

Morning Classroom Conversations

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*We dedicate this book to all of the educators who see the future of our society
in the children we educate today.*

Morning Classroom Conversations

Build Your Students'
Social-Emotional, Character, and
Communication Skills
Every Day

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Foreword by Joshua Freedman

 CORWIN

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A SAGE Publishing Company

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www.corwin.com

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Cover Designer: Scott Van Atta
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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021938742

ISBN 978-1-0718-3936-2

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

21 22 23 24 25 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Visit the companion website at resources.corwin.com/MorningClassroomConversations for downloadable resources.

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Foreword

Decades later, I can still feel the thrill of my favorite class in high school. Our teacher, Mr. Barankin, would unleash one of life's big questions, give an impish grin as he saw us begin to grapple, and tip his chair back against the chalkboard to listen. These deep questions became guides throughout my life, encouraging me to think more deeply about meaning, purpose, beauty, and my role in the world.

Those conversations are one reason why, when I later became a teacher, I treasured classes where my students and I would engage in discussions about deep topics, sharing views about everything from the meaning of courage to which character on the sitcom-of-the-season we liked the most. At the time, I felt the significance of this kind of conversation, but I didn't know why, or the essential social-emotional skills that we exercised together.

Just as the questions in Barry Barankin's class have resonated with me, I've been honored to hear similar feelings from my students. The kids I taught as adolescents are now "grown-ups"; many of them have become parents, and I still hear from some of them. They don't remember the brilliant lectures I delivered, but they do remember when our class sat under a tree and talked about values, what they cared about, and what they hoped to do in the world.

Fast-forward: Today, a growing body of research shows that those social-emotional skills are not only useful for personal development, they're actually central to academic learning too.¹ Alarming, these skills are also declining globally.² In addition to research, we can see the effects in headlines about increased social and political polarization in country after country around the globe: We are more volatile and less willing or able to listen to one another.

¹ Where we once saw social-emotional skills as useful for intrapersonal and interpersonal growth, the neuroscience of learning reveals they're actually foundational for academic learning as well. For more on this, see my interview with cognitive neuroscientist Mary Helen Immordino Yang (<https://www.6seconds.org/2020/09/15/neuroscience-learning/>).

² In the world's largest study of emotional intelligence, using a randomized sample from over 126 countries, skills such as emotional awareness, emotion management, and empathy have declined significantly over the last decade. See <https://6sec.org/soh> for the current data.

The rise of social media is likely one reason for this decline. There's evidence to hypothesize that increased use of digital platforms is part of the erosion of civility. Teens who use social media more are actually more lonely—less socially engaged.³ An “extractive attention economy” has developed, based on taking our attention: According to the Center for Humane Technology, big-tech algorithms are designed to create dissatisfaction and provide volatility to increase the use of social media platforms while reducing individual well-being as well as civil behavior.⁴ Whatever the cause, we're facing a tidal wave of anxiety and loneliness, especially among young people.⁵

Meanwhile, as scores on empathy and collaboration decline globally, more and more businesses are calling these the essential skills of the future. Google's Chief Innovation Evangelist Frederik G. Pferdt said, “Empathy is the skill of the future.”⁶ The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs reports in 2018 and 2020 highlighted that in an era of rapid transformation, the future of work will require both cognitive/technical skills and social-emotional skills.

For a decade, I've led a research project to track awareness about emotions as part of workplace performance. Surveys from over 95 countries have shown, over and over, that the biggest challenges managers face are relational.⁷ While technical and business skills are important, what holds leaders back is a deficit in the social-emotional domain. These are the kinds of skills we develop through meaningful conversation.

In short, we have a massive and growing need for social-emotional skills.

Imagine a world where students are meaningfully engaged in practicing those skills. I run one of the world's largest nonprofit organizations working in this space. It's called Six Seconds, and our vision is a billion people practicing the skills of emotional intelligence. We measure and teach

³ Jean Twenge has done extensive research on this link, such as Jean M. Twenge, W. Keith Campbell, Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study, *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 12 (2018): 271–283, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003>.

⁴ See the EmotionAI conference (www.6seconds.org/emotionai) and the Center for Humane Technology (humanetech.com).

⁵ For a snapshot of trends on emotional well-being in the world, see www.6seconds.org/emotional-intelligence/topics/wellbeing/.

⁶ See accelerate.withgoogle.com/stories/product-inclusion-leadership-insights-from-google-chief-innovation-evangelist-frederik-g-pferdt.

⁷ See the Workplace Vitality research reports on 6sec.org/vitality.

a process for doing so—at work, at school, at home, and in communities. There are three steps to this process:

1. Being more aware
2. Making more careful and conscious choices
3. Stepping forward with both empathy and commitment to purpose.

