissed by such comments as "We are professionals; we know what we are doing," rather than, "Thank you for your interest and concern. Let's discuss this together and try to come to some agreement."

Parents have a right to know what their children are doing 6 hours a day; to understand how reading and math are taught as well as other subjects, and what the system of discipline in the classroom and school is.

All this requires that administration and teachers demystify the school and invite parents in on a regular basis to learn what is happening in their child's class, to attend workshops which will explain the curriculum, to learn how to help their child academically at home and how to develop better parenting skills.

In many schools, parents are only expected to come during Open School Week, and if for some reason they can't, they feel they lost their chance for a school visit.

The alienation of parents from their child's school is a great loss, not only to them but to their child, the teacher, the school at large, and the community.

In this chapter are stories of encounters between teachers, administrators and parents—many negative—with commentary on how the negativity could have been avoided. Others are positive, pointing the way to building stronger school/home relationships.

Many of the examples are from the elementary level, but most have relevance to middle school and high school levels, too.

How lack of communication between teacher and parent resulted in children's unnecessary suffering: two examples

Fifth-Grade Student

One year, I had a 5th-grade child who was a non-reader. I called the mother at the beginning of the year and asked, "Why do you think Joe can't read?" She replied, "I've been wondering about that myself." It had never crossed her mind all those years to come to school and seek help for her son.

Because I reached out to her, she came to school, and I gave her suggestions on helping her son to sound out words and to understand what he was reading. I lent her some books to read to/with him. One day she told me, "My son called me at work today. He said, "Mom, I can read!" This formerly depressed boy began to cheer up.

Fourth-Grade Student

I had a friend, **María,** whose son, **José,** was also a non-reader. One day while he was visiting my home he said, "I can't wait until I'm a teenager, so I won't have to go to school anymore." My son, who could read, and who was in the same school, didn't feel that way at all. They were both in a school where serious efforts were made to make education interesting and to improve teachers' skills.

I said to José's mom, "María, why don't you find out why your son isn't reading, and what you can do about it?" She replied, "I went last year, filled out a form, and they never got in touch with me."

I took her to a remedial reading teacher in the school who then helped get her son into a remedial reading class. María told me later that his teacher reported he was not as frustrated and angry as he was before.

Why hadn't these parents been called up years before, invited to the school and offered help? I think part of the answer is that we are caught up in the four walls of our classroom, often isolated from other teachers, with little help from the administration, and frequently inundated with bureaucratic paperwork. It is all we can do just to get through the day in one piece.

In addition, there is a frequently misplaced feeling of territoriality: "This is my classroom. I'm in charge. I don't want any interference. I don't want to have to explain myself." It's like the doctor I visited once for headaches, who, when I asked him to check my neck as a possible cause, said, "I don't look below the chin." Just as overspecialization in the field of medicine has often led to inferior health care, focusing only on the classroom, and not also on the parents and the wider school can result in poorer quality education.

How Involving a Parent Solved a Behavior Problem

I once had an elementary school student, **Thomas,** who often daydreamed. At least once a day he would tip himself over in his chair and crash to the floor. He would lie there without moving until I told him to get up. This curious phenomenon seemed to have no solution until I decided to contact his mother.

She came to school, and I asked her some questions about her son. Her reply was, "I don't know what's the matter with him. I have wonderful twin daughters two years younger than he is, but he is very strange."

I asked her if she ever sat down and gave him her total, uninterrupted attention for an extended period of time. She said she never did. She was very busy, especially with her daughters. I said, "I think your son falls out of his chair so he will get attention from me and the class. This always works because each time he does this, a child calls out, 'Thomas is on the floor again', and then I do what I can to get him up. I believe he daydreams because he feels lonely, and that is his escape.

"I would like you to sit down with him every day and talk with him for at least ten minutes without interruption. Ask him questions about school, his friends, games he likes to play. Listen carefully; look him in the eye; sit close and give him a hug. Tell him you love him. I think this is what he really needs."

She agreed to try this. Sure enough, in a short time Thomas stopped falling out of his chair. He daydreamed less, and his academic work improved. I wrote letters home regularly commenting on how Thomas had changed.

His mother was very grateful for the advice I had given her. She said she had never realized he needed more attention and that she was proud of his achievement. She told me that he was better behaved and more cooperative at home too.

I would never have been able to help Thomas if I had not involved his mother. She was the key to his being able to change his behavior. Despite all the problems she was having at home with him, it had never occurred to her to contact the school for guidance.

How Involving Parents Improved Reading Levels

In London, England, an experiment was undertaken to involve parents in improving their children's reading. The assignment was for all children in two primary level classes in two different schools to read to their parents on a regular basis. The children came from multi-ethnic communities which included families who did not read English or use it at home. Almost all parents welcomed the project, even those who were non-literate and non-English-speaking. They agreed to complete a record card showing what had been read.

This experiment was a success. "Children who read to their parents made significantly greater progress in reading than those who did not engage in this type of literacy sharing. Small-group instruction in reading, given by a highly competent specialist (who taught two classes which were not part

of the experiment) did not produce improvements comparable to those obtained from the collaboration with parents."

Positive results were seen for all children, even for those "who, at the beginning of the study, were failing to learn how to read. Teachers reported that the children showed an increased interest in school learning and were better behaved." [1]

This experience shows that there can be simple solutions to what appear to be complex problems. In this case, the mere fact that children received extra attention and encouragement from their parents through the simple act of reading to them (even if a parent did not understand or could not read the words) was enough to help children succeed in school.

Learning From Parents

Do you really listen to parents? Are you careful how you speak to them? Do you make a serious effort to be open-minded and non-defensive toward them?

In my role as a parent, I had encounters with my child's teachers which were positive as well as negative. Over the years, I have spoken with many parents who have vivid memories of incidents in which they felt rebuffed more than they were welcomed by their children's teachers. Their experiences have made me think more carefully about our relationships with parents and how they can be improved.

Listen, then, to the voices of parents who have much to teach us. (Any interviews without a citation were conducted by the author.)

Lesson #1: Don't assume you know what a child needs better than their parent.

At a parent/teacher conference, **Esmeralda** was talking to her daughter's kindergarten teacher.

Teacher: “I have decided that since your daughter is so shy, we have to make special efforts to help her overcome this. It would greatly help her if she had play dates without your participation. She’s too sheltered, and she’s with you too much. She needs to interact more with other children. I’ve made an appointment for her to go home with Alice next Monday after school. You shouldn’t go with her. Just call the parent and find out when you should pick her up.”

Esmeralda: “My daughter does interact with other children. She had play dates with children before kindergarten; she plays with cousins and friends; she goes to playgrounds, and I make appointments now for her to play with other children.”

Teacher: “I’m sure she’s done these things, but she needs to be more socially aggressive.”

Esmeralda: “I’m not going to send my daughter to a home I know nothing about.”

Teacher: “Oh, the family is fine.”

Esmeralda: “I always go the first time to a play date. My daughter’s father was shy, and he got over it, and so will my child. Thank you, but I’m not going to let her go on this play date.”

This teacher thought she was being helpful, but the main effect was to make Esmeralda feel badly. “She made me feel that I was a bad parent, that it’s my fault my daughter was shy. My daughter was only five. She should feel close to me and spend a lot of time with me. There’s nothing wrong with that. As it turns out, I was right. My daughter is eleven now and no longer shy.”

An alternative approach to encourage more play dates among students would be to send home a list of all classmates with their addresses and phone numbers (after getting permission from students’ families to include their child’s name), giving parents the option to arrange more after-school or weekend visits which would help widen and deepen

children's friendships. This will also help create better communication and camaraderie among various parents who would otherwise be isolated from each other.

Lesson #2: Keep an open mind. Don't jump to conclusions based on someone's age, race or ethnic group.

Here's another story from **Esmeralda:** "One September day I was in my daughter's school helping to clean up classrooms before school began. I was painting a room, and my husband was about to paint in another room. A teacher said to my daughter, 'Here, take this brush to your mother's boyfriend.'

"I heard this, and I said to this teacher, 'He's my husband, not my boyfriend.' The teacher looked at me and said, 'How surprising.' I was so shocked and upset by her remark, I couldn't speak. I felt that she was stereotyping me because I am young and because I am Hispanic. After that, I didn't feel like talking to her any more. I avoided her whenever I could."

Lesson #3: Don't criticize a parent in front of a child.

Patricia was upset when her daughter told her the following:

"Mom, today the teacher told me that you don't spend enough time with me. She said she knows you are busy, but still you have to pay more attention to me."

Patricia wondered why the teacher couldn't have expressed this concern to her, not her child. She was a single parent with three children trying hard to manage work and family responsibilities. "I didn't need my child to begin to question how I treat her. I would have been willing to discuss this matter with the teacher, but she had no business commenting like that to my child. It could have created a problem with my daughter, but we have a good relationship, and we talked it over."

Lesson #4: Don't blame a child for a parent's errors.

Patricia also relates this incident: "It was very hard for me to get my son to school on time. I had to drive him and my two other children on my way to work. One day, after my son had been late, I decided to park the car, go to his class and talk with his teacher.

"From down the hall I could see my son outside the classroom crying. The teacher had put him in the hall for being late. I had a shouting match with her. I said, 'My child is late because of me. Don't punish him for something that is not his fault.'

"I wish this teacher had made it possible to talk over this problem with me, but I felt her attitude was accusatory, and I became alienated."

Lesson #5: Listen extra carefully to parents who are not of your race, and read about their history, or you may inadvertently make insensitive remarks and wrong decisions.

Allyn is an African American mother. Her child was in a school in which Black children were in the minority, and she thought it would be a good idea for Black parents to get together and discuss how their children were doing. She told it to the white principal who said to her, "I hope this isn't going to be a gripe group."

Allyn had felt that her idea had been a good one, but became discouraged after hearing this remark. "I felt criticized and rebuked, and frankly I lost interest in this project."

