

Creating Caring Classrooms

How to encourage students to communicate, create, and be compassionate of others

KATHLEEN GOULD LUNDY

LARRY SWARTZ



Contents

Introduction: Addressing the Bigger Picture 5

Caring: Such a Common-Sense, Basic Thing 5

The Five Cs: An Evolving Goal 7

Language Matters 8

Creating Caring Classrooms Throughout the Year 10

1: Building Community 13

Doing the Groundwork 14

Games That Build Community 19

Spotlight on the Classroom: “Considering Competition” by David Stocker 24

Story Events That Enrich the Classroom Community 26

The Classroom as a Story Tribe: Sharing Personal Narratives 31

When the Teacher Reads Aloud: A Community-Building Event 37

Spotlight on the Classroom: “Promoting Student Leadership in the Elementary Classroom” by Amy Craze 39

Spotlight on the Classroom: “Engaging the Disengaged” by Ramon San Vicente 42

2: Building Communication 45

The Nature of Communication 45

Games That Encourage Talk 46

Introducing Oral Communication Events 51

Joke and Riddle Telling: A Context for Talk Skills 52

Impromptu Speech Making 53

Learning How to Question 55

Interviewing: Conversation with a Purpose 56

Ten Interviewing Activities 57

When Students Work in Groups: A Matter of Discussion 60

Spotlight on the Classroom: “How SMART Boards Create Community” by Patrick Molicard Chartier 63

Spotlight on the Classroom: “An Online Social Network: Real People in Real Situations” by Lisa Donohue 64

3: Building Collaboration 67

Talking Together, Working Together, Learning Together 67

Games That Build Collaboration 69

Playful Lessons That Foster Collaborative Thinking 72

Introducing Collaborative Literacy Events 79

Problem-Solving Together 79

Choral Dramatization 82

Literature Circles 84

Collaborative Writing: Ten Experiences 88

Spotlight on the Classroom: “The Shine Project: Communication, Collaboration, and Compassion Meet in an Arts-Based Project” by Raymond Peart 92

4: Building Compassion 95

Telling Stories to Build Compassion 95

Acting to Make a Difference 97

Building Compassion Through Interpreting Script 100

Developing a Personal Philosophy 103

Spreading the Word: Be Good, Do Good, Encourage Goodness Everywhere 105

Advocating Gender Equity 107

Spotlight on the Classroom: “Addressing Gender Equity Issues to Foster Inclusive Environments” by Mary Reid 110

Spotlight on the Classroom: “Towards the Reclaiming of Aboriginal Education” by Tanya Senk 112

Putting on Another’s Shoes: Working with Script 114

5: Confronting the Bully Issue 117

A Matter of Relationships 117

Twelve Lessons That Help to Unpack Understanding of the Bully Issue 118

Spotlight on the Classroom: “An Education in Bullying” by Miranda Lytle 141

Towards a Change in Headlines 143

Appendixes 145

A: Recommended Resources on the Bully Issue 145

B: Recommended Professional Resources 149

C: Additional Line Masters for Students 150

Index 154

Introduction

Addressing the Bigger Picture

If we are to raise kids who can think and act ethically, we don't begin with the thinking or the acting. We begin with caring.

—From *Just Because It's Not Wrong Doesn't Make It Right: From Toddlers to Teens, Teaching Kids to Think and Act Ethically*, by Barbara Coloroso

A favorite documentary film, *Children Full of Life*, pays homage to Toshiro Kanamori, a teacher of 40 ten- and eleven-year-old children in Japan. The film documents a variety of events that happen in one classroom over a single school year. Viewers catch a glimpse of the students' writing and sharing of personal notebook entries. They learn about an art project where students trace each other's bodies on large sheets of paper and complete the shapes with visual images that serve as metaphors of who they are. They watch how the class deals with the boy who loses a parent, how the teacher calms a distraught girl remembering the loss of her grandparent, and how the teacher and his class come to terms with a boy not pulling his weight for a class project that has students ready to sail rafts they have created.

The teacher, Mr. Kanamori, believes that everyone comes to school to learn how to have a happy life and to care for others. For this teacher and his students the class mantra becomes, "If one person is unhappy, we are all unhappy." Mr. Kanamori is kind. Mr. Kanamori is tough. He is determined that for the time he and the students spend together, they will be considerate and caring of one another.

