Identity Safe Classrooms

Identity Safe Classrooms

Places to Belong and Learn

Dorothy M. Steele, EdD
Becki Cohn-Vargas, EdD

Foreword by Linda Darling-Hammond, EdD

FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London, EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
B 1/I 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi
India 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Copyright © 2013 by Corwin

All rights reserved. When forms and sample documents are included, their use is authorized only by educators, local school sites, and/or noncommercial or nonprofit entities that have purchased the book. Except for that usage, no part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

All trade names and trademarks recited, referenced, or reflected herein are the property of their respective owners who retain all rights thereto.

Some definitions throughout the text were adapted from Steele, D. M. (2012). Identity safe school environment, creating. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Diversity in Education* (2), 1125–1128. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Steele, Dorothy M.

Identity safe classrooms : places to belong and learn / Dorothy M. Steele, Becki Cohn-Vargas.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4522-3090-0 (pbk.)

1. Educational sociology. 2. Classroom environment. 3. Multicultural education. I. Cohn-Vargas, Becki. II. Title.

LC191.4.S735 2013

306.43—dc23

2013014824

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Acquisitions Editor: Dan Alpert
Associate Editor: Kimberly Greenberg
Editorial Assistant: Heidi Arndt
Production Editor: Melanie Birdsall
Copy Editor: Cate Huisman
Typesetter: Hurix Systems Private (P) Ltd.
Proofreader: Theresa Kay
Indexer: David Luljak
Cover Designer: Karine Hovsepian

13 14 15 16 17 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Foreword **xi**
Linda Darling-Hammond

Acknowledgments **xiii**

About the Authors **xix**

Part I. Getting Started **1**

Chapter 1. Welcome to Readers **3**
Introduction of Identity Safe Teaching Practices 4
Research Basis of Identity Safety 6
What's Wrong With Being Colorblind? 8
From Theory, to Research, to Transforming Practice 9
Identity Safety Brings Together Best Practices 10

Chapter 2. How to Use This Book **13**
How the Book Is Organized 14
Part I References 17

Part II. Child-Centered Teaching **19**
What Do We Mean by Child-Centered Teaching? 19

Chapter 3. Listening for Students' Voices **23**
Why Focus on Listening for Students' Voices? 23
Listening for Students' Voices: How to Do It 24
Build Confidence to Participate 24
Evaluate Their Work Together 26
Promote Student Creativity and Initiative 26
Challenges and Dilemmas 28
Assign Classroom Roles 28
Listen for the Voices of Students Who Have Difficulty Self-Regulating 28
Putting Listening for Students' Voices Into Practice 31

Chapter 4. Teaching for Understanding **33**
Why Teaching for Understanding? 33
Teaching for Understanding: How to Do It 35
Prepare Students for New Activities 35
Make Instructions Clear 36
Monitor Students and Teach Them to Reflect on Their Learning 37
Provide Equal Opportunity to Access Learning 37
Introduction and Closure of Lessons 37
Challenges and Dilemmas 38
How Do You Know if the Students Understand? 38
Putting Teaching for Understanding Into Practice 39

Chapter 5. Focus on Cooperation **41**
Why Focus on Cooperation? 41
Focus on Cooperation: How to Do It 42
Work With a Partner 42
Class Teamwork 45
Focus on Social Understanding 45
Encourage Spontaneous Helping and Caring 46
Challenges and Dilemmas 47
Getting Started: Knowing How 47
Putting Focus on Cooperation Into Practice 49

Chapter 6. Classroom Autonomy **51**
Why Promote Classroom Autonomy? 51
Classroom Autonomy: How to Do It 53
Offer Choices 53
Build Self-Awareness and Self-Monitoring 54
Foster Students' Responsibility for Their Behavior 55
Foster Students' Responsibility for Their Learning 56
Teach Students to Think for Themselves 56
Challenges and Dilemmas 57
How Much Autonomy Is Enough? 58
How to Sustain Students' Efforts to Act Autonomously 58
Ensure Students Can Manage Themselves With Their Newfound Autonomy 59
Putting Classroom Autonomy Into Practice 61
PART II SUMMARY 63
PART II REFERENCES 66

