Julie:
Mara, in our last section I'm going to ask you to kind of "lift us up," literally in terms of our thinking a little more in terms of the big picture. We've talked a lot about that sense of community—what's happening in schools, how that supports or doesn't support inclusive practices, and the whole sense of feeling safe when belonging in schools. I'd like you to talk about why that is so important, especially now, and give us a little bigger picture by looking at some of the social parallels.
Mara:
Okay. I think that the opening statement would be to say that school is the institution in which we learn how we connect with one another, or how we don't connect with one another. We learn whether or not we're responsible for one another or whether it's every person is for him- or herself. I think those are such crucial life lessons that really determine what kind of grown-ups these children will become, and what kind of citizens they'll be in a society.
There's a couple of areas to talk about. One that's really critical to me is, when kids are in school and see something happening that isn't just, or isn't right, or isn't fair, someone is being mistreated. What do they learn that they're supposed to do about it? Do they learn that they're supposed to just turn away and not pay attention? Or do they actually receive any encouragement for stepping in and saying, "Wait a minute. That's not right. That's not fair. I can do something about it. I can change that." We're really teaching people whether they see themselves as proactive people with agency and the potential to change things, or as kind of oh, well, complacent, what can you do. So when we start even talking about world hunger, or war, or poverty, or racism in the bigger world, it's a lot of the lessons that kids learned in school that make a difference.
One of my favorite new children's books is by Peggy Moss, and it's called *Say Something*. And in this book, a little girl is sort of observing what happens in her classroom and in her school about some kids that are being made fun of and teased, and she keeps saying repeatedly, "They do this, and they say this. But *I* don't say anything. *I* don't do anything." It's sort of a tone of self-congratulation—I'm not one of the problem. I don't do those bad things— then it culminates one day in the cafeteria when she becomes the victim of some kids. She's very upset. And when the bullies leave, she realizes that there were kids at the other table she knows, watching this thing the whole time. She goes home and she tells her brother, and says this happened, and this happened, and I'm mad at those other kids. And the brother says, "Why? They didn't do anything," and she says, "Right." And it's in that moment… The next day she goes back to school and sits next to the girl on the bus who's being teased, and becomes her friend. And it's at that moment that this person, this young person, realizes that *doing nothing is doing something*, that passivity in the face of injustice is terrible, that that's collusion.
When you think about the bigger world, that's an important lesson. If I see somebody being, … Rodney King, or if we see something going on in our community that's wrong, do we just cross the street and go on like, "Well, it's not me. It's nobody I know," or, "I didn't do it." Or do we say, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Something's wrong here. What do we do about this." It's the courage to step in and say we need to do something, because what's going on isn't right, and it isn't just.
If you look back to the Holocaust, for example, there's a lot of discussion of bystanders, of people who saw something was going on and didn't want to get involved, and didn't want to step in. And one of the things that I'm very fond of now in this song,--perhaps you read, Julie, in the new book,--is taken from the quote by Pastor Martin Niemoller where he says,

"First they came for the Communists,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Communist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak up,
because I wasn't a Jew. …
Then they came for me,
and by that time there was no one
left to speak up for me."
And it goes through the Catholics, and the priests, and the union workers.
And we think, if that's what we're teaching, that unless it's about you directly, it's not your business, and it's not your responsibility, then we have a society in which we really don't feel that we have to look out for anyone else except ourselves. "As long as I have a good job and health insurance, that's all that matters. The fact that you don't, not my problem."
We see where that's leading us. It will lead us to more and more gated communities, and more security people to keep you away from me, and that's not the world I want to live in.
This song that's in the book that is the contrast to that starts out the same. "First they came for the Communists, and I wasn't a communist. They came for the Jews, and I wasn't a Jew." And of course, if we know the history of the Holocaust, they also came for the gypsies, and homosexuals, and people with disabilities. And nobody said anything, or not enough people said something. Obviously there were resisters. But this song ends, "Now they come for the Muslims. And they come for the refugees. Though I am not a Muslim, and I am not a refugee, I will stand up. I will ask why. And if someday they come for me, I hope there'll be lots of people standing by my side. Yes, we will stand up, Yes, we will ask why…. a world of people standing side by side" ??? 05:59
And that's the world I want to live in.
It's a very strong belief that we're going to teach people whether or not to stand up to injustice, or whether we're going to teach them to look away and not see it. That's a lesson that can be learned in schools. The more diverse our schools are, the more opportunities there are to really be thoughtful about, "What did they just say to that black kid? Wait a minute. That didn't sound right." Or, "Wait a minute. Why are they teasing her?" or, "Wait a minute, if we have that party, she's not going to be able to come. She doesn't have that kind of money. Maybe we should rethink that." Just that kind of sensitivity to how people are being treated at the smallest levels.
I always think that if a lesson is important, we can figure out what it looks like when you're three. And people may say it's a sophisticated concept. Well, the reason I write the way I write is because I figure if you can't explain this stuff to little people and to people who don't have doctorates in education, then you're not communicating it well, because these are essential human truths.
I think of the schools that realize there were huge discrepancies in how kids celebrated their birthdays, from the parent that had money to bring in the hats and the paper plates and the balloons and the party bags, and other kids in the classroom who didn't have a parent who could afford the package of Oreos. And instead of saying "Oh well, that's how it is." they said, "Wait a minute, that's not what we want to model. WE want to model that every kid is important, and every birthday counts." And they had the policy that they would bake cupcakes in class using cake mix and decorate them for the child right there. Every kid had the same kind of birthday

