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## A New Education for Civility

I write this book at a time when the need for civility, for mutually respectful communication, and for ethical interactions between and among groups has never been more acute. To sustain a promising future for our children and grandchildren, individuals and groups need to find ways to work cooperatively and respectfully. Hope for improved civility and dialogue, in my view, lies as much in the hearts and minds of the young as it does with us adults. The questions for me have become these: What kind of education fosters the nascent capacities in young children to reach out and listen to those different from themselves? What will lead them to work together to address problems with solutions that are both intelligent and ethical?

To answer these questions for myself, I have looked to the democratic traditions in education and to individual social, behavioral, and developmental psychologists. These experts hold a shared belief that we are just beginning to understand the miracle of human potential. The path for the future lies in learning how the development of human potential unfolds and nurturing that development as respectfully as possible. My hope is that readers as well will find this shared meaning from these sources, as discussed in the book.

Those familiar with my writing know that my usual focus is classroom **guidance**. By guidance I mean a way of teaching that nurtures each child's potential through consistently positive (sometimes firm, but always friendly) interactions. Over the years, partial expressions of the ideas in this book have appeared in my textbook, *A Guidance Approach for the Encouraging Classroom* (sixth edition, forthcoming), and in *Guidance Matters*, my column in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) journal, *Young*

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**DLS 1: Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual**  
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**DLS 2: Expressing strong emotions in non-hurting ways**  
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**DLS 3: Solving problems creatively—independently and in cooperation with others**  
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**DLS 4: Accepting unique human qualities in others**  
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**DLS 5: Thinking intelligently and ethically**  
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**guidance:** a way of teaching that nurtures each child's potential through consistently positive (sometimes firm, but always friendly) interactions; classroom management that teaches rather than punishes

**progressive education:** forward-looking education that respects diversity and educates the whole child; that balances the needs of the developing child with academics; and that focuses on development that advances children's ability to learn in the context of a democratic community

*Children.* For the first time, the ideas are linked together in a coordinated thesis that civility, through the development of the five democratic life skills (I'll discuss these in a bit), can and should be taught and learned.

In the past, writers have referred to education that takes this viewpoint as *teaching for the whole child*. More recently, descriptions of this education reflect findings from neuroscience—*education for the healthy formation of executive function*—and the understanding that intelligence is multifaceted: *education for multiple intelligences* (Gardner 2006). Such an approach to education balances support for cognitive development with emotional, social, and physical development. Thus, teachers educate not just so children can acquire knowledge that can be measured by tests, but also so children can build the skills needed for intelligent and ethical functioning in modern democratic society. This kind of education happens in classrooms in which teachers implement developmentally appropriate practices.

## Where the Author Comes From

Almost 50 years ago, after graduating from university, my first teaching assignment was in the sixth grade of an inner-city school in Ohio. On the first day of orientation, the principal issued paddles to every teacher. I didn't take one. Corporal punishment was the way of that school, however, and I worked with sixth-graders who had known paddling for years. I made it through the year, but I could not be the teacher I wanted to be in that school and moved on.

For the next few years I taught preschoolers enrolled in the Head Start program of the Red Lake Band of Ojibwe in northern Minnesota. Red Lake is one of very few closed Native American reservations, meaning the tribe holds all land in trust for its members and the land cannot be bought or sold. With the assistance of my colleagues, I learned about the culture of the families we served and what life was like in the untamed nature of the north woods. As best we could, we incorporated this knowledge into the education program.

Together, these two formative teaching experiences gave rise to my long-term commitment to the practice of guidance and to the field of early childhood education. Later, I consolidated that commitment as I taught adults who teach young children. First as a trainer of Child Development Associate (CDA) candidates, then when I was supervising student teachers, and recently while serving as a staff coach for a Head Start program, I have kept my experience with young children, their teachers, and their families fresh. My respect for the learning potential of every child has been ever renewed.

A long career in teaching and writing has given me an enduring perspective on the connection of **progressive education**—education of the whole child, with academics kept in appropriate balance—to social reform. That still-developing perspective has led to this book.

I will always remember the children in my Head Start class, and in particular Virgil and Karen. On a breezy summer day Virgil patiently explained to me that the wind happens because the "trees push the air. The leaves are fans, of course." The following winter Karen drew Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer with a yellow nose "so Santa can see better." This 4-year-old improved on the whole Rudolph concept.