This principal could have had an ally in trying to improve education for all children. She might have said, "I'm glad you are making an effort to involve more African American parents in their children's education. Let me know how your meeting goes. I am interested in any suggestions on how to help African American children be as successful as possible in our school."

Over the centuries in our country interest groups have met among themselves to build up their morale, receive support and solve collective problems: workers, women, people with disabilities, people of color, lesbian and gays, and others.

Because of the history of racism in our country which is embedded in its institutions, those of us who are white often carry unconscious attitudes and beliefs which have racist overtones, and which can silence people of color in interpersonal relations and at meetings. For this reason, Black people, for example, may want to have some of their organizations and meetings without any whites present, so they can speak more freely among themselves.

As a teacher, I haven't viewed any such attempts with alarm. To me, any group which has felt oppressed should have the right to brainstorm and strategize together. Even in the Congress of the United States there is a Congressional Black Caucus, Congressional Hispanic Caucus and a Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues. Don't we as teachers like to talk with each other at times without administration present? Aren't the views of teachers often different from those of their school administrators?

Meeting separately does not have to mean creating antagonisms. It can enable the parties involved to come up with a consensus of ideas in each group which can help raise the level of discussion in the wider community. It can also make it more possible for all points of view to be heard and for a greater equality among all participants.

Here is another example of insensitivity by school personnel to the issues of people of color told to me by a parent:

"I felt that it was not good for all the teachers in my son's multi-racial public school to be white women. I believe all children need role models who are their complexion.

"I went to the director and asked why there weren't any Black teachers. I was told, 'We looked and couldn't find any.' I figured I would give them

time. A year later I asked the same question. The director looked annoyed and said, 'We still can't find any. You find us one.'

"I found two candidates, but they were rejected. The next year I spoke to the new director expressing the same concern. She was also annoyed and said, 'We refuse to compromise the education of our children just to find a Black teacher.'

"I believe it was racist for them to say they couldn't find a qualified Black teacher. The teachers I had sent them were qualified. What was wrong with them? They didn't tell me. It wasn't my job to do this applicant search. Why didn't they make a concerted effort to contact African American newspapers, churches and Black organizations for candidates? New York City has many excellent Black teachers.

"This whole experience was a bad one for me. I felt very disappointed in the way I was treated, and I lost the enthusiasm I had originally had for the school."

Lesson #6: If a parent perceives that his or her child is having a problem in your class or the school, and you don't, you may be wrong.

Example 1

In third grade, **Jean's** daughter **Jessie** was still having trouble reading. Mary, a classmate would say to her, "You're stupid. You can't read." A couple of times a week Jessie would come home crying and complaining about Mary.

Jean went to school to try to solve this problem. However, Jessie's teacher said, "Oh, it's nothing. They just don't get along." Meanwhile, Jean found out that the whole class was in turmoil because of the conflict between Jessie and Mary.

Having gotten nowhere, Jean then went to the principal and asked that her daughter be transferred to another class. The principal refused, saying, "She has to learn to deal with this."

Next Jessie and Mary were sent to a school counselor, but the persecution persisted. Mary was a child who knew how to misbehave and make it look as if it were Jessie's fault. Jessie suffered the whole year and got a reputation as a trouble-maker.

As a result, in fourth and fifth grades, she was put in classes with strict teachers who also turned out to be abusive.

Jean says:

"I wanted to transfer her to another school, but I couldn't find one that was acceptable. My daughter, who had been happy from kindergarten through second grade with teachers who respected and nurtured her, was transformed into a child who hated school and hated reading.

"Now she is twelve, and although she learned how to read from a tutor I hired, she still hates reading. Her elementary school experience has left a wound that has not yet healed."

Those last three years in her elementary school were a nightmare for Jean and Jessie. Neither the teachers nor the principal were interested in the parent's input, nor sensitive to the child's unhappiness. What could have been a united effort to solve this family crisis with a serious two-way dialogue turned out to be a one-way street with the school going in the wrong direction.

Years later, Jean found out that during this period, Mary's mother was suffering with cancer and that Mary had been scared and worried about her mother, which had affected her behavior. If the school had tried to find out why Mary was acting so badly, and had invited her parents to school to discuss the problem, both Jessie and Mary could have been helped and a lot of unhappiness avoided.

Example 2

In another school, one parent felt so rejected that she had to turn to an advice column in her local paper:

"A girl in my daughter's second-grade class is able to convince other girls not to be friends with certain girls in the class," says B.D. "My daughter is not in the clique, and she cries and doesn't want to go to school. The teacher doesn't believe there is a problem, but other mothers have complained, too. Is there anything I can do?" [2]

What is the matter with this child's teacher? How can she deny what one of her students is experiencing? Bullies should never be tolerated and can be transformed into cooperative class members with the help of the other students and with proper teacher guidance.

(See Chapter 4: "Specific Challenges and Solutions" and Chapter 5: "Preventing and Dealing With Personal Attacks Due to Racism, Sexism Homophobia and Bullying")

There is no excuse for any of our students going home day after day depressed and crying. We have the ability to change unhappy situations into happy ones. Why should our students and their parents suffer for nothing? Life is hard enough.

Example 3

Donald transferred as a sophomore into a new high school. He knew no one there and dreaded going to school. His mother went to a PTA meeting which was run by the PTA president and a school administrator. Donald's mother raised her hand and asked if the school had a student welcoming committee to help new students learn about the school and to make new friends.

PTA president: "Does he have a problem?"

Parent: "No, he just needs help in adjusting to a new school."

Administrator: "We don't have money to pay a teacher to advise such a club."

Parent: "Why do you have to pay someone? Can't students be asked to join such a club, be given guidance on how to make new students feel supported and befriended, and left to conduct the club with minimal supervision?"

Administrator: "That's not how it works here. Tell you son to join the band."

Parent: "My son doesn't want to be in a band."

Administrator: "Try to convince him."

The agenda moved on, leaving a frustrated mother behind who never attended another PTA meeting. It took her son a year to become comfortable in this high school, and during most of that year, he was unhappy. This could have been avoided if the PTA and administrator had offered to look into forming a welcoming committee or finding an existing club that would encourage members to be paired with newcomers.

Lesson #7 Don't mislead parents.

Jennifer was a dedicated class parent in her son's third grade who conscientiously helped the teacher, Ms. B, in any way possible. She tells this story:

"When I heard that the next fall all classes would be organized differently and that Ms. B and a co-worker would each be teaching a 3rd/4th grade class, I asked that my son remain with her for another year since I felt Ms. B was a good teacher. She assured me that this would happen.

"When June came around, she firmly and matter-of-factly told me my son would be put in another teacher's class. She was not apologetic and didn't explain why. I was shocked because I had been led to believe all year that he would stay with her. He was now supposed to go into the class of a new teacher who was not as experienced."

Jennifer asked that she and Ms. B meet with the principal, and in front of him, Ms. B said, "She must have misunderstood me."

Jennifer decided to transfer her son to another program. "I am not as open and trusting as I once was of teachers. I have my guard up, and I feel that a parent has to fight for her child every step of the way because a teacher may have a hidden agenda. During the year my son kept telling me, 'I don't think she likes me,' and I would discount that, saying, 'It's your imagination. I'm sure she likes you.' Other parents told me they didn't think this teacher liked the active boys, the ones who are labeled as 'behavior problems'. I never paid any attention.

"But now I think they were right because the next year the new teacher got most of her active boys. I really felt betrayed."

If we are to build trust with parents, we should be honest with them and keep our word. The grapevine in schools is active, and even word of one unhappy experience spreads around among parents and throws a damper on developing a cooperative and enthusiastic school community.

Lesson #8: When parents offer information or suggestions, don't get defensive and assume they are criticisms.

Theresa, parent of **Katherine**, a first grader, thought she was being responsible by carefully answering six questions for parents on the schools' new report cards. One of the questions the teachers had asked was, "Is there some area of work or behavior that you would like me to focus on during the coming months?"

Theresa wrote, "Reading is the most important skill for her to acquire, but she needs to be challenged more in math." Later, she heard that Ms. M (the teacher) was upset by parents' comments which Ms. M thought were too critical. Theresa decided to stop by Ms. M's room when the children were out to discuss this with her.

She said, "Ms. M, I didn't mean to be offensive in the comments I made. I was trying to be helpful by seriously answering each question."

Ms. M replied, "You and other parents don't appreciate all the work I'm doing with your children. You say that I'm not challenging your daughter in math. Your daughter is already struggling with reading. Leave math alone. Now, if you want your daughter to be very challenged and under pressure, put her in a gifted program in another school."

"Ms. M," said Theresa, "I don't believe in gifted programs or in putting her under pressure. I see you have work to do, and I would like to continue this discussion at a more convenient time." Ms. M refused to discuss the matter further.

Theresa then went to discuss this issue with the principal. She told him, "Ms. M shouldn't be so defensive about parents' remarks. She shouldn't give a list of six questions if she doesn't want to hear answers."

The principal said, "It isn't just one teacher who has complained. All the teachers are offended, and they all can't be wrong." He did not look at Theresa's comments.

This experience with the teacher and the principal left Theresa feeling badly misunderstood. "If I describe a problem my child is having," she explained, "it is because I want to help my child, not criticize the teacher. However, if the teacher and the principal react defensively, I start to see them as part of the problem. Why couldn't they address the issue I raised, and explain the math curriculum? As far as I was concerned, since my daughter was having trouble in learning to read, if she could be more interested in math and more challenged that could help her morale, but no one was interested in hearing my insights. I wondered why couldn't the principal see the other side of the coin? He says that all of the teachers can't be wrong in their reaction to parents' comments. Why can't he see that the parents aren't necessarily wrong either? If we have a number of suggestions, why not talk with us instead of shutting us out?"

An Analysis of Why Teachers Tend to Be Defensive

A friend of mine, **Edy Rees,** a parent and former day care teacher, explains teachers' defensiveness as follows:

"I believe that a defensive attitude by teachers is related to the wider society. We grow up and live as adults in a very competitive environment in which put-downs of almost every class of people are intrinsic. Most of us have not learned to cooperate very well with one another, even though we have many natural allies around us. We expect criticism not support, so we are insecure. We therefore tend to be suspicious of others.