Part III. Cultivating Diversity as a Resource **67**
What Do We Mean by Cultivating Diversity as a Resource? 67

Chapter 7. Using Diversity as a Resource for Teaching **71**
Why Use Diversity as a Resource for Teaching? 71
Building on Important Research in Multicultural Education and Intergroup Relations 73
Using Diversity as a Resource for Teaching: How to Do It 74
Cultivate an Equity Lens 74
Create an Environment of Acceptance and Equal Status 76
Encourage Cooperative Interdependence 77
Help Students Get to Know One Another 79
Expose Students to New Cultural Knowledge 79
Address the Hard Conversations About Race and Culture in Curriculum 81
Address and Intervene in Incidents of Stereotyping, Stereotype Threat, and Racism 84
Support Students With Two Same-Gender Parents 85
Challenges and Dilemmas 87
Reframing the Way We Think About Classroom Diversity 87
Consider When It Is Appropriate to Address Race in the Classroom 87
Accept the Fact That It Seems Like an Overwhelming Topic 88
We Are Teaching About Race and Diversity, Whether We Intend to or Not 88
Putting Diversity as a Resource for Teaching Into Practice 89

Chapter 8. High Expectations and Academic Rigor **91**
Why High Expectations and Academic Rigor? 91
High Expectations and Academic Rigor: How to Do It 92
Hold High Expectations for All Students 92
Integrate Bloom's Taxonomy Into Curriculum on a Daily Basis 93
Work Toward Mastery 94
Scaffold Student Learning 94
Scaffold English Learners 96
Begin College and Career Readiness in Kindergarten 96
Challenges and Dilemmas 97
Supporting Students Who Are Below Grade Level 97
Undoing the Damage of Low Expectations 98
Countering Low Expectations and Negative Messages About Competence 99
Putting High Expectations and Academic Rigor Into Practice 101

Chapter 9. Challenging Curriculum **103**
Why Challenging Curriculum? 103
Challenging Curriculum: How to Do It 104

Create an Air of Intellectual Excitement 104
Provide an Appropriate Level of Challenge and Encourage Students to Ask for Help 106
Make Classrooms Safe Places for Thinking 107
Differentiate Instruction to Offer Higher Level Thinking for All Students 108
Challenges and Dilemmas 109
Getting Started With Meaningful Differentiation 110
Higher Level Thinking for Students at All Performance Levels 111
Breaking the Cycle of Failure 111
Putting Challenging Curriculum Into Practice 113
Part III Summary 114
Part III References 116

Part IV. Classroom Relationships **119**
What Do We Mean by Classroom Relationships? 119

Chapter 10. Teacher Warmth and Availability to Support Learning **121**
Why Teacher Warmth and Availability to Support Learning? 121
Teacher Warmth and Availability to Support Learning: How to Do It 122
Connect With Each Student Daily 122
Provide Support by Staying Close 123
Use Words Thoughtfully: They Are Powerful 124
Monitor and Support Engagement 124
Challenges and Dilemmas 125
Nobody Is Unlovable 125
Praise and Feedback 126
Supporting Students Who Have Experienced Repeated Failures 127
Putting Teacher Warmth and Availability to Support Learning Into Practice 129

Chapter 11. Positive Student Relationships **131**
Why Focus on Positive Student Relationships? 131
Positive Student Relationships: How to Do It 132
Structure the Environment to Promote Positive Relationships 132
Provide Opportunities for Intergroup Friendships 133
Monitor Interactions on the Schoolyard 133
Promote Students' Sense of Belonging 134
Resolve Problems and Conflicts 135
Respond to Bullying 136
Challenges and Dilemmas 138

Determining When to Intervene 138
What to Do When a Disability Affects a Student's Capacity to Be Empathetic 139
Determine When to Protect Student Feelings 140
The Hazards of Circle Time Focused on Student Compliments 140
Putting Positive Student Relationships Into Practice 142
PART IV SUMMARY 144
PART IV REFERENCES 145

