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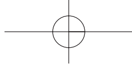
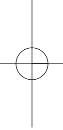
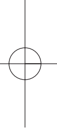
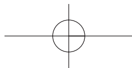


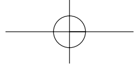


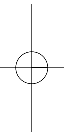


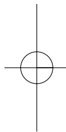
PART ONE

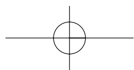
BUILDING TRUST











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BUILDING THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

I was talking to the kids early in the week about field day, telling them what we were going to do and what the events were, and Kenny said, "I've never been on a field day before."

I was surprised. "You haven't?"

He said, "I always had to sit in the room. They never let me do it."

So on Friday morning when we finished the spelling test and we were getting ready for field day, he just came out of his seat and grabbed me and announced, "I love you, and you know it." He didn't mention field day.

The weather kind of cancelled our plans for an outside picnic. It was real overcast and cold. So we ate lunch together inside the classroom. I was sitting at a table with some of the kids, and Kenny came over and said, "You're the nicest teacher I ever had."

And I said, "Well, now, what are you going to say next year when you get this teacher and she looks like me, and acts like me, and talks like me, and dresses like me?"

He said, "I don't know."

So I said, "Well, you can say, 'You're as nice as that teacher I had last year.'" And then he just started laughing because he knows that he's going to stay with me next year.

AS ADULTS, we believe that others like us when they joke with us, give us a soft nudge, tell us they care, do helpful things for us, ask about our lives and tell us about theirs, and make an effort to spend time with us. If

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it turns out that someone did any of these things in order to get us to do something for them, then we feel manipulated and mistrustful of them. The same is true for children. If we want our students to trust that we care for them, then we need to display our affection without demanding that they behave or perform in certain ways in return. It's not that we don't want and expect certain behavior; we do. But our concern or affection does not depend on it.

A solid, trusting student–teacher relationship is the foundation of a classroom community of partners. Over the course of the year, Laura was able to build a trusting relationship with Kenny, even though he was a child who was often "in trouble." She responded to his qualities of warmth and goodwill, worked with him to control his frustrations and tantrums, and conveyed her genuine affection for him, whether he was in a sulk or declaring his love.[1]

Martin Haberman (1995) calls this "conscious, premeditated caring," and he reports that it is characteristic of teachers who are successful in teaching children of poverty. "Such caring," he argues, "is not predicated on children always doing the right thing. On the contrary, it assumes they frequently will not. At that point, the professional caring springs into action and demonstrates to the child that he or she is worthy and capable—even at the lowest and worst moment of his or her offense" (pp. 57–58). Others have called such caring unconditional love or unconditional regard. And it is this kind of caring that meets our students' basic need for belonging. How do we achieve this feeling of caring for all our students? And then how do we help them see that we care?

Learning to Like All Students

Although most children are easy to like, there are always some in every class who are not. Perhaps they are defiant, disrespectful, aggressive, or disruptive. Perhaps they moan and groan and complain that everything's boring. Perhaps they tease and belittle others. Whatever the annoying behaviors are, we can soften our feelings toward these children by viewing them through the lens of attachment theory.

Children's Basic Need for Belonging

Knowing that all children want and need to belong—to be loved and protected by caring adults and to fit in with their peer group—can help us look through their troublesome behavior to see the vulnerable child behind the bothersome or menacing exterior.

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It's not easy to think of children who are misbehaving, particularly children who misbehave frequently, as vulnerable and needy; they often seem so powerful and defiant. Laura's student Martin was one of the most aggressive children in the class, but he was also someone to whom she paid a lot of attention and who seemed to trust her and want her good opinion. Toward the end of the first year, when a mean quarrel with another student finally resulted in Martin slugging Laura, she struggled to understand why his behavior continued to be so erratic.

> Tuesday I had to be out of the classroom for the first hour of the day. The speech teacher watched my room, but when I walked in, Martin was on the rug instead of in his seat, and he and Denise both looked upset.
>
> When I tried to get everyone together for the morning meeting, Denise said, "He called my auntie a fat, ugly witch."
>
> Martin yelled out, "Well, you called my mom fat and ugly."
>
> Denise said, "I only did that after you said that about my auntie."
>
> At this point I said, "Well, we're not going to say things like that here. I'm ready to start the morning meeting, so let's get going."
>
> But before we could get started, Denise said, "Well, if he does it again I'm going to have to hurt him."
>
> By this time Martin came over and stood like an inch away from her and shouted, "Your aunt is a fat, ugly witch. Now hit me!"
>
> Denise looked up at me and said, "Get him off of me, Mrs. Ecken, or I am going to hit him."
>
> I said, "No, you're going to control yourself. You're not going to touch him."
>
> To Martin I said, "You need to back off and get over there and sit down. I told you we don't do this here."
>
> Instead, he got closer. He put his body on hers, like the front of his body on the side of hers, and he started pushing on her a little. And he went, "Your aunt is a fat, ugly witch! Now get up and hit me!"
>
> Denise warned, "I'm going to do it."
>
> And I said, "No, Denise, just sit there." I walked over and put my hands on the side of Martin's arms, and I said, "You need to move away, and this needs to stop."
>
> And with that, he took his elbow and slammed me right in the stomach. I mean, as hard as he could.
>
> I exploded. "You're not staying here and doing that. I don't know where you think you are, or what's going on with you. I don't know what went on this morning while I was out, but you are not staying in this room and touching me or touching anybody else. You're out."

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Well, he said, tough as can be, "I'm not going anywhere, and you can't make me."

I thought to myself, "Well, that's a good point." So, I wrote a referral, and I asked Martin to take it to the office.

He reminded me, "I told you, I'm not going anywhere, and you're not making me go anywhere."

I asked one of the other kids to take the referral to the office, and I wrote on the top of it, "Martin refuses to bring this to the office."

The rest of us gathered for the morning meeting, and Martin stayed in his chair. It turned out that they were busy in the office and no one came down right away. After about fifteen minutes into the meeting, Martin started scooting his chair over by us, so I looked up and said, "Martin, just because today got off to a horrible start doesn't mean it has to stay that way. This day doesn't have to continue to be bad for you. C'mon, why don't you join us?" He sat down, and he was just ready to share when the principal showed up at the door.