No simple task.

This film, which we share with our teacher candidates, is one way that we help our student teachers discover the importance of creating and maintaining caring classrooms.

Caring: Such a Common-Sense, Basic Thing

We all long for the perfect class—the one where everyone gets along and where there is joy in learning about the curriculum in new and inventive ways. As classroom teachers, we have this longing and so do our students.

Sometimes we get very lucky. The mix of individuals in the class, the circumstances we find ourselves in, the particular physical space, the relationships among class members, and the group dynamics all seem to come together in such a way that the whole experience just "clicks." The classroom is a joy to be in, and there is a hum of activity. A sense of purpose and an overall feeling of respect

pervade the room. Experienced teachers recognize when they are having a very good year because everyone in the classroom gets along, trusting the work, trusting each other, trusting themselves.

In other years things don't go as smoothly. There are difficulties in terms of learning and behavioral challenges as well as varying levels of student interest. There does not seem to be enough time to do what needs to be done. The space is too crowded, and the kinds of events and lessons planned seem too difficult.

Many of the factors are hard to pinpoint. Lessons that worked well with other classes seem to fall flat. An uneasiness about the work masks itself as disinterest. There might be an underlying tone of disrespect, of low self-esteem. One or two individuals might set things off. There might be issues connected to chronic bullying and exclusive cliques. Yes, there are moments where everything comes together but, more often than not, the class is disrupted by unhappy events that seem out of teacher control. Everyone feels unsettled. Things are not working.

We cannot spend every summer hoping that next year's perfect class will come along as if by magic. Doing so would make teaching and learning too uneven, too hit and miss, too hard on the soul. There needs to be a way to create a culture of caring about one another, about the work, and about the community both inside and outside the classroom, a culture that is connected to the learning in school and to the future goals of living privately happy and publicly useful lives.

We need to spend time creating a non-competitive culture of listening and cooperation, and an ethic of hearing and valuing everyone's voice. Some teachers might say they don't have time to do this: that it takes too much planning, energy, and time away from the real purpose of education—to teach the curriculum. Our response is that creating this culture *is* the curriculum: that teaching students how to respect one another, value differing opinions, share common experiences, and work towards a critical understanding of complex relationships and ideas is at least partly what school should be about. The goal of any inclusive pedagogy is to create learning environments that reflect, affirm, celebrate, and validate the diversity and complexity of the human experience.

We need to approach the curriculum from a multi-faceted perspective, taking into account content, pedagogy, access, and climate.

Caring about creating caring classrooms does *not* mean lowering our expectations for ourselves or for our students. It means looking at individual students, groups, and the whole class and making curricular decisions based on what we see and glean from the data we collect. Lisa Delpit reminds us about how important it is to maintain high academic expectations for all students coupled with resources that support high achievement. That is why we need to look critically at what is in place in terms of inclusive curriculum so that we can make the necessary changes in our teaching and learning environments.

Here's a story to support becoming a caring teacher. Chip and Dan Heath, authors of *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*, tell a story about a young adolescent who was living life with a "School stinks" mentality. Bobby was described as full of "bad" behaviors—constantly late for school, rarely doing his work, disruptive and threatening. A chaotic home life was outlined as one reason for poor school performance—every school has its Bobbys. School counsellors worked hard to find a solution to give Bobby success.

When asked to identify a time in school when he didn't get into trouble so much, Bobby answered:

BOBBY: I never get in trouble, well, not a lot, in Mrs. Smith's class.

COUNSELLOR: What's different about Mrs. Smith's class?

BOBBY: I don't know, she's nicer. We get a long great.

COUNSELLOR: What exactly does she do that's nicer?

Helping to dig deeper into the problem, Bobby explained that Mrs. Smith seemed to help him behave well. Other teachers usually avoided Bobby, but Mrs. Smith always greeted him as soon as he walked into class. She modified the workload, giving different assignments that were explained more fully for him to complete successfully. As others worked in the class, she checked with him to ensure that he understood the instructions, felt connected to the work, and was challenged but not overwhelmed by what was asked of him. The work had to fulfill a purpose for him.

Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard by Chip Heath and Dan Heath (2011) offers narratives and research in psychology and sociology that help shed light on how we can effect transformative change.

Recognizing the bright spots and moving into action is the stuff of being a better teacher for our students. To give students positive attention seems such a common-sense, basic thing. So simple. So important. This story about Bobby's caring teacher serves as a wakeup to the possibilities of what can happen when we work towards finding and igniting bright spots.

The Five Cs: An Evolving Goal

Creating Caring Classrooms started out to be a book on dealing mainly with bullying issues. We hoped to provide a range of resources, strategies, and frameworks to encourage young people to learn, through literacy and arts events, empathetic understanding through active engagement. We intended to offer teachers a number of text forms and lesson templates that we had developed over the years. With good intentions, we wanted to help teachers prepare their students for times that they might be caught in bullying situations and help them deal with situations where they witnessed hateful behavior. Despite the hundreds of resources in print, online, and through the media that provide guides to teachers and parents to help them deal with the bully, comfort and empathize with the bullied, and empower the bystander, the problem persists. There is no road map for dealing with the bully dilemma.

Our goal is to help teachers tap into the locations, identities, and realities of their students as they share power in the classroom. Our hope is to give teachers ideas about how to nurture student voices as they invest personal interest and increased effort in their own learning.

As we worked together, we realized that the bully issue, although important, is often the outcome of complicated relationships and dynamics that need to be unpacked in various ways. So we decided to address the bigger picture: how teachers could work from the beginning to build on the individual strengths of each student to establish classroom environments of trust and respect.

From our own experience, we knew the benefits of caring classrooms on students' self-esteem, academic motivation, and individual and collective successes. We knew the value of addressing the emotional and spiritual needs of the classroom and the importance of adults treating students with the care and respect that they would extend to their own children.

Creating Caring Classrooms therefore offers a structure for some ideas and strategies for taking control of the classroom agenda so that you and your students can co-create caring classrooms where respect for others is shown, where individual and collective identities are honored, where kindness and concern become crucial backdrops for critical conversations—about the curriculum, about each other, and about the future that lies before us. This book is organized around five Cs:

- Community**
- Communication**
- Collaboration**
- Compassion**
- Confronting the bully issue**

Each of these represents a phase of development.

Confronting bullying is about building healthy relationships. In our classrooms, we need to build a *community* where members can trust, connect with one another, and share.

We need to enrich *communication* skills so students feel comfortable enough to share ideas and prod each other to think, question, explain, guess, predict, wonder, and grow. We need to provide contexts for talk where students share ideas out loud and listen and respond to what is offered by those around them.

Extending communication skills, we feel that it is important to provide opportunities where students engage in *collaboration*. In this way they can learn to solve problems, brainstorm, negotiate, plan, and develop events where everyone can feel success. When learning to collaborate effectively, students can come to appreciate the power of being part of a group of any size. Opportunities for students to work effectively with those having different interests, skills, talents, backgrounds, and identities move students to a better understanding of cooperating and collaborating.

In the next phase in our development scheme, where students have grown as a community, we build *compassion*. As students work together and respond to texts about caring and compassion, they can learn to care and to be compassionate.

Ultimately, the success in each of these phases can lead to *confronting bullying issues*. By stepping into the shoes of others, by dealing with the tough questions, by making connections to personal and world stories, students can reach an understanding of why someone behaves as a bully. They can be prepared to take action when ongoing, deliberate taunting and threats arise. They can come to learn to care.

More Cs for the classroom framework

A caring classroom is like the caring medical clinic whose sign caught our attention. The sign indicated that the clinic is about care, comfort, and confidence. Like that medical clinic, a caring classroom inspires *comfort* and *confidence* within and among all community members. *Cooperation* and *creativity* are other words that could be added to the C framework of the book. For this to be achieved, we need to strive for another important C: *consistency*.

It is hoped that any of the games, lessons, activities, and tips we provide will help teachers achieve a caring atmosphere, but throughout each school day, attention to consistency needs to be paid.

Language Matters

We also need to pay attention to language and become critically aware of how we speak to our students and to our colleagues. The words that we use in classrooms, labs, hallways, cafeterias, dance studios, gymnasias, and soccer fields can be key mechanisms for both oppression and transformation.