"The effect of this competitive atmosphere and the attitudes it engenders, is to divide us from one another when what we need most is to be united in efforts to solve the many problems we face in our schools and in the society at large."

John Gordon, both a parent and a teacher, believes that a prime responsibility of teachers is to build a cooperative spirit with parents. "Parents and teachers have the basic common interest of educating the child. If teachers could describe in detail to parents what their school does well, and what needs to be improved, this honesty would be greatly appreciated by most parents. It could draw parents into a dialogue on how to make things better.

"The main problem as I see it is a reluctance to discuss problems. If somehow a problem is brought out in the open, there is often an inability to discuss the issues involved without implicating each other. There are no easy answers, but teachers must have an open ear to parents and involve them in real ways in their schools."

Lesson #9: Be very careful how you report a problem to a parent.

Second grade teacher, **Lori Hartwick,** was talking with a parent about her child's low reading level. The parent's first language was Chinese; she had no confidence in her English skills and felt she could not help her son at home:

"I was giving the mother an example of her child's difficulties decoding blends and word endings, and his tendency to substitute words that would be O.K. in context or supported by pictures in the stories.

"The parent was agitated, so I added that he's not the only child in the room with difficulties like these. Her tone softened; she looked at me and said, 'Thank you very much for telling me this. I've always heard he was the only one in the room with reading difficulties.' She had been on the defensive since kindergarten because of his low skills, but finding out that her child was not being singled out, she became more receptive to news and updates on his progress.

"I am sure his former teachers did not ever say the child was the lowest in the class or was very far behind his classmates. I do think that is what the parent interpreted from the discussion. I believe parents can handle the truth if given with compassion and sensitivity. As teachers, we must keep this in mind.

"As I think back on my experience with this parent, I know there is more that I could have done to help her. I could have given her suggestions on how she could help her son at home such as by giving her a list of sight words starting with kindergarten and had her practice those with her son. Her English was good enough to be able to handle that. Unfortunately, I could not recommend an English as a Second Language class for adults because my district does not have any, which is unfortunate, but I could have helped her find a book that could help improve her English."

Lesson #10 Give children a chance to redeem themselves: a parent shows the way.

Tanya played hard at recess, and when she came into the school, she was disheveled. Her white shirt was hanging out, skirt askew and socks had a brown ring around them. The teacher said, "You look too dirty. You can't be in the color guard."

Tanya became sad. Her mother happened to pass by the classroom and overheard the teacher's comment. She took Tanya to the bathroom, washed her face, tucked in her shirt, fixed her skirt, and rolled down her socks. She said to Tanya, "Now you can be in the color guard."

An Open Door Policy to Parents Improves Communication

There are, of course, parents who have had positive, welcoming experiences in their children's schools. This is either due to a school-wide policy of encouraging parents to come to school, participate in activities and generally making them feel welcome, or to efforts by individual teachers to make themselves and their classrooms accessible to parents.

Elementary School

My sister-in-law, **Ann Califf,** attributed the positive relations between parents and teachers in her children's K-8 school in Rutherford, N.J., to the fine leadership of the school's principal, Anna Maria Amorelli. For example, this extraordinary woman found out that a parent of a child in her school was depressed because she was always home with small children. One day she went to this woman's home and watched her children for a couple of hours while the mother went out for a break. The mother was much revived and grateful.

Such selflessness is contagious. In this mostly middle-class school, the family of a poor child was not looked down upon. The question was, "How can we help this family?" Parents and teachers collaborated in finding out the family's needs down to the size of their children's clothes. They would even find fancy clothes for a child who needed them to go to a party or other special event.

Ann says, "If parents objected to something going on in the school, we met with the principal. We complained about poor substitute teachers who were then replaced. One of our teachers was not effective in the classroom. The principal redirected her to be a tutor in one-on-one situations.

"Our school had an open-door policy, and parents were invited to visit classes at any time. We had an open house in the fall where teachers described the curriculum.

"We had a blue book in which were listed 30 functions that will happen during the school year. Parents were encouraged to sign up for something, and the activities ranged from giving a lot of time to a little. In this way more parents could be involved. Every now and then a single page was sent home listing the latest events coming up and encouraging parent involvement in the day or evening."

In Ann's school, a great effort was made to bring out the best in students. There was a program called "Silver Bells" where children go out into the community to help senior citizens, and each year an award was given to a student who cared the most for others.

The principal had a knack for turning around disruptive students. Once a first-grade boy put a rubber toy knife to a girl's throat. The parents were brought in, and the principal decided not to suspend him. Knowing this particular child as she did, she helped him become involved in positive activities which built up his self-esteem and which changed him into a cooperative student.

According to Ann, all of these efforts and activities resulted in a thriving school environment in which teachers and parents worked well together.

Middle School

Edy Rees had two children who attended a small alternative public middle school of 200 students in New York City. Edy explains that "parents were completely integrated into the school process. Teachers had an open-door policy. You had to get a pass, but then you could go to any class and sit down. The teacher would say "Hi" and go on with the lesson. Teachers would ask any parent who showed up to help out and even for input in the curriculum."

Dr. James P. Comer's School Development Program

Nationally known African-American educator, psychiatrist and author, **Dr. James P. Comer** is the originator of a successful parent involvement and school restructuring method that has been implemented in more than 1,000 schools in 26 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Trinidad and Tobago, South Africa, England and Ireland. It is called the Comer School Development Program. Dr. Comer believes that parents need to be involved at every level – from school governance and management to a parent program in which they are active in developing social events and improving school atmosphere. In a 1993 interview, Mr. Comer stated:

"You have to structure some experiences that allow parents and staff to interact with each other as equals. You've got to be careful that you don't ask people to interact in ways that expose their weaknesses. We have some Black parents whose parents and parents' parents have been denied education and participation in the economic and social mainstream. So you don't immediately ask them to serve on an academic development committee. Where do they have the necessary experience? Well, they've planned activities in churches, figured out how to structure and publicize events. So we have a social program in schools and that's where you bring in parents with those citizenship skills. The social program helps the kids to feel valued and to improve certain skills related to interacting with

peers. If you happen to have parents who are going to be very good in the academic areas, then bring them into those areas." [3]

Dr. Comer testifies that encouraging the active involvement of parents is key to creating a positive school atmosphere with fewer behavior problems and higher academic achievement. Strong parent programs have created parents who become activists to improve their communities. This teamwork also has inspired students to discuss among themselves what they can do.

In the New Haven communities, where Dr. Comer worked for many years, he noted that "…at probably the best elementary school in the area, kids who graduated went over to the middle school, and they came back and told their principal, 'We're going to change that school. We're going to make it the best school.' And these were elementary school kids just going to middle school who felt the commitment to make it better!" [4]

If we want to be more successful in our teaching, in our classroom management skills and in reaching more children, we need all the help we can get. Hard as it may be at first, we must make time to reach out to parents and to pressure the administration to work for a school policy that welcomes them, encourages their participation, invites their questions and suggestions, offers them workshops, and in general, makes them feel at home. Then our students will have a greater chance of succeeding.

Teachers Who Successfully Reached Out And Listened to Parents

Ken Bierly

Ken Bierly held a meeting for parents in his classroom at the beginning of the year and he provided refreshments. He carefully explained his philosophy of education and how he taught each subject. Parents were

encouraged to ask questions. He gave them a booklet which had more explanation and which said in part: "Visit our classroom. Observe. Come any time; ask what your child is doing….Question the teacher's philosophies and activities. Keep the teacher informed of your views and objectives. Help establish and maintain three-way communication: home – school – child." [5]

This kind of invitation cannot help but allay parents' fears and even make it clear that it is their duty to be involved.

Cyndi Kerr

Cyndi Kerr invited parents to "hang around" in the classroom instead of just dropping kids off. "Then they see what's needed," she said.

For example, she trained one parent to work with a group of children learning place value in math. Another parent, a dancer, taught her class dances that related to the curriculum. One mother came in to read and write with her son who needed extra help.

The Lower East Side School in New York City where Cyndi Kerr worked, had a strong parent group. They set up a phone tree system so that "Parents get called regularly to tell them what's going on in the classrooms…. These phone calls also give parents a chance to talk about any problems they might be having."

Lena Ashly, a parent, said, "A lot of parents need that extra push, to hear a teacher say, 'Just come in and see what's happening.'…One parent suggested that the teacher needs to call them to say, "Can you come in at l0 a.m. and read?' The teacher has to be organized enough to be able to call the parents."

Their school received a Parent Involvement Grant. With the funds, teachers and parents invited speakers for a series of breakfast and evenings meetings. They had workshops on discipline, racism and the school's educational philosophy.[6]

Bonar A. Gow

In a Rethinking Schools article, **Bonar A. Gow** describes his experience as a beginning teacher for a class of 33 fourth/fifth-grade students in a small village in northern British Columbia. Almost one third of the residents were Cree. "The level of unemployment, alcoholism, family instability, and child and wife abuse among whites and non-whites was high."

He very conscientiously planned his lessons and was confident that he was doing well. All this changed when a parent of Arlene, Mrs. Yellow Eyes, came to school looking for Waba-Sewa-Towah-Ka, which he found out later meant "rabbit with short (or small/flat) ears" as opposed to a rabbit with ears that are "long" (upright) and cannot only listen but hear.

She was very upset, saying that her daughter was unhappy in his class and wanted to leave school:

"You white teachers think white. You don't know nothing. My Arlene, she is one smart girl. But you got her readin' and writin' things that are no good. She brung her big yellow book (basal reader) home last night and read me stories. Stupid stories. About white kids doin' things she don't know about.

"White kids and Indian kids are different. Indian kids got to learn 'bout things to help get jobs. No jobs on our reservation. Ain't no jobs in trappin' now. Too many people on welfare or getting drunk. I don't want that for my Arlene. She is one damned smart girl, this I tell you. But you whites don't hear me. Not in Fort Nelson. Not in Fox Creek. This is true."

