Shannon Simonelli:
Aloha. I'd like to welcome everybody to our next Effective practice Briefing in this series. Thank you for joining us today. Our featured speaker today is Mara Sapon-Shevin. She is a professor of inclusive education at Syracuse University. She prepares teachers for teaching in inclusive classrooms and is interested in disability studies and is also very interested in social justice in education. She's a published author, and her most recent book is called *Widening The Circle: The Power Of Inclusive Education.* We also have with us Dr. Julie: Smith. She is our curriculum expert in the field with the State Improvement Grant. And I'm Dr. Shannon Simonelli, serving as your host and moderator with the Center on Disability Studies at the University of Hawaii. So I'd like to welcome our speakers.
Mara:
Thank you.
Julie:
Good Morning, Shannon. Good morning, Mara. This is Julie.
Shannon:
Hello, Julie. Do you want to begin with some questions for Mara?
Julie:
Sure. Mara, I am a huge fan of your writing and of the approach that you take to education and kind of the way our world needs to be I'm sitting with both of my favorite books, *Because We Can Change The World* and your newest one, *Widening The Circle: The Power Of Inclusive Classroom.* As I read through both of the books over the years, and most recently your new one, I wanted to talk to you about the sense of community within education and how important that is, and really how your perspective has widened on that through your writing. I would like for you to start to just tell us how you came to find that the sense of community that kids can get within a school, how that is important to them.
Mara:
Yes. Thank you. I think like all of us in education at some point, we sort of teach ourselves. Or we talk about our own stories. And for me growing up, I was often in situations in which there wasn't a good sense of community; in which children did not treat each other well, and which the teachers didn't do a lot or know how to do a lot to make that a safe, welcoming community. Even though there were situations in which I was achieving well academically, there were also many situations in which I didn't have friends and didn't feel connected, in which a pervasive sense of competition and very narrow definitions of achievement kept a lot of kids from being accepted.
Then as I became a teacher myself, I realized that unless there was a solid community in the classroom, that almost nothing else we did as teachers was going to happen or was going to matter. If a child was worried about being beat up on the playground, it was going to be impossible for him to learn his math. If a child was being called names, or isolated, or teased, then all of the focus of that child's energy was going to go toward trying to make themselves feel safe and okay, and that they weren't going to be able to learn anything else. So no matter how wonderful our curriculum was, or how great our pedagogy was, unless there was a classroom community, all of it could quickly fall apart. I would see teachers who had brilliant lessons that were well designed, and as soon as they would start, the kids would start teasing each other. "I'm not working with him. He's stupid." "He's cheating." "She looked on my paper." This kind of bickering and low-level disruption of a community would really keep even the best lesson from working. So it seemed to me that having a solid community in which kids know each other, like

one another, know how to problem-solve, know how to appreciate each other, know how to work together, had to be point zero before anything else could happen well in the classroom.
I think what's changed for me over the years is I am increasingly convinced that this is what matters most in education. But we're also at a period in our history now when spending time building a community is seen as a real luxury and a frill, and all the focus is on high-stakes standardized testing and achievement. People don't understand that we can't have that achievement, even if we agreed with those standards, we can't have any kind of high level achievement if kids aren't feeling safe in schools. I see so many of the things that we're spending time and energy in schools as related to community. There's lots of bully curriculum now, and how to deal with bullying in the classroom. Bullying is a direct manifestation of the sense of community or the lack thereof. So it seems to me it's really the most essential thing. I say to my students, probably until they're somewhat sick of it, that time spent building community in the classroom is never wasted time. It's not what you do for the first two weeks until you get in to the real stuff of education. I keep saying over and over again, it's one of the most important things we do; it has to be an ongoing commitment, something we do all throughout the year, not just for the first two weeks in September.
Julie:
Right. You talk about the bullying curriculum that's starting to surface in schools. That seems to be a reaction to the lack of community, and we're not really getting to the core of what's causing the bullying in the first place.
I think you'd be a little relieved to know that I was sitting in a school last week during their opening, --because we start early here,-- during their opening faculty meeting, and the principal stood in front and said a quote, and I don't remember whose it was, so I apologize in advance, and you may know, but it said "Successful education is 80% about relationships and 20% about strategy." So he was really on board to cultivate relationships.
But I think your point of teachers' perceptions, thinking that building community is something that's extra, that it is something they don't have time to do. Could you talk to us a little about how you can use community-building types of approaches to teach content?
Mara:
Right. I think that's one of those things that it's almost got in position is those are two dichotomous competing things here that we neither work on ??? 6:36??
Julie:
That they're mutually exclusive somehow.
Mara:
Right. We can work on community-building and social skills, or we can actually teach something.
Now what I do in workshops is I say, let's take almost anything we need to teach and let's figure out an interactive way of doing the activity. Let me describe something I just did with some students, and then with teachers. It was a way of saying okay, so even a lesson on something that was nouns and verbs, or something like that, I said, instead of having to sit in isolation doing worksheets, and then what about the kid who really struggles and for whom that activity is going to be a challenge, what do you do? Exclude them completely or sit them off with an aide in the corner? Or is there a way to do it differently?
I gave every person in the group a little tile with the letter of the alphabet on it. We started with okay. Let's assuming we're reviewing nouns with kids. What are nouns? People, places, and things. I want everybody to come up with a noun that starts with your letter. So the R said