Part V. Caring Classrooms **147**
What Do We Mean by Caring Classrooms? 147

Chapter 12. Teacher Skill **149**
Why Teacher Skill? 149
Teacher Skill: How to Do It 150
The Science and Art of Teaching 150
Set Up the Environment for Success 151
Define Clear and Reasonable Expectations and Procedures 151
Engage Every Child at Least Once Every 10 Minutes 152
Solving Problems 153
Intervening 154
Use Consequences That Teach Rather Than Punish 155
Restorative Justice, a Consequence That Restores Dignity 156
Challenges and Dilemmas 157
Finding Time to Resolve an Issue 158
Responding With Authority Without Humiliating Students 160
Use Intrinsic, Not Extrinsic, Motivators 160
Putting Teacher Skill Into Practice 162

Chapter 13. Emotional and Physical Comfort **165**
Why Emotional and Physical Comfort? 165
Emotional and Physical Comfort: How to Do It 166
The Teacher's Attitude Sets the Stage 166
Provide a Personal Physical Place for Each Student 167
"I See Myself Reflected on the Walls" 167
Equal, but Different 168
Pay Attention to Student Status and Cliques 169
Teacher Fairness 170
Expressing Feelings 171
Self-Affirmation as Protection Against Stereotype Threat 171
Positive Presuppositions: Our Words Can Counter Stereotype Threat 173
Humor, a Two-Edged Sword 174

Time for Slowing the Pace 175
Supportive Learning Strategies 175
Challenges and Dilemmas 176
When Some Students Have More Than Others 176
How to Balance the Needs of Special-Needs Students With the Needs of the Rest of the Class 176
Putting Emotional and Physical Comfort Into Practice 178

Chapter 14. Attention to Prosocial Development **181**
Why Attention to Prosocial Development? 181
Attention to Prosocial Development: How to Do It 182
Class Meetings 182
Teach Empathy, Mutual Respect, and Intergroup Understanding 184
Respecting Different Points of View 186
Integrating Prosocial Teaching Into the Academic Curriculum 186
Parents as Partners for Prosocial Learning 189
Challenges and Dilemmas 190
Putting Attention to Prosocial Development Into Practice 192
Part V Summary 193
Part V References 194

Epilogue **197**

Index **201**

Download PDF versions of the book's tools for reflection at **www.corwin.com/identitysafe.** Access additional materials and information at **identitysafeclassrooms.org.**

Foreword

This book offers a rare gift: Drawing on an extraordinary base of both practice and research, it paints a vivid picture of how to create intellectually exciting and psychologically supportive classrooms that enable children to succeed. Rather than pursuing the false quest for a single silver bullet, Dorothy Steele and Becki Cohn-Vargas acknowledge and unpack the multiple dimensions of teaching for social, emotional, and cognitive development. They provide a *whole child, whole classroom* picture of instruction that illustrates how inclusive, academically engaging, and socially aware classrooms promote learning among all students.

This well-painted picture—based on carefully assembled evidence—provides a map for teachers and school leaders, and for educators of these professionals, about how to develop an integrated and coherent approach to instruction that helps students develop academically, socially, emotionally, and ethically. Many aspects of this approach have been described elsewhere in the literature as progressive, child-centered, or culturally responsive. This book brings a careful empirical lens to defining, measuring, and describing the elements of curriculum and teaching that support development and learning while bringing a teacher voice to the description of what educators do day-by-day to create engaging classrooms where children thrive in every way.

A key concept in this book is the notion of *identity safety.* Much more than a feel-good effort to boost students' self-esteem, this idea includes the range of classroom practices that offer cognitively meaningful learning opportunities along with the supports to take full advantage of them. Key parts of this configuration of practices are those that enable students to feel that their social identity is an asset, that they are valuable and welcomed members of the classroom, and that they have a range of peer and teacher supports that will help them succeed. Research finds that these practices positively influence student learning and attachment to school, even in the face of powerful social inequalities students may confront. This book is distinguished by its ability to bring leading-edge psychological research out of the lab and into the classroom in a way that can be understood and used by educators.

The many examples throughout this rich account show how a foundation for growth is built on acknowledging and appreciating what each child brings to school—his or her experiences, interests, culture, language, family roots, talents, and distinct ways of being and knowing in the world. It illustrates how students and teachers succeed together when these starting points are treated as sources for intellectual growth and guidance and when different approaches to communicating and learning are incorporated into classroom life.