## The Democratic Life Skills

For a long-lasting solution to the issue of incivility in modern life, it is time to look anew at the social and cultural purposes of schooling. Education that prepares the whole child for modern, democratic society incorporates the best practices of early childhood education. Under the umbrella term popularized by NAEYC, **developmentally appropriate**

**practice** (see Copple & Bredekamp 2009), three aspects essential in meeting the needs of all children are particularly relevant to promoting the democratic life skills:

- ◆ Reciprocal and respectful family-teacher partnerships
- ◆ Curriculum and teaching methods aligned with principles of child (and brain) development
- ◆ Teacher-child interactions and relationships that guide children toward prosocial behaviors (the practice of guidance as opposed to discipline)

The goals of progressive education constitute five social-emotional skills that together illustrate a comprehensive, contemporary concept of civility. These **democratic life skills** (DLS) are the emotional and social capacities individuals need to function civilly in our modern, diverse, and complex democratic society. The skills are

1. Finding acceptance as a member of the group and as a worthy individual
2. Expressing strong emotions in non-hurting ways
3. Solving problems creatively—independently and in cooperation with others
4. Accepting unique human qualities in others
5. Thinking intelligently and ethically

The highest of the skills, the ability to think intelligently and ethically, defines the core of civility.

The strength of the early childhood education field is that it is widely researched and its best practices are continually vetted (see Part Two). Teachers support young children’s acquisition of developmentally appropriate emerging academic skills—as well as the social-emotional capacities that constitute the development of the democratic life skills. An education that teaches the ability *and* a willingness to engage in literacy, numeracy, scientific inquiry, artistic expression, and physical activity—in concert with the five social-emotional skills—has much to offer. Further, as shown in Part Two, early childhood education’s best practices have documented, unmatched promise as an approach for what education at all levels should be.

## Toward Civil Democracy

One way of looking at our diverse society is as the continual interaction of independently functioning groups of every kind: families; classroom and school communities; civic, religious, and recreational clusters; business, service, and professional structures; political entities; and cultural and ethnic groups. Education that teaches children the skills they need to be contributing members of a civil society begins with classroom communities that embrace inclusive—mutually respectful—communication.

Of course, I do not suggest a blind equality among all members of any given group, including in the classroom. Families have parents or parent surrogates. Businesses have managers. Corporations have executives. Unions have presidents. Organizations have directors. Classrooms have teachers. Civility means that intelligent and ethical communication occurs vertically within groups, a prerequisite for cooperation and collaboration across memberships in groups to come. When the members of differing social groups find common ground they are able to cooperate and to create and implement sustainable solutions to the vexing problems of the day.

Education for a civil society models these principles for straightforward but friendly communication both within and across the diverse groups of society. We progressive early childhood educators view the role of schools as preparing citizens for the only form of political society in which all individuals have equal opportunity to actualize their

**developmentally appropriate practice (DAP):** an approach to teaching that is grounded in how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education

**democratic life skills (DLS):** the emotional and social capacities individuals need to function civilly in modern, diverse, and complex democratic society

**civility:** intelligent and ethical communication among individuals within and across groups

potential: one that has a rich mix of diverse, democratic communities. Through modeling as well as other teaching strategies, teachers can educate young children to connect with and extend these communities in civil but responsive ways.

Now, to think that society can be transformed by a new education for a civil democracy in my lifetime or even yours would be . . . you supply the adjective. I write this book to make the case for democratic (thus prosocial and developmentally appropriate) education for learners of all ages, which will, over time, lead to a more civil democracy.

## In Three Parts

The book has three parts: Foundations, The Early Childhood Lead, and Teaching for the Democratic Life Skills. The democratic life skills are introduced in Part One, expanded on in Part Two, and form the entirety of Part Three. Each of the chapter-essays explores a topic relating to the need to educate for civility.

### Part One: Foundations

Part One establishes the educational and psychological foundations for an education to promote civility. Chapter 2 documents the progressive tradition in education, with profiles of Johan Comenius, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey. Chapter 3 explores the psychology of the democratic life skills with profiles of interesting, visionary, courageous intellects who have furthered our understanding about the connection between humane education in childhood and civil living by adults.

The final chapter in Part One addresses the neuroscience of nurturing relationships. This material is essential to the new education for civility because it highlights the importance of children's early relationships, including those with teachers. Nurturing relationships help children manage stress levels, kindle mastery motivation (interest in learning for its own sake), and support executive function skills.

### Part Two: The Early Childhood Lead

Part Two presents conditions necessary for teaching the democratic life skills. The theme developed in Part Two is that guidance (and thus teaching for the democratic life skills) is possible only through the use of developmentally appropriate practice.

