Shannon Simonelli:
I'd like to welcome our listeners back for part two of our conversation with Mara Sapon-Shevin and Dr. Julie Smith. So you can begin with the next question, Julie.
Julie:
Okay, Mara. As we paused at the end of the last segment, I started talking about how I would like for you to discuss how that sense of community, kids having a sense of genuine belonging and genuine value in a classroom not only supports inclusive practices, but also can be, and has the capacity to prevent more significant interruptions in the school climate like bullying, and even things as much as Columbine. I know that I've got a two-pronged, large area for you to go, so just go wherever your heart takes you.
Mara:
Okay. I think that when people have to fight to belong, have to fight to think that they're okay, and they sense that lack of safety, then they often engage in behaviors that are damaging to themselves and to other people.
When we think about bullying, I think we have to step back and say, well, what does it mean for a classroom to be inclusive? To me, we're not just talking about issues of disability; we're not just talking about the child with Down's Syndrome or cerebral palsy. We're also talking about the hundreds of other ways that kids differ; we're talking about the kid who's overweight; we're talking about the kid with acne; we're talking about the kid who's Muslim in a primarily Christian school, or the kid who's Christian in a primarily Muslim school; or the child that has two moms. We're also talking about the child who just came to the U.S. from another country and whose English is not their first language. These are lots of differences that kids bring to school. It's what we teach kids about those differences and how to respond to those differences that sets the whole tone for how they're going to treat one another.
I think it's very important,--and one of the points I always make when I'm talking about inclusive classrooms and safety and belonging,--is that it's never our differences that separate us; it's the *response* to those differences. Children do not come out of the womb saying, "White is better than black. Thin is better than fat. Male is better than female." Those are all things they learn, that they are taught, sometimes explicitly, and sometimes just sort of because it's in the air they breathe, and they pick it up. So we really have to say, how do we develop a language for talking about differences, for asking respectful questions, for saying "I've never seen anybody wear something like that on their head. Why is that?" or, "What are those things in your ears, and why do they squeak sometimes?" or, "How come you can't celebrate birthday parties like everybody else in the class?" Or, "What's that you're eating, and why are you eating that? What does that taste like?" It's important to have the language of being able to talk about those kinds of questions. I think as a culture we tend to be, many people tend to be, so nervous and uptight about differences that the message kids get is, "Don't talk about it. Don't notice it." Then of course they notice it, and they don't know what to do about their feelings or their questions about it. So it comes off in kind of very negative ways.
One of the stories I told in the book was a true story of one of my teachers who came back from the field, and I'd been in the classroom—a first-grade classroom. They were first-graders, and the kids were drawing. One of the kids turned to the other kid and said, "You're Puerto Rican." The teacher, obviously hearing something in the tone that was distressing, turned to the child who'd said it and said, "Don't say that." Well, what she probably meant was "Don't say it like that." But what everybody heard was, "Don't say, 'You're Puerto Rican.'" And she *was* Puerto Rican.

To me this requires a two-pronged response. At the moment we want to make sure that everything's okay at that moment. But then I would want to know why that child said that about being Puerto Rican in that tone, and what do the kids know about being Puerto Rican? What has Maria been allowed to share about being from Puerto Rico? Do the kids even know where Puerto Rico is? Can we look at the map? Can we learn some Spanish? Can we understand what that means? What had that other child heard about Puerto Ricans, maybe, that needs to be on the table and dealt with?

So we can't just run away from discussions of differences hoping that will smooth things over. Instead, I think we have to dive in to those discussions with a lot of respect and good listening and explanations.

I have loved it when I have been in classrooms where kids are very, very comfortable around some really major differences because someone has helped them understand them.

My older daughter wears hearing aids, and she was diagnosed with her hearing loss when she was three. She got fitted with in-the-ear hearing aids. I remember her very comfortably explaining to her kindergarten class about her hearing aids and why they beeped sometimes, and letting kids understand it. Then it was just not an issue. It was really not an issue because it had been dealt with instead of like, "Shh. Don't ask what those things are in her ears. That's not polite. That's not nice." So it was really right there on the table for children to understand and to be thoughtful about.