In giving voice to teachers who have created classrooms built on positive relationships, trust, and challenging curriculum, this book also offers an antidote to the persistent teacher bashing that has characterized recent "reform" initiatives in the United States. It puts the teachers' role in creating child-centered classrooms front and center, and it celebrates the role of teachers in creating classrooms that promote learning and development for all children.

The practices brought to life in this book can allow us to develop schools as places that empower all students to own their own learning, to become efficacious in pursuing their own goals by helping others to participate in building a healthier and more just society. In such schools, all students will experience high expectations and encounter academic work that calls for critical thinking and problem solving around real world concerns that provoke passion and commitment to learning. In such schools, students will have multiple ways to demonstrate their learning through authentic assessments. In such schools, students' capacity to succeed and excel will be built on trusting relationships between and among students and staff that extend to families and communities as well.

The research presented here reveals that schools engaging in these practices produce stronger learning in many ways, including on standardized tests. However, that is not the most important aspect of this work. In a society where high-quality education has too often been confused with meeting test score targets, we need portraits of the kinds of educational settings where students can experience affirmation, joy, discovery, and meaning. We need images of how the families, cultures, and experiences of students can be integrated into the tapestry of the classroom. And we need depictions of how students flourish in such environments. This book provides all of that and more. It is a gift from which educators and children will benefit in as many ways as the multifaceted elements of learning and teaching are illuminated in these pages.

—Linda Darling-Hammond
Stanford University
April 21, 2013

Acknowledgments

DOROTHY STEELE'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My life has been rich in opportunities to work with many generous people who have taught me everything I have learned about how children learn and what teachers need in order to help them. I will try here to do their immeasurable contributions justice.

The work on identity safety described in this book has a long history, beginning in 1998 when a small group of us began to meet to explore whether and how teachers could create classrooms in which students of color could become more successful by being freed from the threat of being negatively stereotyped in school. Without this research group's strong dedication to this question and expertise in designing a large, school-based study to answer our questions, this work would not have succeeded.

This group consisted of Claude Steele, whose original work on stereotype threat provides the foundation of identity safety; Hazel Rose Markus, a Stanford University social psychologist whose work has focused on the powerful influence of culture on experience and behavior; Michael Kass, an educator who has been a kindergarten teacher, principal, and activist devoted to equity in schools; the late Dan Solomon, another social psychologist who served as the director of research at the Child Development Project in Oakland, whose expertise on observational data helped us develop and analyze our research tools; and finally, Francie Green, the research coordinator who helped us plan for the many considerations and carry out all the needed tasks to conduct a year-long research project in multiple schools.

Generous grants from the Russell Sage Foundation funded this research and supported the group of teachers who met with us monthly for over two years following the data collection to think about how to incorporate our findings into daily practice. Much gratitude goes to Eric Wanner, president of the foundation, who generously supported our work.

It is humbling to consider the numbers of people on whom we depended to carry out this research. They include the 84 teachers who allowed us into their classrooms many times in one year, the six classroom observers who carefully collected and documented the data throughout the year, the principals of the 13 schools, and the superintendent and her cabinet who accepted our work into their midst. Importantly, the school secretaries, who worked with our research coordinator to match complex school schedules to orchestrate all these visits, deserve our deep gratitude.

Many people gave freely of their time to think about how to analyze the vast amount of data and interpret it so that teachers could benefit from what we learned. These include dear friends, Paul Davies, who was then Claude Steele's postdoctoral student and is now a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia at Okanagan; and Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis, who were then visiting fellows at Stanford's Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity and who are now both professors of sociology at Emory University. They worked with the research team, Claude, Hazel, Dan, Francie, and me to help us get a handle on all the data.

I thank also Leanne Isaak who, with lots of grace and competence, worked to keep me on track in my role as executive director at the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity during the years we were busy with the research project; Milton Reynolds, who was one of our classroom observers and now serves as a teacher educator with the organization Facing History; and Adi Lapin, a professional developer and program manager of Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) in our research district who, with Milton, has continued to work with the new teachers in that district to help them incorporate identity safe teaching practices into their classrooms. I continue to learn from them about this process, which is inspired by their deep dedication to making school a better place for all children and their teachers. Their commitment has encouraged me to keep my focus on finishing the book and sharing it with teachers.