Chapter 5 makes the case that best practices in early childhood education point the way for what education at all levels should be. Chapter 6 discusses why family-school partnerships are at the heart of education for a civil democracy. Chapter 7 explores the meaning of developmentally appropriate practice for progressive education. When developmentally appropriate practices are in place, curriculum tends to emerge from the interests and life experiences of the classroom community, with the teacher serving as mediator between children's life experiences and the educational standards for the program.

Chapters 8 and 9 address the practice of guidance with the group and with the individual child. The final chapter in Part Two discusses including every child, particularly active boys and children vulnerable for stigma.

### Part Three: Teaching for the Democratic Life Skills

Chapter 11 provides an overview of the democratic life skills and addresses the hierarchical order of learning the skills. (Gaining the safety-needs skills, 1 and 2, must precede attainment of the growth-needs skills, 3, 4, and 5.)

The next five chapters focus on the democratic life skills. Each chapter explains one of the democratic life skills, provides behavioral indicators that document progress to-

ward gaining the skill, includes a composite case study of young children in the process of learning the skill, and concludes with a list of teaching practices that promote each skill's development. I make the case that adults should teach *for* the democratic life skills rather than try to directly teach them. The skills are developmental capacities within a child's developing mind and can be nurtured and fostered, but not directly taught.

**Chapter 12: Democratic Life Skill 1: Finding Acceptance as a Member of the Group and as a Worthy Individual.** DLS 1 has to do with the ability of the child to develop secure attachments with significant adults, the foundational emotional acceptance that each child needs in the home and classroom for progress with the other skills.

**Chapter 13: Democratic Life Skill 2: Expressing Strong Emotions in Non-Hurting Ways.** This capacity is both foundational to the child's ability to transition toward the three remaining democratic life skills and fundamental to the individual's ability to sustain all five skills through life.

**Chapter 14: Democratic Life Skill 3: Solving Problems Creatively—Independently and in Cooperation with Others.** The chapter explores how meeting the early democratic life skills, DLS 1 and DLS 2, enables children to develop both *individual* and *cooperative* problem-solving skills.

**Chapter 15: Democratic Life Skill 4: Accepting Unique Human Qualities in Others.** DLS 4 builds upon creative problem solving but is a more generalized capacity of the developing mind. Moving past feeling “this person is not like me” to relating in friendly ways to individuals of whatever human qualities is a capacity most of us adults still work on.

**Chapter 16: Democratic Life Skill 5: Thinking Intelligently and Ethically.** Some readers might reasonably argue that young children, due to limitations in life experience and brain development, cannot rise to DLS 5. But Piaget argued that although young children cannot reason about prosocial actions, they can act prosocially (Piaget [1932] 1960). In his theory of multiple intelligences (discussed in Chapter 3), Howard Gardner also makes the case that intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences can and should be cultivated in young children—and can be seen in their behaviors.

**Chapter 17: Education for a Civil Society.** Chapter 17 provides a recommendation for bringing the democratic life skills into American educational practice. This concluding chapter suggests what can result when more citizens understand the need to intentionally educate the young to apply civil action—intelligent and ethical decision making—in their daily lives.

## Anecdotes . . . and a Sprinkling of Humor

Many readers know that I begin each Guidance Matters column with an anecdote, a brief account of something that took place in an early childhood classroom. Similarly, anecdotes also appear throughout this book. The following classic involves a child who swears, and his befuddled teacher.

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Early in my first year of teaching Head Start, whenever 4-year-old Joey got upset he said, “Damnit to hell.” I found a quiet moment with Joey and we discussed the situation. I explained that we all get upset sometimes and that is okay, but the words he was using bothered people at Head Start. I gave him a significant nod and told him whenever he got upset, he could say “Ding-dong it” instead. Those would be all-right words to use.

The next day Joey came into the classroom, got upset about something, and declared, “Ding-dong it. Damnit to hell!” I had just increased his vocabulary! My assistant almost fell off her chair laughing, and I did some re-teaching with Joey, trying to contain my grin.

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Over the years, from experiences like this, I have learned at least three lessons. First, it is important to have a friendly sense of humor, whether dealing with people big or small. Situations in early childhood classrooms rarely go exactly as we expect, and, whenever we can, we should try to enjoy the moment.

Second, we teachers at any level learn even as we teach (an absolute necessity when we are teaching for the democratic life skills).

Third, never underestimate the abilities of young learners, especially their ability to increase their vocabularies!

I hope readers find these three lessons helpful as we make our way together through the ideas in the book.