

Introduction

The Core Ideas of This Book

The core ideas that weave their way through this book are *relationships*, *authenticity*, *cultural responsiveness*, and the *democratic purposes of schools*. When we teach from relationship, offer authentic learning experiences, and engage in culturally responsive practices, we embody the democratic purposes of schooling. It is in our classrooms that students practice the skills and dispositions associated with meaningful participation in our democratic society.

What are some of the core ideas you hold about teaching and learning? How are they similar or different from these four core ideas?
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Relationships

The relationships we can create with students are at the heart of being an effective teacher. Nearly every classroom problem—not doing homework, discipline, emotional trauma, motivation—can be prevented, resolved, or improved through a positive relationship between student and teacher. This means teaching is first and foremost a human enterprise, an endeavor that involves at least two human beings of different status and age and perhaps race, culture, sexual orientation, or religion meeting in the shared spaces of the classroom and school. When we acknowledge and understand this, teaching takes on an entirely different look and feel. Good relationships between teachers and students help make the school

a safe learning environment where every student can bring their whole self to the classroom. Kids can be motivated and challenged academically when they are treated with respect and are known and valued.

When relationships are central, students are less fearful of ridicule or being unnoticed and can more confidently participate in discussions, contribute their ideas, make mistakes, invest in classroom activities, and achieve their potential. This can only happen when the teacher cultivates a classroom climate where encouragement, equity, authenticity, and real-life engagement are promoted and supported through relationship. A teacher's classroom management, instructional choices, and professional growth should all be motivated by a commitment to creating positive relationships with students.

Relationships are at the heart of making classrooms safe for all students to learn and grow socially and emotionally. Anxiety, depression, teen suicide, drug abuse, school shootings, and other mental health and behavioral issues are on the rise. The legacies of racism, oppression, and inequity have made classrooms unsafe for non-majority children. Schools and classrooms are part of the problem because they are a microcosm of the larger society, but they are also places where we can address these problems as we create safety and engagement. Relationships are the foundation for creating an environment where students and teachers thrive so they can participate in the rigors of discussion and in-depth, engaging activities. Classrooms built on relationships invite students to bring their most authentic selves to the classroom.

Authenticity

We use the term *authenticity* in two ways. First, teachers must be willing to engage students when teaching and building relationships with their most authentic self. This means that teachers must be genuine when interacting with students and colleagues. Young people are pretty crafty BS detectors. It's hard enough to create and nurture relationships when being authentic; it's even harder when putting on a fake persona or valuing power more than the work of developing relationships. Teacher-student relationships built on authenticity can weather tough times. Students are more motivated to meet high expectations when they know the caring is real. Trust, joy, and humor are also necessary for building authentic relationships. Together, they can create an environment of

positive human interaction that we believe is at the heart of healthy, engaged, and challenging classrooms.

Authenticity also applies to instructional activities, which should be more connected to real life than the worksheets and graphic organizers that are so frequently found in classrooms. The more authentic or real the activity, the more likely students will be to buy in and engage in challenging and powerful learning. Solving real-world scientific or mathematical problems, discussing actual policy dilemmas facing the community, drawing examples from a student's life, and writing for real audiences are ways to bring authenticity to your instruction and make learning relevant to students.

Cultural Responsiveness

As teachers and as members of a democratic society, we recognize that oppression by the dominant culture exists in the form of racism, heterosexism, classism, anti-LGBTQIA+, xenophobia, and other forms of intolerance that result in inequities for nondominant cultures and people. All students and families in our communities, regardless of their identities, should be equally valued members of the school community. A commitment to equity requires persistent effort to root out structural racism, sexism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and other isms. Too many young people have been marginalized and disrespected in schools. It takes conscious and specific effort to redress past injustices and to invite every student into the learning process.

If all students are to learn in our classrooms, we must honor and give validity to their experiences, voices, and identities. One way to do this is to use and respect the ways they self-identify. We want to note our use of pronouns in this book. We use *they*, *them*, or *their* as singular pronouns, not just *he*, *she*, *him*, or *her*. We think this is more inclusive and allows space for individuals to identify themselves in ways of their own choosing.