"Rabbit." And the P said "Peanut." So everybody came up with something. Then you found a partner and shared your word with them; you showed them your letter and shared your word. You were with a partner, and there was that interaction. If one child was struggling, there was someone else to help them or suggest something to them.

One of the things we also know is that if somebody has shared an answer in a small group, they're much more likely to be comfortable sharing it in a larger group. You've already had that kind of one-on-one. Then you could say, "Michael, what did you tell Marissa?" And he'd say, "I told her I had a B, and that was ball." And that's great, and we did that.

Then we added some discussion about what are verbs? Verbs are action words. So it was, "I want you to find a partner, and I want you to make a two word sentence using one of your letters as a noun and one as a verb." So P and R becomes "Peter runs." What if we turn it around. Could we say, "Rabbits putter."

So there was all this interaction again, and peer teaching just easily there. When somebody says, "Peter run." And you could say, "I think it would have to be Peter runs, to make that a full sentence."

Then we added adjectives and had groups of three. Make a sentence with an adjective, a verb, and a noun. It was like, "Funny Peter runs." We did this, and there was lots of movement, and there was lots of laughter, and there was lots of sharing. It was so easy for them to see how they could include a kid whose skill level was not the same. Also, incidentally, this could be modified to include a kid whose skill level was high. Give that kid the letter Z. It was going to be a little bit harder to come up with a verb or a noun or an adjective with a Z. And yet they were included in the activity.

So it was an example of doing content that needs to be taught, but doing it in an interactive and participatory way; a cooperative way. Just doing a lot of those kinds of strategy things, how could we do this in a way that people can help one another, in a way that people can see that people have different gifts and strengths. How can we just organize the day so it's not isolating?

One of the other things that has always made me both troubled and amused is that I used to be the president of the International Cooperative Learning Association. So I did a lot of work around teaching teachers how to use cooperative learning in the classroom. You'd go in to one classroom where there wasn't a belief in cooperative learning, and Carolyn would lean over to Tyrone and say, "I don't understand this." And the teacher would say, "Carolyn, do your own work. I want to know what you can do, not what your neighbor can do. Eyes on your own paper." And so in that case, asking for help was seen as cheating. In another classroom with a different belief system, Carolyn would lean over to Tyrone and say, "I don't understand it." And Tyrone would say, "Okay. So what part don't you understand. All right. So here's what I think," and they would help each other. In that classroom it was called cooperation and helping. In the other classroom it was called cheating. And yet it was really the same behavior. But it was how it was framed and viewed by the teacher.

One of the saddest moments for me ever in my history as a parent, --because that's formed a lot of my work as an educator, because these were the children that were the closest to me, my own,-- happened when I went to have a conference with one of my daughter's teachers when she was small. The teacher told us that her academic work was good, but that there were a few problems she was having. And I said, "Like what?" And she said, "She cares too much about other children." I obviously looked a little bit puzzled, like, "Okay?" She said, "Do you want an example?" I said, "Please?" She said, "Well, if somebody in the class breaks their pencil and starts to cry, Dahlia goes in to her desk and she gets one of her pencils. And I say to her, "Dalia,

it's not your problem. *It's just not your problem."* At that moment I was just so sad, because here was this child, --(and my daughter's now almost twenty-eight)-- who is empathic and generous and giving and kind, such a kind person from the time she was tiny, and that was seen as a problem in school because it was so individually structured. They literally saw this as a problem behavior. Whereas I listened to that and said, oh, my God, that's a value that we've nurtured in her on purpose, being attentive to somebody else who's in trouble and saying can I help, can I support, there's something I can do.

So I think very much our own beliefs about how people interact and how independent they should be, or how connected they should be, flavors what goes on in our classrooms as teachers. So we really have to ask ourselves, "*What do I believe about how people should be in the world because that's going to color what I expect and teach and support in my own classroom.*"

Julie:

Right. Right. It occurred to me as we were talking that we may have kind of jumped ahead. I think there may be listeners to this podcast that might not be really clear about what we mean about establishing a sense of community within the classroom and what some of the foundations and some of the processes in doing that might be.