He got up and went on out with her. I was glad he had calmed down. The principal didn't let him come back to class the rest of the day. She made him sit in her office. She told him that if he touched another person in the school, he would be suspended for ten days. After all the other kids had eaten, she took him down to lunch and left him to eat with Ms. Lucy, who runs the lunchroom. Ms. Lucy told me Martin was indignant, complaining that he had to punch me because I was jerking on his shirt. He told her, "I'm not having anybody do that to me!" I think he knew he was wrong, but he just has to show that he's this big tough guy.

His mother came in with Martin the following morning before the start of school, and we had a long talk. Martin had an attitude at first, but his mother told him, "You get that look off your face, and you get it off now!" He did and he was fine. After his mother left, he and I were in the classroom alone, and he just came over and he hugged me and he said, "I love you."

Sometimes he kisses me good-bye when he leaves; he'll just hug me and kiss me on the cheek and say, "I love you." And then he just leaves. I don't think he really meant to hurt me. I think it probably is a matter of self-control; he just can't control himself. On the whole he's a good person and he tries to be decent. But then he does some stuff that's so bad.

Even when Laura got upset with a child, down deep she believed that the child wanted to be loved, wanted to belong to the classroom commu-

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nity, and wanted to learn. She did not tolerate abusive or disruptive behaviors, but she usually attributed them to children's vulnerability, their difficulties with self-control, or their insecurity. She considered it her job to find out how to help every student develop the skills and understandings he or she needed to succeed. This belief in the deep humanity of all her students helped Laura continue to like even her troublesome students while searching for ways to help them change their problem behaviors.

In the first year, many of Laura's students were angry, aggressive, and defiant, and a few were withdrawn, easily upset, and stubborn. The sheer number of difficult students made it especially hard for Laura to maintain a caring stance. Progress was slow and Laura was frequently discouraged. In November, Leonard, one of Laura's most difficult students, left the school. Leonard had frequently refused to work, defied Laura's authority, teased and made fun of other students, and involved other students in fighting, teasing, and name calling. Although Laura had not succeeded in building a trusting relationship with Leonard, she did care about him and even shed a tear in the good-bye class meeting she arranged for him. However, once Leonard was gone Laura was surprised at the sense of relief she felt. Her class began to run more smoothly, and she begged the principal not to place Leonard in her classroom if he should return to the school.

In February, however, Leonard returned to the school and to Laura's classroom.

> Leonard's back. I thought I was going to die! I was walking through the parking lot and a voice yelled, "Miss Ecken!" I looked and there he was with his mom. And I thought, "Oh, this can't be true," but I said, "Oh, it's so good to see you all. How is school going?"
>
> Leonard's mother said, "Mrs. Ecken, we had to take him out of that school, and I had to move back out here. He had a referral every single day. Last night I had to get him out of JCYC [Jefferson County Youth Center]."

Laura was very upset to have Leonard back in her classroom. Her first response was anger with the principal for placing Leonard back in her room and resentment toward Leonard for being there, even though she knew that there was no better placement for him.

> When Leonard came back, they didn't even walk him to my room. They put the enrollment sheet in my mailbox, and he just showed up after breakfast. It's like nobody had the nerve to bring him back down here.

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> He wasn't here a day before the problems started: the teasing and name calling and defiance. I know it's hard for Leonard to come back, but apparently he has come back about like he left.
>
> At the beginning of the year, a lot of times when I'd say the class was going to do this or that, he'd shout, "I'm not!" It was his way of letting me know that "I do what I want to do." Or if I challenged him, he would yell, "Suspend me. Go ahead, suspend me!"

Leonard's return upset the equilibrium and sense of community that Laura had worked hard to establish. He was a powerful personality and exercised a fair amount of negative leadership in the classroom. Dismayed by the effect Leonard was having and remembering all her earlier struggles with him, Laura was initially ready to sacrifice Leonard in order to protect her class.

> Leonard's coming back made me think about how it was at the beginning and how everybody gets along now and does what they're supposed to. There are a few rough spots—there always will be—but, basically, the children are doing excellent work. So I told him right off the bat, after the second incident, "Look, I am going to tell you how it is, Leonard. You cannot destroy this class. I am not going to allow it. I want you to be here. I will help you with anything you need to do to be successful, but disturbing people who are working and upsetting people by talking about them—that's not going to happen here. So don't bother to look at me and scream that I should suspend you, because I will. I want you to know up front, before you come back in here, that this class runs fairly smoothly and you are not going to destroy that."
>
> I am not saying that that was the best thing to do, but I just felt I needed to let him know that whatever was going on in September and October was over. I'm not going back to that.

At first, Laura saw herself entering a battle of wills with Leonard, and she began by laying down the law. Over the weekend, Laura and I discussed Leonard's return to the classroom from his point of view. Laura was able to take Leonard's perspective. She saw his vulnerability. She realized how insecure he must be feeling, having been suspended almost daily from his new classroom and then having to return after three months to the classroom he had left. She realized that he needed reassurance and support more than ultimatums, and she focused on meeting his needs. She didn't lower her standards, but she provided Leonard with the encouragement and support he needed to get his behavior within acceptable

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bounds. Laura's ability to empathize with and have confidence in Leonard paid off for both of them.