The Democratic Purposes of Schools

Our public education system exists, most importantly, to help students learn, practice, and nurture the values of our democratic society. It is in

our public education system that students of all ages come to appreciate and promote core democratic values:

- Equity
- Anti-racism
- Treating others with respect
- Listening
- Agreeing to disagree responsibly
- Open-mindedness
- Forming opinions based on facts
- Taking turns
- Engaging in civic activities
- Justice for all

We want students in our classrooms to learn to be civil in society, to recognize that democracy is an evolving political system, and to see themselves as effective actors in making our society more just. These ideals were articulated at the founding of the nation, and despite a rise in polarization, the power of social media, and laws limiting what teachers can teach, these same ideals remain central to why we compel all young people to attend school. Private schools and charter schools are not exempt from this duty; their students must also learn to share the classroom space and the larger society with others who are different from themselves.

Schools and classrooms should be places where students become familiar with the concepts and values associated with social justice. Learning about the causes of inequality and working to end it are important aspects of being a citizen in a democracy. Human rights and equity should be modeled and taught in schools. In a democracy, we have the responsibility to make the world a more just place. Indeed, schools are among the few places in society where young people learn about the balance and tension between rights and responsibilities in a democracy.

Not everyone in this democracy believes that schools are places for promoting justice or equity. Efforts have been made, for example, to limit teaching about systemic racism. State legislatures have passed laws

on what topics teachers can or cannot address in classrooms and at what ages. Bills have been passed that limit what books can be assigned or found in the school library. As teachers, we can use our rights as citizens to protest these laws and help educate our communities about the importance of open inquiry, the risks that censorship has to a free and open democratic society, and how to support the fight for social justice. But we are also public employees who are subject to these sorts of legislation. Each of us makes our individual choices when facing these challenges. This book provides guidance on how to negotiate these pressures while supporting the democratic purposes of schools.

Within a society that is increasingly self-segregating into like-minded communities of socioeconomic and political affiliations, schools and classrooms should be safe places to encounter differences of opinion and background. These are critical experiences for future civic participation and engagement. Many of the skills and types of student engagement we advocate in this book support our democratic core values and develop the role of citizen.

Instilling these values is not the sole responsibility of social studies classes. Collaborative work in math and science classrooms supports the values of democracy. Fair play in physical education classes models how citizens should interact in a democracy. Puzzling out ethical dilemmas in the sciences, from cloning to climate change, is a task for all citizens. Reading stories to elementary school children about different groups starts modeling inclusion. Students should come to see the centrality of liberty in a democracy as they learn the stories and struggles of marginalized peoples in the literature they read and in the people they meet.

There are powerful connections between the interpersonal relationships we advocate for our classrooms and the civic relationships that undergird a functioning democracy. Teachers and students forge bonds of mutual respect and appreciation that cross boundaries of power and age to do meaningful work in the classroom. A democracy depends on equally healthy and respectful relationships among citizens to serve the civic good and promote social justice. When the bonds of relationship among citizens are frayed or stretched, we see polarization and dysfunction in society. The same is true in our classrooms. Thus, the democratic purpose of schools is intimately and powerfully connected to the development of meaningful and productive relationships in our classrooms.

Classrooms with healthy relationships between teachers and students and where learning tasks are more authentic are, by their very nature, more democratic. These classrooms are mini laboratories for participating

in civil society. Classrooms like this allow for greater student voice and choice in learning opportunities and empower students to take on real-life tasks. As they do these things, students are practicing the tasks and skills of citizens. In these classrooms, inclusion and equity are celebrated and honored by modeling and practicing how to live and learn among diverse members of the larger community.

Think back to your own school experiences. What are your memories of relationships, authenticity, cultural responsiveness, and the promotion of democratic values? If you can't think of any, why might that be?