

Preface

Your silence will not protect you . . . for we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.

—Audre Lorde (1984, pp. 41–44)

I came into teaching at the age of 22, more than 20 years ago now, with enthusiasm, a big dose of curiosity, lots of boldness, and an exceedingly high standard for myself and for those with whom I worked. I spent the next several years of my life learning what many of us learn—that there were more gray choices in determining how things were done in schools than the black-and-white absolutes I had thought existed.

During this time in my life as a teacher, I learned there were many ways to teach, rather than just one right way. I learned that there were circumstances outside my understanding that needed to be considered, both personal and systemic. Many decisions were made “behind the scenes” to which I was not privy. I learned a bit more about organizational savvy and what that meant, and I learned to be more understanding and therefore, for better or worse, quieter. I listened to the veteran teachers who taught me to play safe and work within the system. Stay small. Don’t rock the boat.

Eventually I found that the philosophy of “staying small” wasn’t for me. I hungered for a stretch, for some place to challenge me, for some new ideas that would put me on a learning edge. I began to seek out other professionals, go to conferences, and take in new knowledge. I learned that there were better ways to teach than what I saw within me and around me—strategies that were more research-based, more thoughtful, more engaging for students. When I came back and tried to share my new ideas, I found some were welcome, others not.

And I thought to myself, *Why, if we know better, don’t we say something? What is stopping us from being our best selves, the best professionals we could be, for each other and for our students? Why are we staying small? The question is one I carry around with me to this day.*

In my first few years as a beginning teacher coach, I took a Cognitive Coaching seminar and had the good fortune of being publicly coached by Bob Garmston. In front of 60 colleagues, I shared a particular dilemma I

had been facing. I had been struggling with what to say to a new teacher with whom I was working. She had been, I felt, rather lax in her lesson planning. I was hemming and hawing about how to speak up and tell her I thought she needed to put more effort into designing assignments. Simply whitening out the name of another teacher at the top of the assignment and replacing it with her own name didn't seem to me to be a well-thought-out idea. Had she actually taught what the assignment asked of the students? Had she read through the rubric that was attached and did she agree with it? I struggled with my judgment around this dilemma.

And then Bob asked me a question. "Why do you feel you have to let go of your judgment?" I was stunned. Having been told by fellow staff members that it was inappropriate to criticize colleagues, and that it was so important to keep rapport and not cause bad feelings, didn't we all have to just bite the bullet and be quiet? The coaching conversation that ensued about how one might go about sharing one's point of view in a way that can be heard and keep one's sense of integrity has shaped me and has shaped this book. As the Lorde quote at the beginning of this preface suggests, "[We] have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition." There *is* a way to move past our fears and find the language we need.

I write this book for those of us in the profession who were told they should remain quiet and for those who are quiet by nature, for those who speak up immediately and might get a slap on the wrist, and for those who don't speak up much and then wish they had. Our students are coming through the doors of our classrooms every day, and they deserve our best selves, both personally and professionally. A thousand things are unspoken in schools every day, and the lack of truth telling enforces an ineffective status quo. Change—personal and institutional—requires that we speak *out loud* about what we know and believe. We need to be liberated from those of our beliefs that limit us. We need to find our voice around what matters most.

A SUGGESTION FOR HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Read this with a hard conversation in mind: a conversation you have yet to have with a colleague that you find hard. Hard is relative. It is something you feel uncomfortable saying and you'd like to find more clarity and courage so you can say whatever you want in the most professional and supportive way. Then work through the book and its exercises with your own upcoming hard conversation as your guide.

With your own hard conversation, ask yourself the following:

What are the circumstances surrounding the concern?

What is bothering you?

What are some of the reasons you have yet to say anything?

Hard conversations aren't ever not "hard." They will always be awkward and uncomfortable, but you can learn tools and the language to make them more professional and more effective. It is my hope that by reading this book you will be more empowered to have those important hard conversations.