Mr. Gow went home that night preoccupied. He thought carefully about what Mrs. Yellow Eyes had said, and he evaluated his curriculum. He concluded that he had been "plodding on through endless language arts, social studies, science, and art lessons, seldom pausing to challenge the assumptions underpinning what I was doing. On the rare occasion when I questioned the wisdom of what I was doing, I promptly proceeded to

devalue my homegrown knowledge and to wilt in the face of the superior abilities of curriculum designers. How could something be unsuitable if an expert in curriculum design wrote it into the guide, I reasoned.

"An aboriginal mom with little or no education – but a deep understanding of what an education should be all about – changed my view of myself and my children. In the early evening I sat at home and subjected everything I was doing in my classroom to a rigorous examination. In the end I was forced to recognize that I had to change my approach to children and learning."

The very next day he began shelving his curriculum guides and asking the children "what they felt young people their age needed to survive on a day-to-day basis." They had many suggestions. As a result, "learning how to snowshoe replaced some of our regular indoor activities. Basal readers were almost completely replaced by books the children brought in. They represented a wide variety of subjects, and comic books became acceptable reading material. Reading snowmobile repair manuals, recipes, and assembly instructions for toys and games came to occupy an important place in my classroom. Writing began to focus on personal experiences, hobbies, and 'how to' booklets meant to be read by other children. Learning became something that you took out through the door with you at the end of the day and then into your home, to share with your family."

Once he was able to show respect for the children's culture and bring aspects of it into the class, the children were more willing to listen to and read about lessons from the wider world.

His new curriculum changed Arlene who "blossomed." She showed the class how to skin a beaver and how to prepare the hide for sale; she showed how to make clothing out of moose hide. She became "an accomplished storyteller in the best of the Cree tradition and in so doing, she won the admiration of all her classmates." [7]

Sally Novak

Sally Novak, a special education teacher, realized over time that many of the parents of her students were overwhelmed by the challenges of raising a special needs child. Her school administration did not support her effort to meet for extended periods of time with parents. She found a way out of this dilemma which resulted in much better communication with her and the school staff. Parents built supportive friendships with one another and learned new skills to help their children.

Her story, entitled **Connecting with Parents of Special Education Students** is on my website.

I've come strongly to believe that many parents have a lot of wisdom and knowledge about education and what their children need. Two other examples come to mind: parents who had no training whatsoever in reading instruction who taught their children to read:

An African-American teacher describes how her mother helped her learn to read:

"When I was three-years old, my mother was gonna take me to the river. And we were going to visit some big ship that had come in. And I kept saying, 'I'm going to see the big boat.' And she said, 'No, a big boat is called a ship.' And I kept referring to it as a big boat. So, in desperation, she got a piece of paper, and she wrote, 'This is water.' And she drew a wave. 'This is a boat,' and she drew it. 'This is a ship.' And something about the this is with a different word there, and the diagram, I immediately read it.

"And then I could read anything thereafter. It was just like…Oh! And I remember that very day. I read everything from then on. I don't know what method of teaching reading that is, but whatever it was, you know, it clicked. But it made me read this early, which then all the neighbors and relatives took very seriously. And that determined what kind of person, I guess, I was going to be." [8]

Nancy Jefferson, a community organizer in Chicago, tells how her father taught his children to read:

"...My father makes an X for his name, but he taught me how to read. I remember all thirteen of us had to sit down in front of the fireplace. Sometimes we had oil in the lamps and sometimes we didn't. If we didn't, Dad had made a big fire, and the glare of the fireplace would give us light. We had to read every night.

"I was eleven-years old before I knew my father couldn't read or write. We'd get to a word and we'd stumble over it. He'd say: 'Read that over again. You're stumblin' over that word.' We thought he knew what that word was. He knew it didn't sound right to him. He'd tell us: 'Chop it up like you're choppin' cotton. You know how you get weeds out of cotton. Chop the word up like that an' put it back together again.' That was really teaching phonics. (Laughs)

"Now, my brothers and I, we laugh. When we're talkin' about things, I'll say: 'Chop it up. Chop it up. Put it back together again.' As a result, all of us are great readers." [9]

Making Parents Feel Welcome in Our Schools

If you are in a school that does not welcome parents, it is easy to fall into the pattern of dealing only with the children and having little, if any, input or relationship with their parents. However, you don't have to go along with this; you can be different and encourage other teachers to be the same.

Here are a few suggestions for making parents feel at home with you, your class and your school:

- If your school has a school-based management (SBM) committee, encourage your colleagues to be as open-minded and welcoming to parents as possible. Remind them that the average parent is not our enemy or spy, but someone who wants what is best for his or her child. For children to do their best in school, the relationship between the home, community and the school should be as positive as possible.
- If your school has no SBM committee, talk up the need for reaching out to parents and making them feel welcome. Form a committee to brainstorm how to attract more parents to the school.
- When parents appear unexpectedly at your door, warmly greet them and invite them in. Ask them how they are, if they have any questions. Say something positive about their child. **Erica Fishman,** parent of a 4th grader in a Minneapolis school said, "In my son's school, you always know you're welcome. The teachers talk to you when you come in, and they make you part of the class activities. For example, they will have you help your child or another child in a project. They prefer that you let them know a day in advance when you are coming in, but you can also drop in."
- If parents show up during the school day and there is no time to talk at that moment, make an appointment for a more convenient time.
- Call parents early in the year to mention something positive about their child. Parents are often shocked and pleased to get such a call since many expect bad news when a school contacts them. A phone message with good news helps to build better relationships with parents. If you have to reach parents later about a problem, they will be more open to listening to you and collaborating on a solution.
- When you report a problem to a parent, be careful how you say it. Try not to blame the parent or student. For example, don't say, "Bob will fail math if he doesn't buckle down and do the work." Instead say, "I am concerned about Bob's math. I'm sure he can do better if we both help him. When can you come in to discuss this?"

- → Send a monthly letter home to parents explaining your curriculum, special programs or trips, and any problems you think they can help you with. Encourage them to visit the class.
- → If they are critical of one of your lessons that you feel was important, or if they feel you should be teaching something that you believe is inappropriate, don't brush off their comments. Show respect for their opinions, but explain why you teach what you do. Tell them you take what they are saying very seriously, that you will think about their concerns and get back to them.
- → Invite parents to share their expertise or interest in a subject with your class in a one-time presentation or in a series of lessons. Ms. Fishman and her son told of programs in her son's K-8 school in which parents played a key role: "At the beginning of the year, teachers sent home a note explaining how you can help in your child's class. One year there were two main programs. In *Book Nook*, the teacher, a volunteer parent and his daughter made a list of books to read aloud during the year, a schedule was made and different parents showed up 3 or 4 times a week to read.
- → "In *Options,* parents could volunteer to teach something one hour once a week for 6 weeks; classes included the Chinese language, baseball cards, chess, Moncala (an African board game involving math), volley ball and basketball. A student in 4th – 8th-grade could team teach with a parent or another student. Teachers could also teach an Options class.
- → "Options happened in two 6-week sessions during the year. There were 15 choices and children attended two different classes for one hour each during the week. This program was very popular and helped bring parents closer to the school."
- → Encourage parents to join the P.T.A. and to become active in the school.

Phone Calls to High School Parents That Solved Problems: Two Examples

Phone Call #1

When I was teaching at the Frederick Douglass Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., a successful alternative school with a literacy emphasis for 17 – 21-year olds, I had a student who began regularly falling asleep in class. I asked him why, and he simply said he was tired.

I called his mother and described the problem. Could she tell me if anything had changed in his life recently? She said that she had given him his own TV which was put in his bedroom. She wondered if his sleep deprivation was due to watching it at all hours.

This proved to be the case. She took it away and put it in a closet. She set up new rules for TV time which resolved the problem. From then on, her son stayed awake in class.

My call to this parent enabled me to talk about more than TV. She had told me early in the term her worry about her son's poor reading skills and his lack of interest in reading. I was able to further discuss with her ways she could enforce study time at home and help him with some of his assignments.

As a result of the phone call, my relationship was strengthened with the parent, and the son's work showed improvement.

Phone Call #2

Marie, mother of Robert, also a student at the Frederick Douglass Center, did not think her son was smart. He had been a school drop-out and had a low reading level. She had come alone to the U.S. from the island of Jamaica when he was a child to work as a housekeeper because in her

country jobs were scarce and wages low. She sent a portion of her wages each month to his care-giver.

By the time she had saved up enough money to bring him to the U.S., they were estranged. Robert resented the fact that his mother was absent for most of his childhood. She was disappointed in his low academic level and his lack of appreciation for all her years of sacrifice for him. (This problem was not unique to Marie and Robert. Many of my immigrant students and their parents were in the same situation with communication problems and feelings of alienation.)

I worked patiently with Robert, giving him short, achievable academic goals, and he began to take more interest in his schoolwork. I told him I would like to tell his mother in person of his progress, and he agreed. She came to school for the meeting, but despite what I told her, in front of her son she said, "He's not college material, is he?" Robert slumped in his seat. I replied, "He is if he wants to be." She looked surprised, but skeptical.

At the end of the year, our school had a ceremony in which students received certificates for progress they had made. Robert's mother came, and I showed her our booklet of class compositions and poetry, pointing out two poems and a story Robert had written about his life in Jamaica. She read them and began to cry, saying "He *is* intelligent. I didn't know he could write poetry, and here in this essay he tells what he was doing while I was in the U.S. I didn't know any of this. He never told me. I am his mother, and I missed it all."

Breaking down a barrier between mother and son could have appeared to be hopeless. After all, Robert was 18. However, if a teacher stays positive, doesn't give up and keeps in touch with a parent with reports of progress, the parent could become an ally instead of an obstacle to her child's academic advancement.

To read more about Robert's transformation, go to an article on my website entitled **Students and the Power to Change** which describes my entire year with Robert's class.