> Monday morning, as soon as Leonard got to school, I told him how glad I was to have him back and that I could tell that all the kids were really pleased that he was back. Then I said, "Leonard, I have been noticing that when we work in partnerships you have some problems leaving the other partnerships alone. I'd like you to think about working on that this week. When you go to work in a partnership, get your work done and don't bother anybody else." He just very seriously said, "Okay, I'll work on that, Miss Ecken."
>
> Later in the day, it was time for everyone to write down goals for the week. For Leonard, it was his first time writing goals because we didn't start writing them until after he left. Just as nice and pleasant as could be, he said, "I know what I need to work on." And he wrote, "Don't mess with other partnerships." I talked with him a couple of times during the week and asked how he thought he was doing and told him that I hadn't had any complaints. He was really, really happy about how he was doing.
>
> I've also been watching closely to see when exactly it is that he has rough spots. It's when everyone is together. It's when we are in the morning and afternoon meetings and whenever we get in a group—like to share something out. It's not so much a problem for him when we are in a lesson or they are all at their tables working. But if he's in the group and he makes that contact with others, he will turn and get into it with somebody or make fun of someone. So I'm going to tell him I have noticed what happens when he gets in the group and encourage him to work on that next.
>
> He also has trouble in the lines. He wants to cut ahead of the others. So what I have done with that, without drawing any attention to him, is I control which table group leads the line and I alternate the groups. Since we have five tables, each one is named for a day of the school week. So on Monday I say, "Now remember, I need to see all the Monday people first in line."
>
> I've also had a couple of talks with him in the cafeteria. What he does is grab his tray and then just push it down in front of people, just shove it in. A lot of them won't stop him. And it happens so fast that everybody just kind of stares at him. The first time I saw him do it, I asked him to think about whether that was fair, and I told him to go to the back of the line. The second day I said, "You know, we talked about this yesterday, didn't we?" And then he just said, "I know where

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> to be," and he went to the back of the line. So I think it's going to be okay. He is already making progress.

Although Leonard still misbehaved on numerous occasions, he and Laura gradually developed a partnership focused on his continuous improvement. Once Laura changed her view of Leonard, seeing him as vulnerable and in need of her help and guidance rather than as powerful and bent on doing things his way, she was able to build a positive, nurturing relationship with him. Laura was so pleased with his progress that she decided to keep him in her class for another year. She labeled him a fourth grader, and she challenged him with fourth-grade work, but she kept him in her classroom, which was otherwise designated as a second third-grade class. Laura knew how difficult it was for Leonard to form trusting relationships, especially with adults, and she believed that he needed another year with her to reconcile his tough-guy self-concept with his concept of himself as a good and helpful person and a serious learner.

Examining Our Working Models of Children

Laura was able to develop a caring attitude toward Leonard when she changed her working model of him and his behavior. Our working models of children are works in progress; they are shaped throughout our lives, both at the conscious level by our professional training and at the unconscious level by our relationships with our caregivers, our individual childhood experiences with peers, the general cultural milieu in which we grew up, and our ongoing personal experiences. For example, if we were insecure or badly treated as children, we are apt to find it harder to trust in the goodwill of others, both children and adults. If we were bullies as children, we might be more understanding of the causes of bullying behavior in our students and, as a result, find it easier to sympathize with and care for them, even as we struggle to stop their bullying. However, if we were victims of bullies as children, we might feel irrational anger toward children who bully, undermining our ability to care for them. Reflecting on our own past as we analyze our reactions to our students can help control these unconsciously generated negative feelings.

Our working models of children are also affected by our conscious and unconscious beliefs about groups of people. None of us like to think of ourselves as biased or prejudiced, especially if we have entered a helping profession such as teaching. But we are all influenced by our environment. We may have heard our parents or grandparents characterize people from other groups as less worthy or less trustworthy. We have certainly been

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affected by the media, which, controlled almost by definition by people in power, generally portray people from nonpowerful groups in negative ways (Cortes, 2000). We can overcome these influences and, as caring teachers, we must.

Psychological theory and research provide strong support for the belief that at the fundamental level of human motivation, all children are alike. They share the same basic needs: to belong, to be and be seen as competent, and to be autonomous or to feel that they are the cause of their own actions.[2]

However, multicultural theory and research provide strong support for the belief that at the level of behavior, children are different. For example, they have different learning styles, politeness norms, and conversational styles.[3] If we do not understand these differences, and if we have been influenced by negative stereotypes, we are apt to hold negative or stereotypical views of groups different from our own and fail to meet the emotional and educational needs of children who differ from us by, for example, race, class, or culture.

On the basis of theory and research related to human motivation and attachment, we can anticipate that all children want to feel loved and cared for, want to acquire the skills and knowledge valued by their culture, and want reasonable autonomy. On the basis of attachment and multicultural theories and research, we can be confident that some children will fail to learn and fail to adjust well to us and our classrooms either because they have a history of insecure attachment relationships or because our curriculum, teaching, or interpersonal styles are out of synch with what they are accustomed to, or both.

Unless our beliefs about individual children are working models, subject to constant revision, and unless we consciously strive to understand the unique qualities of each student, we are likely to resent children who are troublesome. Because some children thrive in our classrooms, we are likely to conclude that those who do not thrive must have something wrong with them. We might dismiss them as learning disabled, lazy, or willfully defiant. Of course, some children are learning disabled, but often they are labeled as such because our curriculum or interaction style does not match the experience and qualities those children bring to our classroom. Some students avoid work that is either too hard or too easy, and we label them lazy rather than find work that will engage them. Some students are willfully defiant. But if we see this defiance as their desperate attempt to survive in a world they view as hostile, we will see them more as vulnerable than as defiant, much as Laura finally did with Leonard. It will be easier to genuinely care for all our students if we review our working model of each child, taking

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into account children's universal needs for autonomy, belonging, and competence, filtering out our unconscious biases or stereotypes, and adding all the unique information we have about the child and his or her family and culture. Courses in multicultural education and books and articles written from diverse perspectives can help us understand general characteristics of diverse groups, but they only make us aware of ways in which our students *might* be different from us and from one another. There is a great deal of diversity within every group. Our goal is to understand and value the individual students in our classrooms and their families. For this there is no substitute for getting to know them as individuals and trying to view the world from their perspective.

Getting to Know Our Students

It takes time to find out who our students are and what's going on in their lives. But it is time well invested if we are committed to learning to like every student in our classroom.

GATHERING DATA. Students' cumulative files can alert us to important information even before they enter our classroom, but some teachers do not read those records. They think by not doing so, they can give each student a "fresh start." But students cannot make a fresh start. This is one of the important implications of attachment theory. Our students bring their past experiences into our classroom. If they had conflictual relationships with their teachers in the past, they will be more ready to interpret our behaviors through mistrustful eyes. Knowing about earlier troubled relationships can alert us to the extra work we will have to do to earn a student's trust. We don't have to accept another teacher's judgment about a child, particularly if the relationship was conflictual and the judgment is negative.