There are many conversation topics in *Morning Classroom Conversations* that align to these steps. As educators and students engage in meaningful conversations about emotions, behaviors, and options, we'll have an opportunity to increase awareness. By "talking it out," we'll have a chance to expand options. Through dialogue around aspirations and values, we might be able to connect to that larger sense of purpose that could motivate us all to be better versions of ourselves.

While there are many programs that can teach social-emotional skills, I'd contend that the heart of this book isn't about explicit curriculum. Most curriculum is static; it's mass-produced and simplistic. It's usually instructor-driven and cognitive. Even well-intentioned social-emotional learning curricula can be boring—and, too often, white-centered and reinforcing transactional behavior norms.⁸

This brings us to the beauty of *Morning Classroom Conversations*. There are three features of this framework I'd like to highlight:

1. This is an approachable approach. Educators who read this book will quickly see that these conversations draw on "the usual" pedagogical skills we use every day, such as inquiry, analysis, and communication.
2. It's student-centered. The questions in *Morning Classroom Conversations* are ones where students are the experts. Rather than asking about what's in a text or what the teacher thinks, this book is full of questions about students' perceptions and experiences.
3. These are big, meaningful questions. All too often, classroom conversations are about important-but-not-profound topics. Dates. Formulae. Items that can be easily assessed on a multiple-choice test. While these may have utility, they're limited. Big questions, however, can engage levels of curiosity, discovery, and meaning that go far deeper.

⁸ The Communities for Just Schools Fund published a powerful article on this topic: "When SEL Is Used As Another Form of Policing" (medium.com/@justschools/when-sel-is-used-as-another-form-of-policing-fa53cf85dce4). Cierra Kahler-Jones, one of the authors, added additional perspectives in this video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_d_YSH9DhA.



1. AN APPROACHABLE APPROACH

You can do this! The frameworks in this book are not introducing some new or foreign language. The practices that the authors are advocating here will feel natural and practical for most educators. What's remarkable and new is a simple way to take our typical educational practices to a deeper level.

The book offers ways to adapt the process to a variety of contexts. I suspect many educators will enjoy just randomly flipping to a page to get an inspiring question to discuss today!

The point is that this isn't a typical "packaged program." It's a framework that is adaptable and will support both your academic and social-emotional learning.



2. STUDENT-CENTERED

The obvious way to escape from culturally insensitive curricula that reinforce systems of oppression (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) is to put your students and their lived experience at the center of learning. What we call upon as "factual evidence" is usually rooted in specific cultural understandings. In this book, you'll find questions that open up equity-oriented dialogue where the students' expertise is meaningful, such as

- Where do you feel like your voice is heard? Are there places where you wish your voice was heard more?
- Why might people not listen to new ideas? What helps you to be more likely to listen to new or different ideas?
- A new student just arrived at your school. What do you think it feels like to be living in a new place with all new people?

These are questions that kids can answer from their own cultural perspective, norms, and values, and in discussing these, adults and youth will increase their mutual understanding.



3. BIG, MEANINGFUL QUESTIONS

As an author of an assessment of school climate,⁹ I'm concerned about how students and educators feel about school. We summarize this into an index of engagement; we'd know students are engaged if they look forward to going to school. In a global study of over 2,000 adolescents, we found no students were meaningfully engaged.¹⁰

One solution is to make time to pose questions that students will want to discuss. The previous examples are questions that, as an educator, I'd love to discuss. I'm genuinely curious about what students would say. How about you?

I started with the story of my favorite high school teacher asking big questions. I can imagine a generation from now, people will look back at their *Morning Classroom Conversations* and reminisce about how these meaningful questions became guides in their lives. This book is chock-a-block-full of the kinds of questions that will lead you to those life-changing interactions.

—Joshua Freedman, MCC, CEO of The Six Seconds
Emotional Intelligence Network

⁹ Education Vital Signs is a normed, validated measure of school climate, including dimensions such as safety and inclusion (see 6sec.org/evs).

¹⁰ <https://www.6seconds.org/2016/04/14/groundbreaking-education-research-area/>.

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Acknowledgments

We recognize that our work stands on the foundation of many others in the fields of school psychology, social-emotional learning, community psychology, and prevention. We have had colleagues, mentors, students, and collaborators too numerous to mention, whom we hold in great admiration and gratitude. The work in this book emerged from a specific project, Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC), and there are some individuals whose work has found its way into the ideas and interventions we provide. Specifically, we want to thank our MOSAIC team, Arielle Linsky, Danielle Hatchimonji, Samantha Kifer, Sarah DeMarchena, Samuel Nayman, Anam Ahsan, and Karen Colello and our many school colleagues, especially Franklin Walker, Paula Christen, Rosalyn Barnes, Robert Brower, Margaret Critelli, Francine Luce, and Joanna Veloz and all school staff who took on leadership roles within this program.