Advice From An Administrator

Lenora Bosley, now retired, was a very effective administrator in a Brooklyn, N.Y. elementary school. She did her best to support teachers and to have her school be welcoming to parents. Here are some recommendations based on her long years of experience to add to those above:

- Making your school a positive place for parents begins with the security guard and the personnel in the main office who need to see parents and guardians as allies in the education of their children, not as intruders who are looked upon with suspicion. The school entrance and main office can be authoritative without being forbidding. In addition, having the main office well-decorated and with plants helps convey the message that your school cares about its appearance and its students.
- When speaking with parents, try not to use words that might not be understood outside the profession. Parents need to be spoken to in plain English. For example, there is vocabulary specific to medical doctors, social workers and others which are appropriate to use at meetings of people in the same profession. These are not the terms used in speaking to people in the outside world unless they are clearly defined. You can close people off by the language you use. To guard against this, be sure to encourage parents to ask questions, and don't rush. Give them time to think.
- Teachers should greet parents as children are lining up in the morning or at dismissal. Don't socialize with colleagues instead of with parents and children. You can learn a lot about your students and their parents through casual conversation which can help you communicate with them better.

- Don't discuss other people's children with a parent unless a student is having a problem with a classmate. Even then, the goal is to ask as many questions as necessary in search of a positive solution. Disparaging one of the parties involved will be counter-productive.
- Don't run out the door at 3 p.m. Although you may feel like escaping after a difficult day, don't make a habit of it. Staying around to talk with students and parents, or to get ready for the next day shows your dedication to the job.
- Make sure your school has a welcoming room for parents which can be a social outlet for those who need a network that can help solve personal as well as educational problems. It should be a place where administrators and teachers can stop in for conversation, to encourage participation in school activities and to hold workshops on issues of importance to families.
- Avoid being part of a clique. Be open to including other teachers in conversations and social gatherings.
- Negativity and pessimism can often be found in the teachers' lounge which can cast a pall on school spirit and cooperation. Teachers who badmouth students and parents to colleagues violate student confidentiality. Conversations about problems with a student or parent should be held with colleagues who have their interests at heart, who do not play the "blame game," and sincerely want to help you find a solution. The teachers' lounge can be turned into a positive place when colleagues agree to share successful lessons and student victories not just failures, as well as earnestly work together for a better school environment.
- A serious outreach effort should be undertaken to have a multi-racial staff. Students of different races and ethnicities, as well as parents, need to have role models they can easily identify with.

Note

Sometimes there are parents who will come to school with inappropriate behavior toward their own child or the teacher. I know of an instance in which a teacher complained to a parent about a child's behavior; the parent came to school with a belt and beat the child with it in the hallway while the teacher looked on.

In such a situation, a teacher should call the principal or guidance department. We must never condone parental violence toward children. Such parents need serious counseling that we are unable to provide but which the school administration can recommend. In extreme situations, children need to be removed from a violent home.

If a teacher and a parent are in conflict, a principal, guidance counselor or social worker can be asked to mediate. There have been instances in which serious conflicts between a parent and a teacher have been resolved through successful mediation.

A Helpful Resource on the Need for Parent Involvement in Schools

Henderson, Anne T., Mapp, Karen L., Johnson, Vivian R. and Davies, Don, *Beyond the Bake Sale, The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships,* The New Press, N.Y., 2007.

This book points out that research indicates a positive relationship between parental involvement in schools and children's achievement. It advises that educators need to examine their own attitudes before they can work effectively with parents, and it shows step by step how to do this. It gives many suggestions on how to improve relations between parents and school staff.

It stresses the need for required courses to train teachers and administrators to be adequately sensitive to cultural, social and economic differences

among families, and how to use this information to successfully reach out to parents. They came to this conclusion during their research when school staffs stated that they needed greater skills to work more productively with their students' families.

Resources to Help Improve Parenting Skills

Many parents want to be loving and effective in raising their children but don't know how. It is amazing that although one of the most important and difficult jobs one can have is parenting, there are no job requirements. Some adults are able to parent well naturally while most need guidance. Adults who are successful parents raise children who are more cooperative and more ready to learn in our classes.

One resource that schools can access to help in this effort is the **Center for the Improvement of Child Caring.**

This organization has national programs that train people on how to deliver parenting classes and seminars. It provides books and videotapes on child-rearing for parents of preschool through 19-year olds.

Around the country there are school districts that have a parent center that specializes in helping adults improve their parenting skills. The Commack Union Free School District in Commack, New York is an example. Its Parent Resource Center provides free child-rearing advice and support for area parents of children of all ages.

The parents' section of the school district's website, https://www.commack.k12.ny.us/ has many links with helpful advice. For example, it features a *Character Education Parent Handbook* suggesting ways to develop in children values that include citizenship, honesty, responsibility, accountability and compassion. It lists movies and books that can help achieve these goals.

The website has an encouraging invitation to parents to use these resources:

Visit the Parent Resource Center…for information and support.
Call for answers to your parenting and school questions.
Borrow parenting books and brochures.
Attend workshops that are held throughout the year.
Discover the many school resources available to your child.

Such a proactive approach to reaching out to parents can be very helpful in school districts nation-wide.

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CHAPTER TEN

PART I: MUSIC AS AN INTRINSIC PART OF THE CURRICULUM

(How can this be a force for academic achievement, improving behavior and more?)

The Royal Conservatory, located in Canada, has been a leader in music education for over 127 years. In an article entitled "The Benefits of Music Education, An Overview of Current Neuroscience Research" (April 2014), they include an amazing quote from Albert Einstein: "The theory of relativity occurred to me by intuition, and music is the driving force behind this intuition. My parents had me study the violin from the time I was six. My new discovery is the result of musical perception." (p.5)

How could this be? Some of their research findings, summarized below, can point to possible answers as well as why including music in school curricula can have a positive influence on all students:

"We know that from early childhood through to retirement years, whether involved in recreational music making or training for a professional career, people who are engaged in music study are sharpening their cognitive skills and developing social connections.

"Over the past two decades, several large-scale studies have found that music students outperform academically compared to other students, often by large margins. Music students tend to be more engaged and motivated in their studies, and more likely to win academic awards.

"Thanks to the groundbreaking research of neuroscientists, we now have a clear scientific explanation for this phenomenon. Music study leads to lasting changes in children's brains, increasing their capacity to perform tasks that require sustained attention and careful listening and reading." (p.8)

A section of the report entitled "Empathy and Social Awareness" states:

"Recent studies have shown that collaborative music making can increase empathy in toddlers. Empathy, in part, comes from being sensitive to subtle changes in the human voice that indicate mood and emotion. Children need to develop empathy if they are to thrive in family life, at school, and later, at work.

"This connection between music and empathy may be due to improved verbal intelligence. Playing music improves a child's ability to listen and pick up nuances of speech – the way something is said and the emotions underneath the words, not just the words themselves, which in turn is a key element of empathy and emotional intelligence.

"Music is inherently emotional, and musical memories are among the most visceral and vivid… Whether harmonizing in a choir or performing in a string quartet or simply jamming with friends, music students of any age, even the very young, learn how to share attention, co-operate and collaborate…" (p. 6)

It is ironic that in this age where education departments and government officials are obsessed with standardized testing (which is supposed to prove how much students have learned) that music and other arts programs have been cut to spend more time with prescriptive test preparation. This has led to less fundamental learning in many subject areas, a rise in anxiety among teachers and students, a loss of creativity in lesson planning, and a resulting loss of student interest in school.

Educators need to unite in efforts to reinstate the arts as well as to eliminate all barriers that have been erected that prohibit our profession from doing the best job of teaching possible. Meanwhile, in our separate schools and classrooms, we can do what we can to bring lessons that include the arts into our teaching.

In this chapter, you will find examples of how teachers have used music to enhance interest, learning and behavior in a variety of subject areas, many at the elementary level, which could be adapted for higher levels, and music specifically for upper grades. The hope is that this will encourage you to think in terms of including music when you are planning your lessons.

There is a list of resources in Part II of this chapter to help you access relevant music for your grade and subject area.

Loving Music and Singing at the Elementary level and Beyond

Children love music but can often be found these days only singing the latest rock and rap songs, many of which have lyrics reflecting violence, alienation and sexual innuendos. Once I heard a group of third and fourth graders riding in a van singing loudly over and over again the chorus of a song they had been hearing on the radio: "We will, we will rock you, sock you, pick you up and drop you." An adult had to step in and say it was time to sing something else – a song without violence. Only then did they begin another song.

We live at a time in which anger, violence and sex predominate in the media, and so it is logical that the words to popular songs will reflect this state of affairs. Children are great imitators and quickly pick up on the music, attitudes and gestures of popular performers.

Teachers can build positively on children's natural love for music by offering them alternatives to the negative aspects of mass music and music

videos. Fine children's music is available as well as certain folk songs and contemporary songs for adults which can be an invaluable tool in helping to create an atmosphere of cooperation and respect in the classroom. When children sing songs that they enjoy, there is a collective feeling of unity and pleasure. Funny songs make children laugh, and laughter aides their mental health. Songs which require children to contribute a word, a line or a verse encourage creativity. Songs about childhood conflicts show children that their problems are not unique, while songs on friendship and respecting one another foster a positive, open attitude toward others. There are songs dealing with global issues such as the need for peace and for saving the environment which can be engaging.

Such songs need not be didactic. There are many readily available that feature creative musical arrangements with catchy tunes and words that are equally so, and children can really enjoy singing them.

Music on these themes can help bring out the best in children. They encourage discussion of right and wrong, of why people are unkind to one another and what can be done about it. This in turn can lead to role-playing serious childhood issues such as feeling left out or being scared of a bully. When children are not afraid to express their feelings in class, helped in part by songs freely dealing with personal issues, a sense of security is created, cutting down on frustration and therefore behavior problems.