Mara:

Well, when I say a sense of community, I mean that children treat each other well, that they ask each other for help, that they offer help and support, that they say nice things to one another, that they're appreciative of one another, that they can admire someone else's achievement without feeling competitive, that they can work together to solve problems. I sometimes hesitate when people say "I want the classroom to feel like a family." Because unfortunately some of us didn't have families that we'd like to recreate in the classroom. But it's sort of the family that we wish we'd all had, you know, where people are kind and loving and gentle, and where if I say to you, "I'm having trouble." You say to me, "Can I help?" Not "Ah, ha, ha! You're having trouble" or something like that. It's where people are free to reveal the places they're struggling and their weaknesses, knowing that they'll be met with love and kindness and not teasing; and that people are also free to celebrate their successes without that being considered inappropriate. I can say, "Look what I did. Look at my picture." And have people say, "Cool! Mara, that's wonderful." Not, like, "Oh. You think you're so great." So that we really establish an atmosphere in which every child can feel successful, and that we eliminate the competitiveness and the sense of that there's only enough success or love or admiration for a few children in this classroom, and we say, really, there's no scarcity here of success or feeling good about yourself.

Julie:

Some of what you were speaking to reminded me of that element of safety. What advice do you have for teachers of really getting that sense of community established in their classroom very early and sustaining it throughout the school year?

Mara:

I think that there's two things that are important. A lot of what happens in a lot of classrooms is very *reactive.* A child does something negative to another child and the teacher says, "That's not nice, Charles. We don't treat each other that way." Or something like that. But long before that, I think teacher have to spend time from the very beginning establishing norms of how we treat each other here and what that looks like and what that sounds like and what that feels like. This has to be made very explicit very early on, and monitored carefully, and attended to as though it was a crucial aspect of how people treat one another. I think that activities like having morning circle or morning meeting where children sit and, even if it's only for ten minutes, share how

they are, share what's new with them in their lives, or what's happening for them; an opportunity to celebrate good things, an opportunity to share things that are hard and receive some sympathy and support. Those things have to be established proactively. Then when something happens, then I can say, "Carolyn, you know our classroom norm of kind words. That's not a kind word is it? Let's think about how else you could've said that to Marissa," because we've already talked about kind words. You can't refer back to a rule that you've never established. So it's doing it up front and not just reactively, but really proactively teaching social skills, spending time saying, "Okay. Today we're going to talk about how we encourage one another, and what does encouragement sound like? What does it look like? What are some encouraging things people have said to you in this classroom? What are some ways we could encourage each other." That needs to be monitored by saying, "Oh. I heard some great encouragement today. What did that look like?" Really, always referring back to how we treat one another is something essential. Not just "did the group get the right math answer, but how did they treat each other? How did you work together? Who supported you in your group? Who helped you when you had a problem?" Really treating the process as though it were as important as the product.

I think teachers really have to be extremely proactive. I have to say that in any classroom I've ever been in where children treated each other well, it was never an accident. It wasn't like, "Oh. I'm just so lucky. The kids are nice to each other." It's always been a teacher who said, "I work on this very carefully from day one. We have group sharing. We have morning meeting. We have singing activities. We have show-and-tell. We have student of the week, and we get to ask them questions and do appreciations of them. We do all of these activities. We have cooperative learning partners. We have peer buddies. We have all these things going on." It never just happens. There's always a teacher who has valued that and seen the importance of it and done a lot of things to make sure that it's happening regularly in the classroom.

That doesn't mean that there aren't still problems, but there are many fewer problems that typically are less serious. When they do occur, there's usually a mechanism for talking about them that's like, "Okay. We need to come to the rug. We have a problem on the playground. Let's figure out what we can do about it." But there's already a history of sitting on that rug to talk about it. There's already a history of talking about how we want to be treated. And it doesn't mean hundreds of punitive rules. Sometimes it means very few rules. In fact I've found that the better the rules, the fewer you need.

I think about a classroom that I was in recently, and there were only two rules: We treat each other's insides and outsides gently. We don't hurt people's insides or their outsides. Which means I don't poke you with a pencil or hit you with my notebook. And I also don't tell you your mother's stupid, or that you're ugly, or anything like that. Kids learn very quickly to monitor, to self-monitor, and to stand up for one another too when they hear something that doesn't meet the classroom norm.

Julie:

I think Shannon's probably going to say it's about time to take a little pause.

What I wanted to lead in to next, Mara, is talking about how that sense of belonging, that sense of value can really support inclusive education.

Mara:

Right.

Shannon:

Great. And you're right. Your sense of timing is impeccable, Julie:. I also was going to say how touched I am just on a heart level in terms of the rightness of that, teaching kids to treat people well on the inside and the outside. I love the simplicity of that. So thank you.
Let's take a short break, let our listeners digest and chew on some of this. And we'll be back in just a moment.