Laura always reviewed her students' records and checked them against her own evaluations. When Chantelle showed up on the first day of school, her records had not preceded her, but her behavior presaged what Laura would learn later from them.

> Chantelle is a new girl. On the first day of school, before her records were sent down, I noticed right away that she walked the edge. If we lined up, or whatever we did, she would just take it to the limit. Then when we were making cut-outs of ourselves to put up around the room, I was sitting at her table, cutting out my own self-portrait, and she said, "I can't wait to see how you act at the end of the year. Last year Mrs.

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> Griff was mean at the beginning of the year, and by the end of the year she was meaner. So I can't wait to see if you're going to be mean at the end of the year. 'Cause you're nice now."
>
> I had no idea, but it turns out she's been thrown out of several classes and was in a special program to keep kindergarten and first-grade kids from getting a BD [behavioral disorder] referral.

Not all of our students will convey their mistrust as clearly as Chantelle did. But if a student's records show that he or she had a difficult time in past classrooms, it's likely that such a child will enter our classroom wary and ready for trouble. Knowing this can help us be ready to work extra hard to build a caring relationship.

During the first few weeks of school, Laura, like most teachers, took great care to make her classroom a comfortable place and to connect personally with each of her students.

> When the kids come in that first morning, I really want to take some time to talk to each one, so I have this activity that keeps the whole group busy making their names real fancy on name tags while I move around the room and talk a little with each child.
>
> The first year, with Martin, I remember telling him that I knew his older sister and him telling me about his younger brother. I was also able to tell Tralin that I knew her sister. They seemed so pleased by just that little bit of personal connection.
>
> Some of the kids were new to the school or had been in different classrooms from each other the year before, so I tried to make some connections for those children. Since quite a few kids came from Ms. Blanchard's room and they already knew each other, it was nice to be able to say, "Hey, you all know each other, but here's somebody you don't know."
>
> So that was kind of a nice little time together while they were making those name tags, just to move around and talk to each of them and give them some time to talk to the others at their tables.
>
> Then right after the name tags, I like to do an activity called Question Circle that shows the kids they have a lot in common. In my classroom half the chairs are red and half are blue. So I make one big circle with the chairs, alternating the colors, and divide the kids into red and blue. I get all the kids seated and give them a question to talk about with a partner, the person next to them. I keep moving the kids; all the reds, for example, move two chairs to the right so that they keep sitting by different people. I have a whole list of things for the kids to talk about

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> that I know they're probably going to have some similar thoughts on, like, "Tell about your favorite cartoon," or "Talk to your partner about what you like to do when it rains," or "Talk to your partner about the favorite thing that you like to do when you get home from school."
>
> What I hope is that they're going to find out that these kids they don't know, or who seem different, are a lot like them.
>
> When we finished our questions, I asked the kids to share something they learned about someone else. No one said a thing, which is not unusual for the first day of school. Since they apparently didn't feel comfortable sharing in the whole group, I said, "Well, I learned that a birthday celebration that someone will never forget can be a sad thing. When I was thinking of this question, to tell about a birthday you would never forget, I was thinking that a birthday would be a happy time, but my partner told me about a birthday celebration where everybody was at the grandfather's house for his birthday and the grandfather died. What was supposed to be a wonderful celebration ended up being a really sad event."
>
> I decided to share that because it kind of went along with a theme I had for this first week of school—letting them see that things aren't always what they seem. Birthday celebrations aren't always happy; people who look different from you aren't always that different—they might actually be the same in lots of ways. It fit with the message I was trying to send: "Don't have a lot of preconceptions, keep an open mind, and give yourself a chance to listen to people and get to know people."

Question Circle was just one of a number of activities that Laura did during the first weeks of school to help her connect with and learn about her students and to help her students connect with and learn about one another. Similar activities continued throughout the year. The class created charts, graphs, and Venn diagrams describing their characteristics; they drew self-portraits and made a quilt displaying important facts about everyone in their class. As time progressed and the students acquired more academic skills, getting-to-know-you activities took on a more academic flavor. For example, students shared their favorite part of a story or the most interesting fact they had learned in their research.

Getting-to-know-you activities are often thought of as purely social in nature, but getting to know how each student constructs meaning is at the heart of teaching for understanding. Getting to know our students, what they like, and how they think is not only essential in building our affection for them, it is essential in effectively teaching them.

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HANGING OUT WITH OUR STUDENTS. Spending time with individuals or small groups of students—time when there is no instructional purpose—is one of the best ways to learn to like even our unlikable students. When we are not pressing our students to perform in any particular way but are simply interested in being with them and getting to know them better, even the most angry and defiant children will relax and let us see their softer side. And because we have no instructional agenda and are under little pressure ourselves, we can relax and enjoy each child's unique qualities.

Hanging out has side benefits as well. It is a powerful way to let our students know that we like and care about them, and we will also learn an enormous amount that can help us in unforeseen ways during instructional time.

One of the ways Laura chose to hang out with her students was to have lunch with a few of them every day. These times were important for her students and useful for mending and cementing Laura's relationships with them.

> On Monday I started eating with the Monday table group. On Tuesday, with Tuesday. And it's worked out great. They absolutely love it, and it's real relaxing.
>
> Well, on Thursday I had problems with Kenny. He interrupted the whole reading lesson on Thursday morning. Just tore it to shreds. Walked around the room, "Not doing this," "My partner won't talk to me," and just on and on and on.
>
> So, anyway, when we got together as a group to discuss the questions we were working on, he sat at his table and started writing what he and his partner were supposed to have been doing earlier. He yelled over at me, "Could you stop talking! I'm trying to work!" I mean, I just wanted to laugh, it was so funny.
>
> Instead, I said, "Kenny, we're going to talk about the work we've been doing and we're going to do it now. You're just going to have to work under these conditions." So he came over with the rest of us.
>
> Then it was time to line up for lunch. I was going to eat with both Thursday and Friday since there was no school on Friday. And Kenny shouted out, "I was absent on my day! And I need to eat with you like everybody else!" So I said, "Well, please get your tray and come in." All through lunch he was just so pleasant and so much fun. It was like he had no remorse at all for wrecking the morning. Just none.