When they hear songs about peace, social justice and about people who have worked for these ends, they can feel more positive and hopeful about their future. These types of songs can be taught in the earliest years. **Ilene Moore,** a first-grade teacher wrote:

"I love to sing and I have a captive audience. As a product of the inspiring 60's, my classes echo the songs of the Freedom-riders, the Civil Rights Movement, ecology, peace and love. Some teachers may fear presenting certain folksongs because of the difficult verbiage, and some songs may seem above the heads of the young ones. Have no fear! I find it is the best tool I have to teach sensitivity and fairness.

"There is no piano. I do not have a great voice. I do not have a lot of songs on paper. All I have and I need is my love and enthusiasm to get the message of the songs across to the kids. They catch that joy. Then, any song is teachable. Words are explained so that the song becomes a part of each child.

"Folksongs in the classroom make learning so much more fun. The environment in the classroom can be changed from:
tense to loving
tired to energetic
noisy to quiet
'I don't care' to 'Hey, I'm here for you!'" [1]

Singing can simply be organized by a single teacher in his or her class. It can also be regularized on a school-wide basis. In one school, every Wednesday afternoon for half an hour, children from a number of classes gathered in one room, and with the aid of a guitar, they built up a wide repertoire of songs. These classes not only had more fun in school, but also enjoyed trips more as they traveled in buses and subway trains singing their favorite songs they had learned from their teachers.

How to Sing With a Class Despite "Not having a good voice"

Teachers may enjoy listening to music but not want to sing with their classes because they feel they don't have a good voice. This is a great mistake because you and your students are missing out on an enriching experience which is a lot of fun. You don't have to have a good voice to sing with children. **Mary Richards** of the **Richards Institute of Music Education and Research** in Portola Valley, California wrote that many teachers who were told as they were growing up that they couldn't sing stopped singing which created great personal problems for them.

"Time after time we have provided assurance, encouragement and singing assistance to teachers whose childhood and adult years were clouded by the idea that they had no song. When one who has been denied the singing experience discovers her or his singing voice, a remarkable release seems to result." [2]

John W. Scott, retired high school social studies teacher and long-time editor of *Folksong in the Classroom* wrote:

"Tone deafness is a serious myth in the United States, and tailor-made for the singing phobic. Baring overt physical disability, anyone can learn to sing. If you really have trouble with the whole idea, take a few voice lessons. If your school has a music teacher, he/she would be more than adequate, and probably willing to help. It should take no more than two or three lessons to get you started." [3]

According to **John A. Scott** and **Laurence I. Seidman** who also were editors of *Folksong in the Classroom:*

"...many people have fairly pleasant voices. Teachers, who are very accepting of students, are overly harsh on themselves. Their voices are usually much better than they give themselves credit for.

"But the quality of your voice is a false issue anyway.

"The whole idea of folksongs is to enjoy them yourself. They are not necessarily to be sung to entertain others. You do not need to play an instrument or have a trained voice to sing folksongs. Your role as the teacher is the same with folksongs as with any other medium: to transmit and teach a song so that the students can make it their own — assimilate it for their own pleasure and information. The teacher is singing the song to the students not to entertain them (though it may do that also), but to make them aware of the melody, the words and their meaning and their background.

"You are merely the vehicle through which the student can discover the song and learn to sing it for himself. So try it – sing away and enjoy yourself. Your students will discover a new side of you and be swept up by both your nervousness and enthusiasm and the beauty and meaning of the song itself." [4]

Finally, "Singing in the classroom is an act of bravery and children love bravery. What a wonderful paradox. Bravery without physical danger. Yes, the cowards way out. By singing in the classroom the teacher demonstrates bravery, emotional maturity and challenges students to follow." [5]

If, in spite of the quotes above, you still feel reluctant to sing alone to your students, you can choose songs you like which you think your class will enjoy. Then you can play CDs to teach the melody as you sing along, or have other teachers or parents introduce new songs. Children can contribute by bringing in music from home that they want to share with their classmates.

John W. Scott, quoted above, gives helpful information on how to make singing successful in your classroom. Here are some of his points:

1. If students are disruptive, stop the class and insist on getting respect. "I ask them if they think singing alone in public is easy. They don't think it is. Now the culprits, not me, are seen by the rest of the class as the ones who have stopped the music. I challenge them to try to sing

a serious song seriously, and invite them to the front of the class to do so. Of course, my offer has never been accepted, because it is precisely the kids who are threatened by public singing who try to interrupt it. Seldom if ever do I have to be as vehement as I think this passage implies. Usually there is no contest. I merely explain that I insist on a safe environment where people are not ridiculed for making mistakes or taking chances in the interest of education.

2. "…I tend to believe song is often the language of secrets, of the unexpressed and unsaid. It's possible to safely intrude with a song where you otherwise might fear to tread. By mirroring what students are feeling with a song you will tend to ease stresses and gain cooperation. Obviously the more songs you have, the greater your flexibility.
3. "…Sometimes I forget how good a song is, because I've heard it so many times I'm thoroughly bored with it. I can't remember ever really liking 'This Land is Your Land' until the following incident took place:

   "After singing this Woody Guthrie song with a group of second graders, I felt a persistent tugging at my clothing. A child's hand had a fist full of my pants leg, but his eyes were staring out the classroom window, transfixed on the horizon. 'It's really mine? really?' he repeated over and over with each tug. I had no idea what he was talking about until I followed his gaze and realized there was nothing out there but the point where the sky met the hill outside his school. I believe the song imparted to this child not only a sense of collective ownership for our country, but also a responsibility for it. I was impressed." [6]

Other Advantages of Music in the Classroom

Music can focus the attention of a restless class especially if there is clapping, stamping feet, standing up or some other physical motion involved. Teachers who notice that their students don't seem to be listening or concentrating on their work can try changing the subject beginning

with a familiar song or songs to ease the transition. This is much more fun than yelling or nagging students to do the work that few seem to be interested in at the moment.

I once visited a crowded 1st-grade class with an excellent teacher. She had a very small portable piano and had taught her students how to march around the room using hand and arm motions as they sang. They learned how not to bump into anyone else as they did this. Between lessons and when they got restless, she took out her piano and they sang one of the many songs she taught them while getting some exercise marching around the room.

Music can also be used advantageously to improve reading skills. In learning a new song, the melody aids in remembering the printed words. If children are learning from a CD, be sure that the words are clear and not drowned out by loud background music.

One technique is to number each line so that it is easier to help lost students to keep up. For example, if they are reading and singing the song, and you notice some have fallen behind, you only have to say "Line 9" or whatever line they are on for them to catch up. If you want to discuss the meaning of a particular line, you have only to call out its number for all to quickly find it.

This can be used at the high school and adult literacy levels to help students who can't keep up or who space out reconnect easily with the words.

Students who read poorly can be so frustrated that they become discipline problems. Reading while singing is one way to help them become more comfortable with the printed word and to reduce their anxiety.

A teacher can select appropriate songs and create reading lessons that encompass word recognition skills, comprehension and literary appreciation. The rhythm and melody of a song can help develop a cadence or pattern to reading expression. The tune and beat help the reader/singer continue from one sound, word or phrase to the next. A song can tell a story that conveys emotional feelings that can stimulate a desire to read,

and the artistic expression of language in musical form is a compelling force that all can enjoy.

Music in Other Subject Areas

Music can be used as a soothing or stimulating background to class activities. For example, a teacher once told me that she played Johann Sebastian Bach's Two- or Three-Part Inventions during certain math lessons. She explained to her class how mathematical Bach's music was and they listened to selections. She played Bach whenever the class was doing complex mathematical operations. The complicated nature of the pieces she played were an appropriate backdrop to the challenging math assignments, and she thought the driving, relentless pace of the music symbolized the determination the class needed to solve the problems.

Teachers who know about opera, classical music, musicals or any other kind of music should share some of that knowledge and appreciation with their students. The music most children are exposed to these days is limited to a few children's songs and the latest rock or rap hits that they hear on the radio or see on videos. Anything we can do to broaden their appreciation of other kinds of music can only enrich their lives and make them happier.

A high school biology teacher once told me that she often played Italian opera while students were working on a class assignment. She told her students why she loved opera and explained what the pieces she played were about. Her class began to show interest in this musical form, especially when the pieces were about love.

Music in the Social Studies Curriculum

Social Studies curricula have traditionally tended to be dry, lifeless and boring. Many students are turned off to this subject and grow into

adulthood seeing no point in studying the past. The main problem as explained in **Chapter 7, "The Need for a Curriculum of Social Justice"** is due to the content which usually focuses on dates, wars and famous white men. The problems, joys, successes and failures of everyday life in past historical periods are often left out. History is portrayed through emotionless paragraphs that seem to have no relevance for today. Students rarely read about movements for social justice organized by ordinary people, the strengths and weaknesses of these movements and what we can learn from them.

(Books have been written to explain why this is so. The conclusion has been that the people who have controlled our country from its inception are by and large wealthy, white, Christian males. This class of people has wanted to sing its own praises so as to maintain its own power and wealth. It is simply not in its interests to encourage books and school curricula depicting the importance of average, struggling working people and their organizations over the centuries at home and abroad, and their influence in the creation of history. Reading such history may provide encouragement for people today to take action for a more just society.)

As teachers search for ways to convey this hidden history, music can be our great ally. Music can evoke deep feelings in the listener and bring to life the strong emotions that accompanied historical events which unfolded recently or many years ago.

Music can build understanding of what they have learned by putting information in a different context. Suppose your class is studying the history of transportation and the difficult working conditions of the laborers who laid railroad tracks across our country. If you teach them a work song in which there are motions that imitate hammering ties into the rails, and you stress how heavy the hammer was and that men had to repeat these motions all day long, students will develop more sympathy and respect for these workers as well as admiration for what they collectively accomplished.

Here are some ways I used music as part of my social studies curriculum.