party. It wasn't about who had more or who had less: It was that everybody gets valued and appreciated. And that may seem like a little lesson, but it's not a little lesson. It's a big lesson. It's a big lesson whether each kid has their own set of crayons and I have sixty-four with a sharpener, and you only have six and they're broken, or whether we have the shared crayons on each table, and we use them and we share them, and I learn to say to you, "Can you pass the red one when you're done?" or, "Can I use your blue one?" Those are important lessons. That's not just about crayons. That's about sharing resources. That's about paying attention to who has and who doesn't have. Those are big lessons that go far beyond school. And a lot of it is about …

Julie:

They're really lessons in critically thinking about things, and questioning things rather than just, "I am an empty vessel, and pour-the-facts-into -me." kind of approach to learning.

Mara:

When people talk about inclusion, a lot of people still think we're only talking about disability. To me, I think it's so important to say it's about lots of other kinds of diversity as well.

I had this experience not too long ago. I was doing a workshop for teachers on social skills and friendship. A teacher approached me afterwards and she said, "I had a problem the other day, and I didn't know what to do about it. Can I describe it to you? Could you give me some ideas?" I'm a story collector, and I said, "Oh, of course."

She said that she had a very diverse classroom that had both kids who were in the gifted program and kids who were receiving special education services. She described a situation in which she was talking to a little girl with a disability who had just done a really good job on something she'd written. She was saying to this little girl, "Oh, I'm so proud of you. This is awesome. Look. Wow! This is such an improvement. You are doing so great." And this other little boy wandered by who was, she said, in the gifted program. He listened to her praising the little girl, and turned and said, "Big deal. I got a hundred."

And she said to me, "What should I explain to him about Down's Syndrome?"

I think I shocked her, because I said, "Nothing. This isn't about Down's Syndrome. This is not about how many chromosomes she has versus how many he has. This is about being a nice human being. And nice human beings don't minimize someone else's accomplishments. So don't turn it in to a lesson about Down's syndrome and chromosomes. Turn this into a lesson about "How would you like somebody to respond to something you are proud of? How do we talk to each other? And even to say, is this boy not getting enough support for himself if he feels that he has to put somebody else down?"

But I think the more we draw the camera lens back and say this is not about disability; this is not about special education; this is about what kind of a world we want and what kind of people we want to populate that world, that we'll have a very different set of answers to what we do in our classroom.

Julie:

I agree.

Shannon:

Mm-hmm.

Julie:

And I think that kind of caps it for us.

Shannon:

It sort of says it all, doesn't it?

Mara:

I guess so. I'm very passionate about it, as you can see, because I think it does really matter.
Shannon:
Deeply.
Julie:
And it matters so much more beyond test scores. It matters so much beyond the certificate accomplishments that you can make throughout your life. It really matters to improve the quality of the world in which we live.
Mara:
And I think if we look at Katrina as an example. Yes, we had the failure of the levies, and there are some engineering issues there. But we also had a huge failure of will to look at people and their lives and to say, "What do we do about the people who don't have cars to get out?" and Why were the poor people living in neighborhoods where there were no support services?" It's a whole set of questions to be asked that were about racism, and about poverty, and discrimination, and not just about flood levels.
Julie:
I think this is an excellent place to just say thank you so much for your insight. I'm feeling so much better. My insides are feeling better.
Shannon:
Mara, I really appreciate your time, and your insight, and your passion. It's very clear. And the good work around linking these things,--I'm a therapist, in addition to being an educator, and so I'm always looking at matters of the heart and spirit, and how that relates to our whole fullness and our ability to learn and be in the world. Doing the work of linking those things as intrinsic, and not separate or extras in terms of attending to the fullness of who we are is really critical work, and I just want to thank you for doing that.
Mara:
Oh, you're very welcome.
Shannon:
This concludes our Effective Practice Briefing on inclusion and community building in classrooms. I appreciate you for listening, and hope you join us with our next Effective Practice Briefing in the future. Thank you very much.