During these small, intimate moments Laura and the students talked and joked and simply told one another things that were on their minds.

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Laura wasn't trying to teach anything. These gatherings were simply to be with the children. They were easy times for even the most troubled of her students because nothing was demanded of them except that they treat their luncheon companions with respect. When a child had had a difficult morning, as was the case with Kenny, hanging out at lunch was an opportunity to reconnect.

In *The Challenge to Care in Schools,* Nel Noddings points out that lunch time can provide an important opportunity to build caring relationship with our students (Noddings, 1992). It definitely served this purpose in Laura's classroom. At the end of the year, eating with Laura was one of the things the class decided to write about for their book, *Remembering Our Year.*

> EATING WITH MRS. ECKEN
> Eating with Mrs. Ecken is fun because we can tell about stuff like [we do in] the morning meeting. If it's Monday, Monday gets to eat with Mrs. Ecken and it keeps on going.

Laura had a number of ways to hang out with her students. Often when she had an uneven number of students for a partner activity, she would partner with one of them. Once the class had the routines for working with partners well in hand, Laura could give the child who was her partner nearly undivided attention. In the following situation, partnering with a difficult child was made possible because a student teacher was conducting the lesson:

> I watch Louise mess with people a lot. She's a nice kid but she just messes with people, and when I talk with her about it she gets upset.
>
> The other day when Miss Rowan was going to start a partner lesson that lasted several days, I made the children's partnerships come out so that I was Louise's partner. She was thrilled to death. It's kind of letting us bond a little bit. So that's been helpful, because if she does mess with someone—like if someone comes over and wants to sit near us, maybe she'll kick their chair—I can talk to her about it as her partner, more like person to person, not so much teacher to student.

Laura also opened her classroom in the morning for kids to come in early if they wished. Some of the more needy students frequently came in to help set up the class and to talk. In *Enhancing Relationships Between Children and Teachers* (1999), Robert Pianta suggests a process called "banking time," whose objective is to spend pleasant, nonstressful time with a child.

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There is no lesson, no goal beyond communicating or connecting with the child. He suggests that teachers think of themselves as prospectors hunting for the gold that is buried somewhere in any child. With preschool and primary-grade children, this interaction may need to be around an activity, such as reading and talking about a story, working with clay or blocks, or playing a game. With older students it may simply involve conversation, talking about whatever the child is interested in, honestly conveying your own thoughts on the subject, and listening with the sole intent of really understanding what the child has to say.

Nel Noddings (1994) calls such conversations "ordinary conversations" and suggests that they powerfully affect children's moral development. The goal of the conversation, however, is not to affect anything but to connect to the child and, by so doing, to build a more loving and trusting relationship. Banking time can happen during school hours if we have an aide or if our students are capable of working independently. However, because it is important for these interactions to be stress-free, it might be easiest to schedule them during noninstructional time.

Getting to Know Our Students' Families

Meeting and talking with our students' parents or caregivers early and throughout the year will help us understand our students' lives outside of school and the kind of relationship each child has with the most important adults in his or her life. A parking lot conversation with Louise's father helped Laura understand some of the reasons for Louise's low self-esteem and petulance.

> Louise's parents did not come to conference, and the first time I met the dad, I was out in the parking lot for some reason. I saw Louise in the car. Louise and the father, they look just alike. I introduced myself, "Oh, hi, I'm Louise's teacher. It's so nice to meet you. She is doing such a nice job. She's serious about school and she's getting along well with the other kids."
>
> The father referred to Louise as a fat slob, and he said, "Well, it's about time she did something she was supposed to."
>
> So I said, "Well, she does. She's one good kid."

This father's relationship with his daughter was extreme, but it was important for Laura to know about it in her dealings with Louise and in trying to establish a partnership with her father on Louise's behalf. Most parents can be relied on for support, especially if we give them specific

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suggestions or materials for helping their children, but some families will be unwilling or unable to provide much support at all. Whatever the case, we will need to know the parents before we know whether or how they can help us work with their children.

When Tyrone, who had made a pretty good adjustment in the class, began having problems, Laura felt sure that his mother could help. Laura had not met Tyrone's mother—she hadn't come to open house—but Laura knew that Tyrone was close to her because he often talked about her and was eager to bring papers from school to show her. As Tyrone's problems escalated, Laura decided to walk Tyrone home and have a talk with his mother.

> After a tough start and then really coming along well, now Tyrone is starting to have a whole lot of problems. He's just in constant motion and he can't focus. I was working with the whole group the other day and he started singing. So I looked over and I said, "Tyrone, I can't talk when you're singing, okay?" And he looked me straight in the face and just kept singing. So I said, "Tyrone, I really need you to stop so that we can hear what's going on." He stopped singing, but then he started doing something else he shouldn't have.
>
> I walked home with him one day this past week because I wanted to talk to his mom. It had been picture day at school, so he had on this real cute little red shirt and he had put on a gold necklace. All day long he was so proud of that necklace.
>
> When we got to his home, well, his mom wasn't there. She's been put in a treatment center, and a young aunt is taking care of him. It was heartbreaking. The aunt started screaming at the older sister, "You let him go to school dressed like that? On picture day!" His face just showed the pain. It was clear that he dressed himself and that his aunt didn't get up with him.
>
> Anyway, the aunt said that he's really upset about his mom, and nobody knows how long she is going to be in this treatment center. So, I really feel like I need to do something special, something to say, "Hey, you're not all alone in this world." But I don't know what. I don't know how to do it.

By walking Tyrone home, Laura discovered one reason why Tyrone's classroom behavior was disintegrating; she also realized that she couldn't rely on his young aunt for much support. Laura couldn't make up for Tyrone's loss, but she did have more patience with him. She provided him with more support and worked extra hard at being dependable and car-

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ing. She also helped Tyrone write letters to his mom that the social worker delivered. And she took him to visit her at the treatment center. Seeing his mom greatly relieved Tyrone's anxiety and, along with Laura's patience and extra support, helped him stay focused on learning in the classroom. As we make efforts to learn about our students, their families, and their community, we are not only building our capacity to like each of our students, we are also building our capacity to teach and we are showing our students that we care.