Music in the Study of the Vietnam War

During the Vietnam War, my friend Adrienne Sciutto, a high school social studies teacher, invited me to sing protest songs to high school students in her school's Little Theater. Social Studies students had been studying the pros and cons of the war during their current events discussions, and this was a chance to hear reasons through song why there was a massive anti-war movement in the country. I had been active in The Teachers Committee for Peace in Vietnam and had been leading singing with a guitar at rallies against the war. (Anti-war songs were a big part of this peace movement.)

She had tried to get a speaker from the U.S. Army from a local base to share the stage with me but was unsuccessful. She invited me anyway, and I sang a number of songs to a large gathering of social studies students and their teachers.

The students were very attentive and asked important questions during the Q and A.

The principal had been listening from the back of the room and when the event was over, he was visibly upset. He told Adrienne that this program was one-sided, whereupon she said she could continue to try to get a speaker from the military. "This would not be worth it," he replied, "because nothing that he could say would equal the power of those songs."

Teachers, especially those without tenure, need to be sure to cover their bases when presenting controversial issues with students. Studying different sides of an issue followed by respectfully listening to different points of view can help develop students' critical thinking skills, and sometimes drive them to take action.

Many years later when I was Director of Outreach in the N.J. Department of Urban Education at the Rutgers/Newark campus, I also ran the Student

Teacher Program. One of our students was doing his practice teaching in a high school social studies class. At one point, his curriculum included the Vietnam War, and he told me he and his cooperating teacher wanted to include protest songs.

I showed up to his class with my guitar, sang a couple of songs and played one or two on a CD. I gave out the words before each song so as to define any uncommon words, to put the song in historical perspective, talk about the terrible waste of human lives, and to answer any questions.

The students, who my student teacher said were hard to please, were quite interested and some said they would look up the songs on the Internet so they could remember them.

Study of Paul Robeson

One year I was teaching a fourth-grade class. I read that Paul Robeson grew up in the nearby town of Somerville, New Jersey. I decided to introduce the children to his life story and his music especially as a follow-up to a cultural program they had seen in school which showed the connection between West African music, spirituals, blues and gospel music.

I stressed his academic achievements, his athletic skills, the fact that he became a lawyer, but chose to spend his life as a singer and actor. I explained how he had always spoken out against discrimination of African Americans, and that he had refused to sing or perform before segregated audiences. This limited his chances to make a living here, so he went abroad and was very well-received.

Once back in the U.S., the government took away his passport because he had spoken out against the treatment of African Americans while he was overseas as well as for equality for all, which was embarrassing to the leaders of our country during a time of strictly enforced segregation.

I played for the children an excerpt from a three-hour public radio program (Pacifica—WBAI in New York City) I had taped on Paul Robeson's life.

The people of Wales had a concert honoring him and had hooked up a telephone so he could talk and sing to them across the Atlantic Ocean, and they in turn could talk with and sing for him.

The children were very moved by the deep affection the Welsh people expressed for Robeson and also by the injustice of his having to sing into a telephone instead of in person. They were greatly relieved when they heard that his passport was eventually restored after national and international protests.

Once the class knew something about Mr. Robeson, I wrote out the words to certain spirituals and other songs he sang. Each day we read the words to another song, heard him sing from one of my records and sang along with him.

I pointed out to the class that spirituals had hidden meanings, giving clues to slaves on how, when and where to escape and who would point the way.

After explaining to the class the story of the Jews in Egypt who were led to freedom by Moses, I gave out the following handout:

"Go Down Moses"

This is a song that came out of slavery. It has a hidden meaning. "Moses referred to Harriet Tubman. What do you think Egypt land, Israel and Pharaoh could mean?

Chorus: Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land.
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

1. When Israel was in Egypt land,
let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
let my people go.

2. Chorus

3. "Thus spoke the Lord," bold Moses said,
"Let my people go.
If not I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go."

4. No more shall they in bondage toil
Let my people go.
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil
Let my people go.

5. Chorus

We discussed this song and heard Paul Robeson sing it. They were very moved as they sang with him. His magnificent deep voice reflected the pain of slavery but also hope for a release from bondage. The children saw how hearing or reading about the Jews' experience, even though it was over 2,000 years ago, gave hope to American slaves that one day they too would be free.

When the children heard that Mr. Robeson was very ill, they wrote touching letters wishing he would get well, admiring his life of commitment to fight discrimination against his people, expressing sadness that his passport had been taken away for so many years and appreciation for his singing. One girl was so impressed with his voice, she wrote, "I wish I had a voice like yours." Another child who wanted to give him something, drew a picture of a small hat and said, "Here is a hat for you."

The children learned much from the study of Paul Robeson's life. Key points included the following:

1. Music from the past can help people understand what happened before they were born.
2. Music can make you feel deeply about what is just and unjust.
3. Music can give you hope for the future.
4. Important lessons can be learned by reading about the past. For example: The Jews freed themselves from slavery over 2,000 years ago. This helped inspire slaves in the United States to fight for their freedom; Paul Robeson and others spoke out and acted against segregation. This encouraged many people to do the same and eventually public and private places became integrated. Mr. Robeson's passport was taken away. Worldwide protests had it restored.

The overall lesson from this study is that people who take a stand against injustice can help make the world more just and fair.

Using Music in Any Study of Africa

Music from Africa has had a great impact on the evolution of music in North and South America and the Caribbean. It was from the western section of the African continent that millions of people were stolen and brought across the Atlantic to live in slavery.

These Africans brought with them the memory of their music. They did not forget the unique intricate rhythms of the drums and other percussive

instruments, the varied musical styles such as call and response and their spirited dances. In the U.S. this music evolved into the blues, spirituals, gospel music, jazz and rock and roll. The heavy, rhythmic beats in modern popular music can be traced back to its African roots.

Children still have many stereotyped and negative ideas about African peoples. Despite the struggle for independence from western colonialism and the many contributions of Africans to world culture, the Tarzan image of the Great White Man vs. inferior natives lives on.

One way to help children develop more respect for African and African-American people is to introduce them to African music.

West African music makes you want to move, clap, sing and dance. Children love to do these things, and so it is a subject they can more easily pay attention to. Whenever I was teaching students anything about Africa, I always brought in music especially after I read the following in *African Kingdoms* by Basil Davidson (N.Y.: Time, Inc., 1966):

"The most astonishing element in African drumming is not sound, but rhythm. Unlike western music, which is built on simple rhythmic patterns, like the one-two-three, one-two-three of the waltz, African drumming is polyrhythmic. After the opening bars, in which the master drummer announces the theme, each drummer takes up a complementary variation and elaborates upon it, crisscrossing it and weaving it into the rhythms of sound. Most non-Africans cannot follow the intricacies of African drum music much beyond the introductory bars. But Africans hear each rhythm as a distinct pattern, frequently picking out one to follow with their feet, while the other parts of their bodies follow other rhythms – shoulders moving to one, feet to another, heads still a third."

To help children understand the complexity of African rhythms, I first pick a song they are familiar with in English such as "Row Your Boat" or "She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain." I sing it and clap at the same

time. I point out how these songs have only one beat, in this case 4/4 or 2/4, and explain that this is how much of our music is.

Then I tell them that music from Africa has many rhythms going at the same time, and this is called polyrhythmic; that while western music has been built on simple rhythmic patterns, in African music, five such rhythms played simultaneously are common, and as many as a dozen at a time have been recorded. (*Africa and Africans*, Paul Bohannan and Philip Curtin, American Museum of Natural History, 1964, reprinted 1995)

I pick three students or groups of groups of students and give them each a different rhythm to clap simultaneously. Example, 3/4, 4/4, and 6/8. They quickly discover how difficult it is to keep up their assigned rhythms.

I point out that African musicians can do this easily. I take out the album Olatunji, "Drums of Passion" (Columbia Records) and play the piece "Akiwowo" (Chant to the Trainman) in which the drums have many different beats, and the singers have their own rhythm. The children are very impressed.

Another piece, "Oya" (Primitive Fire) creates a mental picture, through drumming and other percussive instruments, of a spark taking hold and growing into a big, raging flame which dies out at the end of the piece. I ask the class to raise their hands when they think the spark has ignited the leaves and wood. They listen carefully and most of them can tell when the flame begins to burn and when it dies out.

I also point out that this song was dedicated to the idea of freedom. If people aren't treated fairly, they must struggle hard to change this. Maybe only one person begins, symbolized by the spark at the beginning of "Oya," but when others join, it can become a strong force for justice, reflected in the music as it becomes more powerful, louder and more complex.

I have the class listen to the different rhythms, and I point them out when they are heard. One class was fortunate in that African drummers and dancers came to our school and that gave our study of African rhythms a greater reality.

I had almost no discipline problems when we were listening and learning about African music. It is so dynamic and exciting, the children were caught up in the enjoyment and were focused on how interesting and fun it was.

Follow-up lessons included discussing the African roots of Negro spirituals, work songs, blues and jazz, and singing and listening to these types of music. I gathered information from:

The Story of Jazz by Langston Hughes

Echoes of Africa in Folk Songs of the Americas by Beatrice Landeck, McKay, 1961

We listened to some of their favorite popular songs looking for any intricate rhythms that would indicate African musical influence on these songs.

There is so much more that a teacher can do with the study of Africa and African-American music, but the point here is to emphasize how music from any culture your class studies can help develop more appreciation for that culture.

My students' great enjoyment of African music as well as American songs they learned that were influenced by this music was a major factor in improving their attitudes toward Africa and African-Americans.

A Note of Caution

Whenever your class listens to singing in another language, one or more students may ridicule it by exaggerating certain sounds hoping others will laugh. It is very important to tell children that other languages can be used to express everything English does: sadness, happiness, fear and every other kind of emotion. I explain that English can sound strange to people in other countries.

If a child speaks another language, I have that child write in their language on the board, or I do, and I have the children learn to say and write words and phrases in this language. If no one knows a foreign language, I teach the class some words.

For example, I make two columns:

Spanish	**English**
Hola	Hello
Como esta usted?	How are you?
Bien, gracias.	Fine, thank you.
Si	Yes
No	No

Swahili	**English**
Jambo	Hello
U hali gani?	How are you?
Njema	Fine, thanks.