Becki Cohn-Vargas, my coauthor, is totally responsible for turning this work into a book. She pushed this idea when I couldn't really listen, and kept talking about it, unfazed by my resistant behavior. She found our wonderful editor, Dan Alpert, who made the idea seem real. Meeting Dan was the clincher. I knew we could make this happen. Becki's commitment to true equity in schools is matched only by her broad intellect. Her ability to connect experience to theory and back again makes working with her profoundly engaging, and it moved us toward this shared goal of encouraging teachers in this most important profession. Becki is a great friend

whose thoughtfulness and generous spirit have sustained our work over these last few years.

Other friends helped me keep on track in direct and indirect ways. I want to especially thank four people who read our book and gave comments that improved it. They are Doug Foster, professor of journalism; Jay Rosner, lawyer and advocate for students; Adi Lapin, educator; and Amanda Lewis, sociology professor. Their varied backgrounds helped us to look at our writing from different perspectives. Their enduring friendship means more than I can say.

Finally, I return to two members of the original research team, Hazel Rose Markus and Claude Steele. Hazel has been Claude's colleague for more than 25 years and our dear friend for that time as well. It was her willingness to participate in this research that brought me into the circle of researchers and gave my developing ideas voice. For that, I cannot thank her enough. Her friendship sustains me in work and family life.

From the moment I met Claude nearly 50 years ago, my life opened to ideas and experiences I could not have dreamed of. His persistent interest in "how life works," how to make things better, how to include those who have not yet been included, and how to constantly try to develop one's intellect shapes our lives every day. These passions are embodied in a person who is loving, kind, and full of humor.

Together we have made a happy life woven together by our work and love of our family. Our children, Jory and Benny, and their spouses, Sidney and Dayna, give us roots to the earth that help make me strong every day. Their children, Matthew and Coleman, remind me what my parents taught me by example, to treat every child as a gift to be cherished.

BECKI COHN-VARGAS'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I come from a family of teachers and would like to acknowledge their deep influence on me: my grandmother Elsa Rhee, who taught in Germany before the Holocaust, when she was forced to flee; my mother Eva Cohn, who was a revered teacher for 30 years in Palo Alto, California; my father Cantor Hans Cohn, who taught hundreds of bar mitzvah students, among others; and my stepmother Nina Loban, who teaches piano. Along with love and support, they have been models for me and have instilled a spirit of service and a belief in education as the hope for the future. They also instilled in me a belief in human capacity and a passion for equity and social justice.

I want to thank my husband and children, who have been alongside me in this journey. I met Rito Vargas 31 years ago in Nicaragua, where

we worked together filming preschool children. (He filmed, and I was the producer.) Our three children, Priscilla Vargas, Melania Vargas, and David Vargas, have been my greatest teachers as I traveled the path of parenting. Now they are my sounding boards, my proofreaders, and my cheering squad.

Other family members have also been instrumental and nurtured me along the way, including my two sisters and their families: Ruth Cohn and her husband Michael Lewin, and Barbara Liepman and her husband Michael Liepman, as well as their children Ben and Allison and my niece Julia Rhee, who I now mentor as she teaches in the inner city of Richmond, California. I also want to acknowledge my husband's family, particularly Felipa Cintron, Ethel Martinez, Maria de los Angeles Montcrieffe, Elizabeth Montcrieffe, and Marta Ibarra.

I particularly want to highlight two educators who guided me along the path and deeply embraced identity safety: Joyce Germaine-Watts, my doctoral advisor, and my dear friend Kathe Gogolewski, who I met as my daughter's most amazing third grade teacher and who has worked side by side with me on all equity and writing projects for the last 20 years. Other close friends have also supported me: Reverend Robin Mathews-Johnson, Randi Thomson, Patrice O'Neill, Martha Booz, and Laurie Bernstein.

This book includes the voices of many teachers and administrators. I particularly want to thank Max Velez, Mangla Oza, Katie Bimpson, Arlinda Smith, Jennifer Abrams, Letitia Burton, Danae Reynolds, Meg Williams, Cathy Howard, Keith Libert, K. J. Lee, Laura Joy Lamkin, Jen Corn, and Marilyn Cook, educators from Oakland, Palo Alto, Berkeley, and San Jose, California, for their wisdom and deep exploration of identity safety. They are really just a small part of the hundreds of dedicated educators we have met over the years who truly care for their students and cultivate those students' identities like precious shoots and roots. The amazing students of all ages we have known and continue to know are our inspiration, and for them we have done this work.