Helping Our Students See That We Like Them

Just as we may have difficulty liking some of our students, some of our students will have difficulty believing that we like and care about them, even when we do. Some may mistrust us because they have a history of insecure attachment relationships with their primary caregivers and their working model of relationships is built on mistrust. Others may have had a history of secure attachment relationships but have had such bad experiences at school that they have learned to mistrust teachers in general. This is sometimes the case with students who have experienced repeated failures in school—students, for example, who have had difficulty learning to read. Students who are culturally or ethnically different from us may mistrust us because we are different or because they have been taught to be mistrustful of our group. Some may have had difficult relationships with others of our group. Whatever the cause of our students' mistrust, we will need to make a conscious and sustained effort to convince them that we care in order to build the kind of nurturing relationship that will support their academic learning and their social, emotional, and ethical development.

Touching and Hugging Children

Displays of physical affection are usually pervasive in parent-child relationships, but experts disagree as to whether teachers should hug or even touch children (Johnson, 2000). For example, Martin Haberman (1995), who argues strongly for the importance of teacher caring, states that "demonstrations of affection are not a method of teaching" (p. 60). He asks us to think how we would feel if a twenty-five-year-old teacher hugged a seventeen-year-old student for giving a correct answer. Although physical demonstrations of affection are not a method of teaching academic content, they are an important way to communicate caring, especially for preschool and primary-age children.

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Most preschool and primary children need and seek physical displays of our affection. They frequently want to lean against us, hug us, or hold our hand. We need to accept and return these gentle expressions of need and affection; to pull away would convey rejection. (One of the characteristics of parents whose children become avoidantly attached is their aversion to touching or being physically close to their infants.)

Although we need to be judicious in displaying physical affection and take care that our gestures of affection are designed to meet the needs of our students and not our own, there are a number of appropriate ways to physically display affection, depending on the context and the age of the students. Laura frequently touched, put her arm around, or hugged her students to support, encourage, and convey her commitment to them. Sometimes, it was the most efficient way of repairing her relationship with a student and bringing the child back into the class.

> Martin was just furious because he didn't get picked to help me, first with a math activity and then to pass out cookies. When it was time for our read-aloud, he sat back in the corner and put his coat over his head.
>
> I said, "Martin, can you sit up and take your coat off your head? We're going to listen to the story now."
>
> From under his coat he said, "I hate you!"
>
> I told him I was sorry to hear it, but we went on and started reading the story. I could see him stuck back there in his attitude and, finally, after I read for about five minutes, I said, "Martin, I need you just to come up here right now. I know what's wrong with you. You're feeling left out, so just sit up here and let me put my arm around you." That's what we did for the rest of the story and he was fine. This was on Friday. When we got ready to leave and they were lining up, he came over and gave me a big hug.

Laura often used touch to support her students in their work as well as to convey affection. She had learned that hugs were important for getting Tralin past frustrations, and eventually Tralin identified this pattern for herself and was able to ask for a hug when she needed one.

> Tralin was in a really bad mood all morning on Monday—arguing with her partner over who was doing what book page and just unhappy. At lunch time, as we were walking down to the cafeteria, she looked at me and said, "I'm in a bad mood. Give me a hug."
>
> And so I gave her a hug. And then she said, "I'll be better in the afternoon," and she was.

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> That's never happened before, that she asked for a hug. In the past when she's been in a really bad mood—the work is often hard for her—and I could see that she wasn't going to come out of it, I'd just go over and hug her and say, "You know, Tralin, I've seen you do this. I know that you can do what we're doing, and if I can help you I will." I thought it was a real breakthrough that she asked for that hug.

Other ways to physically convey affection are particularly appropriate for older children. For example, standing close to a child, positioning yourself at the child's eye level, or leaning across a child's desk, if done with a friendly attitude, all convey affection. A congratulatory handshake or other gesture can communicate affection to older children. The important thing is that we convey genuine respect and caring.

Telling Our Students That We Care

All our students need our authentic interest in their efforts. Because we are successful adults, our students look to us to learn the standards for success and to know if they are meeting those standards. We therefore need to pay close attention to their successes and let them know that we admire and appreciate what they have accomplished. Students don't need what Alfie Kohn (1996) calls slobbering, manipulative praise, but they do need expressions of our genuine delight and interest in what they have done and honest feedback about their efforts.

Some students need more than just our interest; they need a direct expression of our caring. Children who have not experienced most people in their lives as caring may assume that they are not worthy of care. They need to hear us say directly that we care about them. This is apt to be particularly true for students who regularly misbehave. Because we frequently need to control these students, our relationship with them will be more conflictual than with other students, causing them to more readily assume that we don't like them. Often students will provide opportunities following some kind of trouble for us to tell them we care about them. Laura describes such a situation with Ella, who came into her class in the second year and for months had difficulty trusting Laura.

> Ella was screaming in line on the way back from the cafeteria, and when I asked her to stop she started screaming at me. I told her I wouldn't listen to that, and I asked her to sit down and write about what she could have done besides scream in the line and scream at me.

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She wrote about what she should have done, and then she wrote on the letter, "To: my teacher, Mrs. Ecken. Love you tons. Did not mean it at all. You know that. Love you Mrs. Ecken."

We read the letter together, and I told her that I could see that she knows what she's supposed to do and so I hoped that she would.

It wasn't a half an hour later when she started yelling at me again. And I said, "Ella, no. I'm not going to have it. Get yourself a piece of paper and write down why this is not going to go."

And so she wrote, "Dear Mrs. Ecken, I should not back-talk. Do what she says. Do not say a word. Go back to my seat. Say Yes Mam, and go. I love you. By: Ella. And next time I will do what it says."

She really is trying. When she handed me the note, I read it, and this time I answered her in writing: "I love you, too! I am counting on it. I know you can do it. Love you tons. Mrs. E."