If we spend some time being more conscious of the language we use, we become more mindful of its power. In a book titled *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, Susannah Heschel refers to her famous father, an American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians of the 20th century who marched in the Selma Civil Rights March with Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1965. Heschel comments on the importance that her father placed on words:

He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with the uttering of evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds, he

Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity is a collection of essays by Abraham Heschel, edited by Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1996).

Power in What We Say

As a student in the pre-service Teacher Education program at York University, Faculty of Education, Danielle Miller shared this insight: “I have seen the positive power of the teacher’s words countless times. A recent example occurred during my practicum. A not-too-confident student was reading the stage directions of a play in an applied English class. He generally participated in the class with little enthusiasm and never seemed excited about his projects. As he was reading, my mentor teacher [David Wagman] interrupted him and said, ‘I am sorry. I’m going to have to stop you right there.’ Instantly, I saw the fear in the student’s eyes. He was bracing himself for criticism. Instead, my mentor teacher exclaimed: ‘Has anyone ever told you what a beautiful voice you have? You should consider a career in radio or news.’

“I watched the boy’s face as he went from shock, to realization, and finally to a profound sense of joy. Of course, he did this without smiling, because that wouldn’t have been cool. As he read his parts through the rest of the class, he never missed a cue, and the quiet pride he felt was unmistakable in his physicality.

“As a teacher, I will strive to maintain awareness of the wonderful gift that is speech, and use it to spread positive support. It is a tool that can uplift and inspire, but it also can cause terrible damage if used improperly.”

used to tell me when I was a child. They must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The book of Proverbs reminds us, he wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue. (pp. viii–ix)

Being mindful of how we use language in our work matters. Most students enter school expecting that the adults who are entrusted with their care will work on their behalf for their personal and academic success as well as for their present and future happiness. All teachers want the community of students in their classrooms to feel that they are individually as well as collectively valued. Teachers want their classrooms to be places where there is not just tolerance but respect; where there is not just group process but community; where there are not just connections but relationships; and where empathy and compassion are based on understanding rather than on superficial encounters.

We know that we have enormous power to influence the future of the students in our care. We need to be mindful of that power and to remain consistently conscious of what it means to teach fairly in an unfair world. It’s essential that we continually “check ourselves,” that we self-monitor what we are saying, thinking, feeling, and doing in the classrooms and hallways of our schools. We need to be cognizant of our students’ reactions and realities, and know when to change direction if necessary, while approaching learning tasks with sensitivity and discretion.

Seeing ourselves as part of the school community

If we are intent on creating caring classrooms, we must strive to know and understand the communities in which our students live and to recognize how gender, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, social class, urban/rural context, national origin, sexual orientation, and linguistic backgrounds shape interactions in the classroom. We need to stop and gain information so that we are not seen as tourists in the school community but as people who are part of the wider community and who have an interest and a stake in what is happening there and in our classrooms. In efforts to educate ourselves about the rich diversity of the students in our classrooms, we need to promote respect for others, encourage close personal relationships, structure effective communication contexts, and imbue in everyone an engaged concern for the common good.

The following observations on community come from Jacqueline Spence, who serves as central coordinating principal, equity & inclusive schools, Student, Parent and Community School Services, Toronto District School Board.

Walking the Talk of Community Engagement

As an administrator in an inner-city school, I learned many things, with the importance of building trusting relationships with parents and members of the wider community topping the list. I realized that if I truly wanted to create a school community where all students were performing to the best of their ability, I had to understand their daily lived experience. So, I had to be visible not only within the school but also in the community.

I remember one day following a student home because I knew that this student lived next door to a student who had been absent for many days. I had tried to reach the parents by phone but was unsuccessful, so I decided to do a home visit. A parent from the school asked me what I was doing walking through the neighborhood—“Principals don’t do that here.” At that moment, I understood that

as educators, particularly in inner-city communities, we must “walk” the talk of community engagement.