Finally, I want to thank my coauthor Dorothy Steele for her inspiration. She has influenced my life for the last 18 years, starting when we worked together as professional developers at the Developmental Studies Center. She even advised me on how to help my young daughter with her attitude about being a mixed-race child. I still remember the day I ran into her in a classroom where she was beginning observations for identity safety, and she told me what she was doing. This work immediately resonated with me, and I brought it into my district and eventually my dissertation. Dorothy and I have had a wonderful time writing this book,

grappling with ideas, drawing from the best moments of our practice, and sharing our lives along this journey.

Together, we want to thank Dan Alpert and Heidi Arndt of Corwin. Dan has been an awesome editor who truly believes in this work and has offered untold support. We also want to thank all the readers and reviewers who helped along the way.

PUBLISHER'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Susan Adkins
Teacher
Detroit Public Schools
Detroit, MI

Roxie R. Ahlbrecht
Math Recovery Intervention Specialist
Lowell MST Elementary School
Sioux Falls, SD

Susan Schipper
Teacher
Charles Street School
Palmyra, NJ

About the Authors

Dorothy M. Steele, EdD, is the former executive director of the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University. She is an early childhood educator who is interested in teaching in public schools, including teaching practices that are effective for diverse classrooms, alternative assessment processes that inform teaching and learning, and strategies that build inclusive communities of learners. Her work with the Stanford Integrated Schools Project (SISP) was an attempt to look at these various aspects of schooling in a large urban school district.

Dorothy began her work with teachers and children in 1968 in Columbus, Ohio, as the director/teacher of one of the city's first Head Start programs. During the 1970s, she served as the curriculum coordinator for the City of Seattle's children's programs, as an early childhood teacher educator, as a parent educator, and, for eight years, as the director of a large, university-based child care center.

In 1987, Dorothy began her doctoral work in early childhood education and, with her advisor, developed an alternative assessment process for early childhood education, the Work Sampling System that is now being used throughout the world. Her dissertation explored the negative impact of standardized tests on kindergarten teachers' educational decisions for their students.

Dorothy received her AB in music from Hiram College in Hiram, Ohio, in 1967; her MA in early childhood education from The Ohio State University in 1971; and her EdD in early childhood education from the University of Michigan in 1994.

She lives in Stanford, California, with her husband, Claude M. Steele. Their family includes a son and daughter and their spouses and two energetic and loving preschool-age boys who make life ever more sweet.

Becki Cohn-Vargas, EdD, is currently the director of Not In Our School, a national nonprofit working group. She designs curriculum, coaches school staff, and produces films and digital media on models for creating safe and inclusive schools, free of bullying and intolerance. She also teaches online courses on bullying prevention for the University of San Diego. Becki worked in educational settings for more than 35 years as a teacher and administrator.

Becki began her career in early childhood education at the West Santa Rosa Multicultural Center in rural Sonoma County, California, in 1975. She did community service in Central America in the Guatemalan Highlands and later in the Preschool Department of the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education. She then returned to California and worked as a bilingual teacher and principal in Oakland, as a curriculum director in Palo Alto, and most recently as superintendent–principal of a one-school district in San Jose. She also worked as a staff developer for the Child Development Program of the Developmental Studies Center. In each of these settings, she focused on developing and implementing effective teaching strategies for diverse student populations and creating environments that promoted educational equity. In 2003, she learned of the research on identity safety with SISP and designed a follow-up study with a group of elementary school teachers. Her doctoral dissertation focused on identifying, describing, and implementing identity safe practices.

Becki received a bachelor's degree and teaching credential from Sonoma State University; a master's in education from California State University, East Bay; and a doctorate from Fielding Graduate University. She and her husband live in El Sobrante, California, and have three adult children living in the Bay Area. With her husband Rito Vargas, Becki is also working to develop an environmental research center on their private reserve in the Nicaraguan rain forest.