When she read those concrete words of affection, she just got the biggest smile.

Students with a history of insecure attachment will need to be assured over and over that they are worthy and that we care about them. Several of Laura's students needed this kind of continual reassurance, and even when Laura provided it, not all of them ever really believed her.

Sharing Ourselves

Sharing personal information is a sign of affection and of trust. Laura frequently shared information with her students about her life, her family, and even her dogs. This sharing was sometimes done informally in the context of a class meeting or while talking with students over lunch, sometimes as part of activities designed to help the class get to know one another and sometimes as a way to introduce or model academic activities. Details from this sharing were often reflected in her students' comments and in their work.

The singers from the senior center came over and gave a performance for the school. My class took their little buddies, and then afterwards everyone got drinks and cookies and sat and talked together. The older people just loved it, talking to them and being with them. When we came back up to the room, we took a few minutes to talk about being with our buddies and the singers.

They all know that at night, after I get the supper finished, I go sit in the family room with a cup of tea and my cookies and just sit and

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> relax. And I've told them that the dogs always sit beside me, so I have to give all three dogs one bite of cookie.
>
> So Martin said, "You know, I was sitting down there with my buddy and those singers and I just felt like Mrs. Ecken sitting in her family room, drinking her hot tea and eating her cookies and giving them to the dogs."

A month later, when Martin was frustrated by a writing assignment and ready to quit, Laura was able to get him back on track by referring to some personal information that Martin had gathered, not from her but from her teenage son Damian. Martin drew on a past conversation with Damian to envision the steps to reaching a personal ambition. He wrote:

> I'd like to be a football player for the Greenbay Packers. I'd like to run the ball and be a quarterback. First you have to go to college. You have to have good grades and go to college. If you don't have good grades you will not be able to play for the Greenbay Packers. You will not play any sports. Like Damian he had to have good grades to play any sport.

As we openly share our lives with our students, we not only convey our affection for them but we provide them with a way to connect to our humanness and our ways of being. As we will see later, it can be particularly helpful to share some of our mistakes and foibles with our students.

Doing Nice Things for Our Students

In every classroom there are many opportunities to do something nice for our students. We can do something as simple as retrieving a pencil from the floor or commenting about a new haircut or lunch box. We can lend forgotten lunch money, make a reminder call about a field trip permission, or write a student's parents to let them know about one of their child's accomplishments. These "nice things" are not earned, and they are not offered as a way of bargaining with children. They are simply done to make a child's or the class's life more pleasant. In essence, they are an expression of the norms for life in a caring community: "When someone needs help and we can provide that help, we do. When we can do things to make the people in our community happy, we do."

One of the regular, nice things Laura did for her students was to provide them with a daily snack. The class ate lunch at 11:30, and the school day did not end until 3:20. By midafternoon Laura's students were hungry, and

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they loved getting a cookie, some cheese and crackers, or a piece of candy to tide them over. It was also hugely important to the class that *everyone* got a snack, even people who had not had a good day. Although many of Laura's students had received snacks in their classrooms before, usually these had been contingent on good behavior. The daily snack was another of the things the kids chose to write about in their remembrance book at the end of the year.

> SNACKS
> By Tangela
> Every day we have snacks after special area. Sometimes we eat them when Mrs. Ecken reads to us. She gives it to everybody in the class. She never leaves anybody out.

Laura also did many small things on an individual as well as a class level. For example, when Cindy was afraid that no one would pick her up from day care because her foster mother's car was broken, Laura made sure Cindy could stop worrying.

> At the close of school on Thursday, Cindy came up to me very upset. She said, "My mother's car is broken so I know she won't be able to pick me up from day care. I'm afraid I'll have to take the bus and I don't know how."
>
> She was really upset, so I told her about a time my mom's car was broken and I was afraid, but that my uncle came and picked me up. I said, "I'm sure that your mom has arranged for someone else to pick you up, but just in case you have a problem, here's my phone number. You can call me and I'll come pick you up." Well, about six o'clock that night I got a call from Cindy. She was home and she just wanted me to know that her grandfather had picked her up.

All Laura's small and large acts of kindness eventually helped her students see that she really did care for them and that they could depend on her.

We sometimes resist doing these nice things out of a fear that our students will become dependent or take advantage of us. As teachers, we have often been warned that if we are too helpful we encourage laziness or create dependency. On the other hand, the research in attachment theory has demonstrated that if we are able to meet children's needs with reasonable consistency, they will become secure in their necessarily dependent relationship with us and will gradually grow more independent and self-sufficient.

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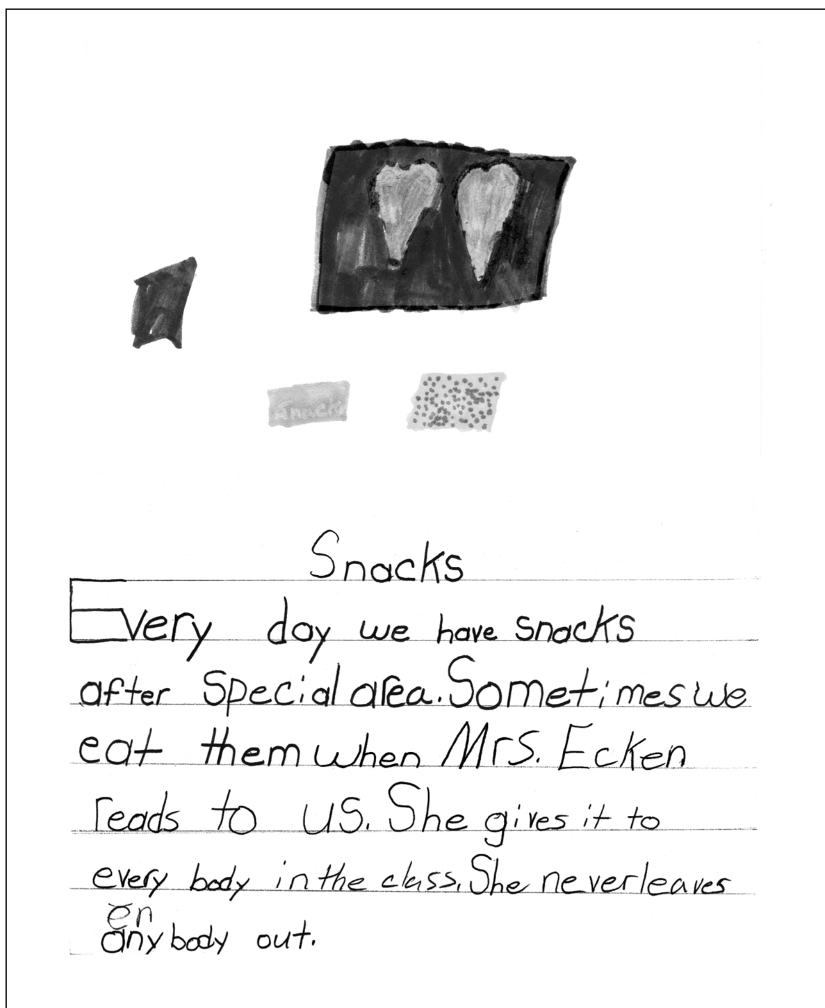