In working with teacher candidates in the Urban Diversity Program at York University, I had the unique opportunity to contribute to a teacher preparation program that put the importance of community at the forefront. Given that the schools where teacher candidates are placed are in inner-city communities, an understanding of the connection of community to school system is essential, as most of the teacher candidates and teachers within the school do not live in the community. At the beginning of each of my three years in the program, there were always students who did not understand the connection between community and school. They insisted that working in the community was not “teaching,” and they wanted to learn how to teach. On some level, I agreed with this statement. Most of the time, the teacher candidates were not *teaching* in their community placements—they were *learning*. By requiring students to do a community placement for a minimum of 40 hours as a part of their course work, the importance of community was emphasized in a meaningful way. The work that the teacher candidates engaged in ranged from helping to plan a Good Food Market to supporting a film-making program run by social workers. Their placement allowed teacher candidates to work with students outside of the traditional classroom setting and gain some insight into the daily lived experiences of the students.

Creating Caring Classrooms Throughout the Year

This book is about helping students gain personal power, establish rewarding relationships, and find fulfilling work in school. It takes time to look after these things in the classroom. One thing that we are advocating is taking the time to do this kind of work—to listen to each other, talk through problems, find out others’ opinions as they talk themselves into understanding, telling personal stories connected to the activities. When it comes to time, doing the kinds of activities outlined in this book definitely represents a challenge. Our advice is to find ways of weaving these activities into what you are already doing in your classroom.

The Decisive Element

Consider these words of Haim Ginatt and how they might apply to us:

“I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life joyous. I can be a tool for torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour; hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, a child humanized or de-humanized.”

The first days of the school year are often about establishing class expectations, outlining routines, doing getting-to-know-each-other activities, and building a trustful relationship between teacher and students, and the students who will be sitting alongside each other from day to day.

There is usually some attempt to build community.

But what happens in the classroom beyond the first day of school? What events help to enrich a sense of community? How will students continue to find the space between the four walls a zone of safety? How will students come to understand and work with those who are similar or different in needs and interests? How will our students work alone, in pairs, in small groups, or as a whole class to work and learn together: to laugh, to create, and to be comfortable enough—safe enough—to share ideas, stories, and feelings with anyone and everyone?

Our advice is to build community not only at the beginning of the year but all through it and not as a separate event but woven into curriculum events. Looking after the learning community becomes part of the everyday work in the classroom, and as time goes by, barriers between students come down, and wonderful friendships and relationships are built.

We encourage novice and experienced teachers to choose the activities and ideas that will work for your particular class. Feel free to amend, adapt, and extend the activities in new ways. Don't be surprised to find that your students respond in unanticipated ways that take the work in a new direction. Probably the best thing to do is to go along with what they are offering up and be surprised by their innovative ideas, by the connections being established among them, and by the new, strong, and respectful relationships that emerge. We hope that you will use this resource to facilitate the students' journeys of personal discovery and empathetic response to each other, to their community, and to other individuals and groups they meet along the way.

Key Chapter Components

The five chapters have a number of features in common, including, of course, an introduction and teaching tips. Depending on chapter theme, however, the balance between the various components will differ. For example, many games promote community building.

- Introductory text sets the context and establishes the skill and content focus for the chapter. Each chapter begins with a pertinent focus quotation.
- Games and activities provide many ways to develop aspects of a caring classroom. Specifically, they offer a foundation and mental set for working well to build community, communication, and collaboration, the first three phases of creating a caring classroom.
- Lessons, sometimes referred to as events, are comprised of instructions that integrate literacy strategies and artistic endeavours. These connect to curriculum expectations, as well as to guidelines that support the creative process and critical thinking.
- Teaching tips offer suggestions for classroom management and for working in group situations, as well as considerations for meeting the instructional needs for a diversity of learners. They always appear as boxed text.
- Literature resources reinforce chapter themes. Fiction and non-fiction sources for exploration include picture books, novel excerpts, scripts, visual images, poetry, and newspaper articles.
- Beyond the use of literature in specific lessons, there are recommended resources: both up-to-date lists of children's literature that you can draw on to support students' learning and reference material that can be used to enrich programming and instruction.
- Reflection and assessment are addressed through key questions and prompts. The book encompasses teacher, group, and self-assessment. Some tools appear as line masters.
- As a special book feature, there are Spotlights on the Classroom, articles in which guest contributors describe authentic classroom experiences and provide practical suggestions for implementing lessons.