We also want to recognize the support of the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab and the many individuals therein, largely talented undergraduates, who worked with data, organized intervention materials, and kept the website working optimally.

Of course, we owe a debt of gratitude to family, other loved ones, and friends, who gave us time and space to do the work this book describes, who inspired us, and believed in us. They have been the wind beneath our wings. And we would be remiss without also extending thanks to Jessica Allan, Mia Rodriguez, and Lucas Schleicher, from Corwin, who shared our enthusiasm and lent their editorial and literary expertise to help our ideas become clearer, more organized, and accessible, and visually presentable. We could not have asked for a better publishing team.

Finally, we thank all of our readers, past, present, and future. Your practical suggestions constantly improve the effectiveness of Morning Classroom Conversations (MCC), and we encourage you to send your suggestions and improvements to us at MorningClassroomConversations@gmail.com. We will be posting new ideas, resources, and answers to some of the readers' questions at this book's website, resources.corwin.com/MorningClassroomConversations, periodically so you can bring the best of them to your students in a constantly refreshed way. We are excited to be alongside you on your MCC journey!



PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Jessica Baldwin
High School Teacher
Claxton High School
Claxton, GA

Elizabeth Crane
Adjunct Professor
University of Cumberlands
Lexington, KY

Darilyn Gorton
ELA Teacher
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He writes a blog on SECD for Edutopia (www.edutopia.org/profile/maurice-j-elias) and can be reached at secdlab@gmail.com. His Twitter handles are @SELinSchools and @SECDLab.

Take a look at a review on *The Other Side of the Report Card* from the New Jersey Association of School Psychologists at https://us.corwin.com/sites/default/files/review_of_the_other_side_njasp_0.pdf.



Nina A. Murphy, PsyD, is a practicing school psychologist in Three Village Central School District, adjunct professor at St. Joseph's College, and Senior Consulting and Field Expert at the Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) Lab at Rutgers University. Dr. Murphy has had a commitment to supporting positive youth development since she can remember but learned, during her graduate work at Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology and in the SECD Lab that this passion was targeted in helping youth develop

positive character and purpose. She worked as a consultant in an urban school, opening her eyes to the intricacies of systems-level work and the importance of collaborative change.

Dr. Murphy has worked as a school psychologist for Grades K through 12 and feels inspired each day by the potential of her students to be the leaders of the future. Whether facilitating groups, individually counseling, consulting with teachers, coaching parents, or engaging in committee discussions, Dr. Murphy embeds her passion for social-emotional learning and development within each part of her work. At St. Joseph's College, she teaches classes based on adolescent development and personality, which align with her passion for supporting student growth.

Dr. Murphy's research targets youth leadership, self-efficacy, perseverance of effort, and student voice. She has trained teachers, administrators, and fellow psychologists in social-emotional curricula, embedding behavioral, emotional, and social competence into multitiered systems of supports and formulating social-emotional character development plans. Dr. Murphy has presented at conferences such as the National Association for School Psychology and APA Division 36 (Religion and Spirituality). She has been published in professional journals such as *The Middle School Journal* and *Evaluation and Program Planning*, highlighting a preventive youth leadership "Ambassador" program and the importance of preparing youth for social action. With experience in training youth leaders and supporting the implementation of social-emotional curricula, she is committed to ensuring youth establish positive character skills through programming and intentional, coordinated school supports.



Kellie A. McClain, PsyD, is a practicing school psychologist for the River Edge School District and a Senior Consulting and Field Expert at the Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) Lab at Rutgers University. She earned her doctoral and master's degrees in School Psychology from Fairleigh Dickinson University and a Bachelor's degree with a dual major in Psychology and Criminal Justice from Rutgers University. It was through these years of study that Dr. McClain developed a passion for helping at-risk youth through preventive measures.

This passion is what led her to become a curriculum writer and consultant for the MOSAIC program, a social-emotional learning (SEL) program that helped bring Morning Classroom Conversations to life. Over a three-year span, Dr. McClain worked closely with students and teachers in multiple MOSAIC pilot schools and consulted around what is now known as *Morning Classroom Conversations*.

Dr. McClain's experience working with students and teachers in urban areas has further deepened her passion to provide children with the tools they need to succeed both within and beyond the classroom. Dr. McClain actively incorporates several SEL and SECD strategies in her current daily work as a school psychologist, with children ages 5 to 21. She specializes in professional development training with middle school teachers and administrators who are looking to incorporate SEL into their students' learning in a cohesive, systematic way.

Dr. McClain's research on the effects that student-teacher relationships have on SEL and academic achievement was published recently in the journal *Research in Middle Level Education*. Dr. McClain is committed to using her knowledge and experience to continue to help educators prepare students to tap into their full potential and live successful and purposeful lives.