Children feel important when they can say something in another language, and it helps build their respect for the language and the people.

Some CDs and songs found on the Internet that are in other languages have the words included in English and the other language. You can copy the verses or put them on the board and compare the similarities and differences. For example, if your class is studying about South Africa, there are songs available to play for your class. I used an album entitled "South African Liberation" (Safco Records) which has the song "Mandela" in the Zulu language praising Nelson Mandela who spent 27 years in South African prisons and became president when he was finally released. The name Mandela is repeated many times and I asked the children to raise their hands every time they heard it.

By looking at one or more verses of this song, students could see that Zulu is a written language and can express important ideas just as English can.

Conclusion

There is no question that the inclusion of music in the curriculum can immeasurably enrich a child's life. Laurence Seidman, quoted above, sums it up by focusing on the effect folk music can have on your students:

"Folksongs are magic. They are like no other medium. When students sing folksongs, they become the people they sing about. They not only learn about the runaway slave, the housewife on the frontier – they see, feel and experience being that person. The words and tune bring alive that period of history. Because the songs have been shaped, honed and polished over a period of time, every line paints a picture which illuminates the scene forever in your student's mind.

"...most importantly folksongs are magic because they really work!!!! They are an emotional and intellectual catalyst that excites your students and makes them want to know more about the social, historical and literary period of the song and the people involved. I have seen it happen again and again. Once students learn a song, they rarely forget it. Nor does it lose its potency to stimulate further learning.

"Folksongs are the voice of the people who built our country, passing on and sharing their thoughts, experiences, sorrows and joys.

"...my entire life has been enriched by them. I have sung with thousands of students on all grade levels. I have never found a student who did not like to sing – once he/she found out they were singing for themselves – not for a grade or for an audience." [7]

Endnotes

1. *Folksong in the Classroom*, "Correspondence from our Readers," Vol. X, #l, Fall 1989, p.4.
2. Ibid., "Song, An Inalienable Right," Mary Richards, Vol. IV, #1, Autumn 1983, p. 36.
3. Ibid., "How to Get Your Students Singing," John W. Scott, Vol. X, #1, Fall 1989, p. 8 and 9.
4. Ibid., "Some Thoughts on 'I have a voice like a frog so I can't sing in my class'," John A. Scott, Laurence I. Seidman, Vol. IV, #1, Autumn 1983, p.5.
5. Ibid., Vol. X, #l, Fall 1989, p.9.
6. Ibid., p.12-14.
7. *Folksong in the Classroom*, "Adieu and Farewell – Folksongs are Magic," Laurence Seidman, Vol. IX, #3, Spring 1989, p. 96-97.

CHAPTER TEN

PART II: MUSIC RESOURCES FOR ALL GRADE LEVELS

1. **Children's Music Network**

   Their mission statement states: "The Children's Music Network celebrates the positive power of music in the lives of children by sharing songs, exchanging ideas and creating community." Its website provides songs on peace, multi-cultural and environmental themes. You can listen to songs in each category; often the words are provided and CDs listed that contain a song you may be interested in sharing with your class. There are articles to read and videos to watch.

2. **Peoples Music Network**

   The People's Music Network describes itself as "a diverse community of singers, artists, activists and allies that cultivates music and cultural work as catalysts for a just and peaceful world." It features songs on many topics that could be integrated into varied middle school and high school curricula. You will also find links to their concerts and workshops featured on YouTube and information on musical gatherings they have around the country.

3. Scott, John Anthony and Scott, John Wardlaw, *Ballad of America, A History of the United States through Folksong, 3rd edition,* Folksong in the Classroom, Inc., 2003. This book is an excellent source of songs

from the colonial period through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s. It provides the music, lyrics and the meaning of each song within a particular historical period. Including songs in the study of history can heighten student interest in any social studies program and bring an emotional component that can help to humanize our ancestors.

4. Blood, Peter and Patterson, Annie, *Rise Up Singing, The Group Singing Songbook, Larger Print Leaders Edition, A Sing Out!,* Hal Leonard, 2005. This amazing book provides words, chords and sources to 1,200 songs in many categories including friendship, hope, rounds, unity, work, peace, men, women and humor. Any teacher can find appropriate songs here for any grade level. An introduction by folk icon Pete Seeger and a section called "How to Use This Book" can inspire anyone, even those who think they can't sing, to give it a try.

   If you visit https://singout.org/ you will find music videos on many topics, recommended songs/singers/CDs, extensive archives of folk songs in alphabetical order, blogs, publications, and a history of their 70+ years of existence. Their mission statement is: "to preserve and support the cultural diversity and heritage of all traditions and contemporary folk music, and to encourage making folk music a part of everyday life."

5. **National Children's Folksong Repository**

   This website says, "If you are interested in Arts Education, Children's Health and Society, the National Children's Folksong Repository is a public folklore project that will preserve what is left of our oral culture. Children in the United States aren't singing the songs of their heritage, an omission that puts the nation in jeopardy of losing a longstanding and rich part of its identity."

   This website encourages children to send in their playground songs, chants and games to preserve oral history that is becoming lost due

to reliance on technology. This website has links to see and hear children's outdoor culture, and teaches clapping songs, chants and games that teachers can teach their pupils.

Carawan, Guy and Candie, eds., *Sing for Freedom, The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs,* New South Books, 2007. There is a companion CD of live field recordings of songs sung and excerpts of speeches made in the midst of rallies, demonstrations and marches. For any class studying the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s, this book and CD capture the spirit, powerful singing and commitment of the participants to an end to segregation and inequality. Students who learn some of these songs are invariably moved by them. When I would sing such songs with my elementary school students, accompanying our singing with my guitar, they would say things like "I dig that freedom song, that 'Amen' song. I cannot stop singing it all day." "I had fun singing the songs." "I love the song 'I woke up This Morning with My Mind on Freedom.'" One child was so impressed with information on this period and the songs that he wrote me a note that ended "You've put a lot of sense into some of our heads." To see how these songs were explored in my alternative high school class with a singer from that period, see **Matt Jones, Inspiring Students with an Invited Speaker** on my website.

6. **Examples of other CDs to consider:**

Linking Up: Music and Movement in the Peaceable Classroom for Ages 3 – 9 Years by Sarah Pirtle is a CD of 46 songs and a teacher's guide with activities related to each song. Ms. Pirtle is a teacher, singer and songwriter who believes in the power of music to promote peaceful conflict resolution. Children not only sing, clap and stamp their feet, but also create new movements, dances and new verses. These songs will inspire singing teachers to sing more and inhibited teachers to sing anyway.

Walk a Mile and *Swingin' in the Key of L* are 2 CDs by Vitamin L, a chorus of children and adults who sing songs that stress how to improve interpersonal relationships. Many of the songs have a rock beat and are backed up by a band. Songs include: "Here's to the Hero" (We all can be heroes – which my high school class enjoyed); "So Much to Share" (Older people deserve our respect and we can learn from them).

Here is the chorus to their inspiring song "Walk a Mile": "I want to walk a mile in your shoes…, I want to know what you think and what you feel, So I really want to walk a mile in your shoes." A student teacher in a 4th-grade told me that some children in her class were not getting along. I showed up soon after and began teaching her students this song. One boy yelled out "I'm not singing" and also said loudly to another boy, "You are poison." I calmly stated, "That comment is not acceptable, and you don't have to sing." I quickly went back to teaching the song. The rest of the class enjoyed the song and the words. When the disruptive boy saw that everyone else was ignoring him and having a good time, he slowly began to sing too.

When other 4th-grade teachers heard about this song, they taught it to their classes, and it became the theme song of this grade level. I left the CD for them to use which made this task easier.

7. Koch, Lynn Arthur, "Singing Folk Songs in the Classroom for the Musically-Challenged," February 2017: 5-page article online that provides helpful tips which gives strategies for teaching songs – pointing out that no accompaniment is needed and exploring why.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

POSTSCRIPT

(Is teaching enough?)

While *How to Teach Without Screaming* focuses on solutions inside classrooms and schools, we know that what happens in the outside world affects our students and us in often powerful ways.

We are living in frustrating times where politicians blame teachers for society's ills, where funding for education is not a priority, where the military budget is massive and the education budget is small, and where teacher salaries in most states are low.

An essential solution to this unfortunate situation calls for teachers to work through their unions, professional associations, and whenever possible with community organizations, to press for changes that we need to make our teaching more enjoyable and effective for all concerned as well as to improve our society overall. If necessary, teachers can follow the lead of teachers in places like West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Seattle, Chicago and other states who have gone on strike, garnered incredible support from their communities and won victories not only for themselves and their students, but also for others.

For example, a nine-day teacher strike in 2018 in West Virginia, which closed all public schools, resulted in victories that included a 5% pay raise that applied to all public sector workers, not just teachers.

Here is a list of some organizations whose websites feature stories of creative teaching; descriptions of beneficial books and other resources for teachers and students; how to address controversial issues; examples of outreach beyond the school to help with community, state-wide and

national projects; descriptions of teacher-led organizations working for social change and more:

Educators for Social Responsibility Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility Rethinking Schools Teaching for Change Teaching Tolerance – Diversity, Equity and Justice, a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center Zinn Education Project

It is difficult for educators to add something else to their often, all-consuming job of preparing for classes and teaching them, some needing to have a second job to make ends meet, as well as family responsibilities. However, those who can fit in one more thing and find an organization whose goals they can support will have the added satisfaction of knowing that by uniting to improve education and/or joining with others to resolve related societal issues, we can help build a movement that can create a brighter future for all of us and for generations to come.

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Professor, Department of Urban Education,
Rutgers University, Newark, N.J.

"How to Teach Without Screaming provides ample resources, real-life examples and suggestions that are laid out in a non-judgmental and straightforward manner. I wish I had a book like this when I began teaching."

Wynnie-Fred Victor Hinds,
Elementary, High School and College Languages Teacher.

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