I see such a difference in terms of how teachers talk about differences, or don't talk about differences, and what attitudes they have that kids really adopt. I think sometimes we really take our own discomfort with some differences that people have and we lay it on kids. We think, "Oh. They could never accept a child who has no legs." Or, "They could never accept …" Kids can accept almost anything if you're honest with them about what's going on. So I think again, we have to start with our own attitudes towards differences and help kids feel safe and comfortable.

With relation to other things like bullying and teasing, one of the things, unfortunately, that we have learned is that almost all the kids who were school shooters, almost all of them had a history of being isolated, being excluded, being teased, harassed, or bullied. The most recent one last week were some kids in Wisconsin who almost blew up some people in their school because they said they had been mistreated at school. Well, obviously not every kid who's teased is going to turn in to a school shooter. But we need to look at that behavior and say, "What are we doing to pay attention to that? What are we doing to help be aware of that behavior?"

One of the stories that I heard about Columbine from some folks in Colorado, which was very distressing to me, was that the school actually knew they had some problems and had a team in to look at issues of school climate. The report was produced by the visiting team and said, "Look. You have some issues. You have this group and that group. You've got some serious stuff going on there."

Apparently that report was deep-sixed by the administration, who basically were told at some level that this would look bad for our school if we make this public. Well, kind of famous last words, right? Because it couldn't look any worse than it looks now.

I really think schools have to be given lots of credit for looking at what's going on. I don't think, whether it's racism or homophobia or bullying, I don't think this distinction is between schools that have a problem and schools that don't have a problem. I think the distinction is between schools that recognize that they have a problem and that are doing something about it and schools that are trying to literally tuck it away and not be responsive to it. I think there are just so many things schools can do to proactively deal with how people are treated.

It's so important not to blame the child who's the victim.
I can tell you another story about another kind of diversity that, to me, is all part and parcel of the same thing. There was a young man who was being harassed and bullied in his school for being gay. He was not, in fact, at that point even identifying himself as gay. But he clearly didn't do the things that some of the other boys were doing. He was interested in the arts; he was interested in music; he wasn't interested in sports. He was being bullied and teased. He was tied up in a volleyball net and thrown in the trash by other kids. Other kids urinated on his artwork in the art room. He and his parents went to the school over and over again, talking about the problem. Nothing happened to the bullies. Finally,--this was the most distressing part to me,--a meeting was held between the counselor and the principal and the student and his parents. The student who was being victimized was basically told that if he would only stop acting so different, that things would be better. So in other words, he should straighten up, literally. To me that was outrageous. And nothing happened to the bullies.
I've seen this happen with kids with disabilities. "Well, if Charlie would just stop drooling, they wouldn't pick on him." Well, maybe Charlie is working on that, but he does drool. Or this kid does stutter. Or this kid does have a weight issue. But we can't mistreat someone. It's never okay to mistreat someone. No one ever deserves mistreatment. And it's not fair to say, "Well, if *you* would only change." Obviously we want kids to develop better social skills, and there are certainly ways we can help kids to get along better. But no one deserves mistreatment. Until we step in strongly as teachers and administrators saying we won't allow this kind of behavior in our schools,and not by a policy of zero tolerance. I hate that phrase, because what it's led to in many schools is simply excluding kids and expelling them if they behave badly. What I like instead is a phrase I learned: that we will treat any of that kind of behavior with *zero indifference*. It means we will pay attention to it. It's not zero tolerance. It says zero indifference. If this kid is teasing another kid or mistreating another kid based on race, or language, or religion, or whatever, we will make sure that something happens here. We won't literally turn away from it as though it hadn't happened. So that's a policy that says this stuff matters; we will stay on top of things; we will treat it as though it matters in our school. And we will understand that the lessons kids learn in school about how we treat each other, and how we stand up for people who are being picked on, are the lessons they will take in to their wider life and to the bigger world as employers, as parents, as people in the community, and that this stuff is essential.
Julie:
Exactly. Mara, you hit on something that we do see a lot of. That is if we have a no tolerance policy. Would you take a minute and talk just a little bit about the lessons in hypocrisy that come out of that statement?
Mara:
Well, I think when a lot of people talk about zero tolerance, it's almost like, "We won't do anything proactive or positive to make things better. But if something goes wrong, we will punish the offender." As educational institutions, that just doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to me, because our job as teachers is to teach people different behaviors and to change the conditions in which people have to live. Simply expelling someone doesn't teach any lesson other than you're a bad person and we don't want you around other people. That just doesn't make sense, and it doesn't change the quality or the nature of the school. It often neglects what else is happening that makes this behavior happen. What are the other conditions?
One of the stories that I often tell is about a situation in which I was called as an expert witness for a young man who had Down's Syndrome. He was being very badly treated in his middle