However, as most teachers have experienced, when we help some students, they seem to want more and more help, which would seem to confirm the notion that providing help encourages dependence and even laziness. Again, the research in attachment theory casts this behavior in a new light. Children with a history of anxious attachment often try to get our help, not because they need it but because they need to test our availability. If we respond by lowering our expectations and providing these students with too much help, we inadvertently convey our lack of confidence

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that they can succeed on their own. So there is tension here. But gradually, with insecurely attached children, as we demonstrate in a wide variety of ways that we are trustworthy, these acts of kindness will increase children's feelings of security in their relationship with us, allowing them to take more risks, develop more confidence in themselves, and grow in independence—not dependence.

Doing Fun Stuff

Although teaching is a serious business, one of the ways to convey our affection—to confirm a close and trusting relationship—is to occasionally interact with students in playful or even silly ways. Laura describes this as "acting goofy." Every teacher has different ways of having fun with a class. Laura danced with the kids at their parties, and she loved to joke and play around with them. On a whim one day, Laura pretended that she was Oprah and that the students were guests on the "Oprah Winfrey Show."

> Sometimes when we did role-plays from the partner reading books, we would set them up like a little theater and I would introduce each partnership. One day I was feeling silly and pretended that I was Oprah and that they had traveled all the way to Chicago to do a role-play for the audience. I used a fat marker for a microphone and started, "Now we have this group here from Louisville, Kentucky." And then I asked them some questions about the city: "So, tell me, what do you all do on Derby Day?" and "I heard you had this boat by the river. Can you tell me a little bit about that boat?" Kind of giving them a chance to talk about some of the things they are supposed to know about their city. Well, they just loved it and frequently they would ask to do their role-plays on the Oprah show. Sometimes I would ask them completely goofy stuff, like, "I heard you all drank so many sodas on the bus that the bathroom on the bus flooded." They would play right along, "Oh, yes, it's true. I drank five Cokes." Once I said, "Now, I hear you all have a lovely teacher. Tell me about her." Goofy stuff, but it added fun to the classroom and made us feel like a community with our own special ways of doing things.

As was the case with so many things the students liked, "doing the Oprah show" quickly became a tradition in the classroom. It was just one of the many ways Laura could increase her students' joy and convey her affection for them.

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Key Points: Building the Teacher-Student Relationship

- Remember that all children, even those who appear aloof and defiant, want to be loved and protected by caring adults and want to fit in with their peer group.
- Examine and revise your working model of children by reflecting on how your personal history might influence your own attitudes and understandings.
- Remember that all children are alike in their need for autonomy, belonging, and competence and that each child is unique in skills, intelligence, temperament, culture, and life experience.
- Find natural ways to get to know each student personally.
- Find ways to get to know and work with students' families.
- Help your students see that you care about them, and share your own life to give them an opportunity to know you.

A trusting and supportive teacher-child relationship is the foundation on which a nurturing relationship is built. Achieving such a relationship with all our students requires that we see each of them in a positive light, learn enough about them and their lives to be able to understand their unique ways, and convince our students that we can be trusted to care for them no matter what—three huge tasks. Theory and research in human development, motivation, and attachment, as well as multicultural theory and research, can help us understand the unique needs and strengths that our students bring to the classroom. But as important as this knowledge is, it cannot substitute for spending time getting to know each student individually and building personal, nurturing relationships with each of them.

Doing nice things for our students is an important way to build these relationships because we are saying with our actions that we care. However, it's very important that these kind or helpful acts be done for their own sake or to convey our affection. If we do something nice but use it

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to bargain with or bribe children, we are being coercive, not caring (Kohn, 1993). To convey that we care and to build our children's trust in us, our kind and caring actions must be unconditional. No matter how many times students misbehave, get something wrong, reject us, or tell us they don't like us, we continue to care, continue to treat them well, continue to be there to help them, and *never* say, "I helped you when you needed help, so will you please cooperate with me now."

Doing nice things for our students simply to be nice also provides students with a model of kindness and consideration. If we encourage them to do nice and helpful things for one another, gradually norms of kindness and helpfulness will pervade the classroom. We will be helping students meet another aspect of their belonging needs, that is, feeling liked and valued by their classmates and peers. In the next chapter, we will see how Laura helps the students in her classroom learn how to be friends.

NOTES

1. Ironically, Kenny was placed in another teacher's classroom the following year. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, after school closed for the summer, the principal decided that Laura's class had too many difficult children and that it would be best to move Kenny to a different classroom. At first Laura argued against taking Kenny from her class, but she was tired and as she reflected on how demanding the year had been, she reluctantly agreed that he be moved.
2. See Ainsworth and others, 1978; Deci and Ryan, 1985; Erikson, 1963; Maslow, 1970; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, and Kasser, 2001; and White, 1959.
3. See Banks, 1993; Cortes, 1986; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Nieto, 1992, 1999; Schmidt, 1998; and Steinberg, Brown, and Dornbusch, 1996.