Identity Safe Classrooms
Identity Safe Classrooms
Places to Belong and Learn

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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
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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.
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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.

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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.