school. One of the people on our team went to watch him in his middle school and see what was going on. This was what was observed: He, we'll call him John, went through the cafeteria line at lunch and he did everything appropriately,--took his food, took his beverage, paid for his lunch, took his tray, and walked over to a table and went to put his tray down,--and the kids said, "Get out of here." So he picked his tray up and went to another table, and the kids there said, "Scram." And he picked up his tray and went to a third table, put it down, realized he'd forgotten his straw, went back to the lunch line to get a straw, came back, and his tray was gone.

I tell this story because when this came to light at the hearing, the hearing officer said, "Well, this proves he can't be included."

I listened to this story and said, "This proves nothing about his inclusion. It proves that there are some real problems here in the sixth grade."

I found it really hard to believe that they're treating a kid with Down's Syndrome badly, but they're being really fine to the other kids,--the kid who's overweight, the kid with acne, or the kid with, all those other differences. So we have to say there's a problem in this classroom community, in this school community. Removing this boy is not going to solve the problem. It does nothing to solve the problem.

What we have to do is say, "Why are kids treating each other this way, and what can we do to make that different? What has to be different in this school?" I think we have to lay the problem solidly in the context in which it's occurring and realize that something is definitely bad. Something's rotten in sixth grade here, but removing the child who's being the victim isn't going to fix it.

Julie:

Yeah. I think now it's becoming more and more challenging to do these kinds of things because of the pressures that result from the high-stakes standards—you mentioned it earlier,-- there's so much pressure on teachers to get certain scores out of their classroom. There's pressure on principals to get certain scores from their schools. The threats of consequences are very, very serious, and they're very, very real. I think it's very difficult for administrators and teachers and everybody that works as part of the school system to keep this a priority when something that sets up the standard, which is a competitive structure, of course. It's a lot of ranking, and it's all the things that erode that sense of community. How do schools and teachers balance these things?

Mara:

I think you've named it. I think that much of No Child Left Behind has been so antithetical to inclusion and to social justice, and we're seeing more and more what a disaster it's been because it's punitive. Schools that have kids who are challenging, and whose kids don't score high, then get punished instead of being given additional supports. That makes no sense.

We literally do have teachers, … I feel, that a lot of this high-stakes testing is driving the teachers out, the very teachers we want to keep, teachers who went in to this field because they wanted to help kids and wanted to make the world better. Now they feel like they're being treated like accountants or something, who have to be on the right page at the right time on the right day. They're testing, and they are not even allowed to follow their own good instincts about kids and what's necessary.

I had a teacher come to me in tears and describe that there had been some racism on the playground. She went to the administrator and wanted to address it and was told, "I'm sorry. It's too bad, but we don't have time, and we've got state testing next week, and it's important that we do well. Whatever. Move on."

I don't think we even understand what the negative effects on teachers are, too, of not being allowed to do what many of them think is their most important job, which is helping kids learn in a school situation that feels safe and loving. I think we're really going to see more and more of an exodus from teaching unless we can really fight back and say we do want high achievement, but I don't think that's best measured in the way it's measured by now. We also want schools to be evaluated in terms of who do they include? Why doesn't every school have an inclusion index that says what kids did you work with, and how many of them were involved in extracurricular activities, and how many of them have friends? What if we ranked schools, not in a competitive way, but if we evaluated schools based on some of those things and say this is the stuff that really matters. Because the truth is, as a society, very few people are likely to come up to you on the streets and say, "Name the states and their capitals." It's not what makes us a community. What makes us a community is our ability to help one another and support one another. Those are the skills we need to be nurturing in our future citizens.

It's not incompatible with learning other things. But we really have to believe that it really matters how people treat each other.

Shannon:

In fact, all of the brain research says, of course as you know, supporting so much of what you're saying in terms of creating learning environments that feel safe and supportive. That really allows the brain …

Mara:

Right. You cannot learn when you're terrified. We know that.

Shannon:

That's right.

Julie:

Mm-hmm.

Mara:

Your brain can't be doing two things at the same time. And when your brain is on red alert, …

Julie:

And you don't teach very well.

Mara:

Something bad is happening here, you can't learn.

Julie:

Yeah. You don't teach very well under those same circumstances. Being the people we are, working with teachers, we see their real fears. I have seen teachers become incapacitated because of the fear that their scores may not meet the requirements and their jobs may be in jeopardy. They respond in the same way that children do when they are in fear, because that is the way that we operate.

But the teachers that are leaving the field are leaving because they want to teach the way that they know is best for kids. They're feeling, and the reality is, they can't do these kinds of things because of the requirements that come from the standards push within their schools.

Mara:

I was talking to some teachers from California recently. The level of surveillance of what was going on in their classroom was so high that when the state examiners came in, they had to be able to justify anything that was on the bulletin board and related to a standard. It was unbelievable. They were like, "Why do you have this up? What standard is that related to?" How could you ever parent, for example, somebody who was going to come in saying, "Why are you

reading that book Why did you snuggle your child right now? Was that the right time to snuggle them?" It's sort of like, how could you not feel completely invalidated and incapacitated if somebody was saying you're really not smart enough to do this without us telling you exactly when to do it and how to do it, and we're going to monitor you and keep you on track?
Of course accountability is important, but wouldn't it be better if we helped teachers feel really strong and powerful and competent and accountable themselves, rather than do it from an external?
Julie:
Exactly. And if they can cultivate that supportive, safe sense of community within their classroom, their students will do better on those kinds of assessments. They will learn more. And what we define as achievement might alter, and that might be a good thing.
But they're going to learn better and faster in that kind of environment than they will in the rigid drill-and-kill types of environments that we see more and more of.
Shannon:
Yes. That's right.
Mara:
Absolutely. And one more thing I wanted to say, because you mentioned teachers, and the state that teachers are in. Everything I said about community building for students also applies to teachers. If students need to feel safe and valued and accepted for who they are, teachers need all that, too. Teachers who teach in schools in which they don't feel supported, and they don't feel valued, and they feel like there's competition established between them, and that they can't share the things that they're struggling with, and that they can't share their successes, those are not going to be teachers who can hang in for the long haul either.
Recently I was with a teacher who's a master inclusion teacher. This woman is just absolutely top-notch, and the leader in inclusion. Her school had an inclusion support meeting. And she shared about a child and situation she was struggling with, and another teacher said, "Oh. And we thought you were the expert." Well, in that moment, not only is she never going to share again and get the support she needs, but no one else in that group is either, so safety for those teachers to share, "Look. I'm struggling with this kid. Has anybody got any ideas?" or "I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm in over my head." Or, "I'm working with a parent that I really can't get it together with. Who can help me?" If teachers can't share where they need help and support, they're not going to become the best teachers. It's just like if kids can't share what they're struggling with, they can't learn either. So it's really the community. It's not just in the classroom; it's in the whole school.
I make the parallel that teacher is to classroom as principal or administrator is to teachers. If the administrator sets up competitiveness between the teachers and an atmosphere of fear and retribution, then teachers aren't going to be doing a good job, either. They're going to be closing their door and hoping they don't get caught, and hoping that nobody's watching them. That's different from a school, and I've seen them, where the principal has this incredible support going on for teachers. And the teachers say, "Oh, Mrs. Jones. Come in and see what we're doing. We're so excited about our plant unit." And there's just this thing of the principal being the cheerleader and the support for the teachers instead of the critic and the judge. It's the same relationship as in the classroom.
Shannon:
Absolutely. I'm gonna jump in here. One comment I wanted to make before we take a break and prepare for our last segment is the implication that if I'm good at something, as in the example

with the teacher that you shared, is if I'm good at something, I'm not allowed to have questions or to be at my own growing edge around that, where I'm in the territory of not knowing. Because learning, by nature, is being in the territory of not knowing, and learning something new. So how do we model that as professionals to the children that we're working with?
So that was my thought on that. I really appreciate the conversation. I'd like to take a break, and we'll be back in just a moment.