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Introduction: Talking Tough Topics in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

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JONATHAN G. SILIN has been a member of the Bank Street Graduate Faculty since 1992. He is the author of Sex, Death, and the Education of Children: Our Passion for Ignorance in the Age of AIDS, co-producer of Children Talk About AIDS, and co-editor of Putting the Children First: The Changing Face of Newark's Public Schools.

Communities, schools, and individual teachers differ widely in their understanding of whether the classroom should be a place for helping children make sense of tough topics. Recently, I encountered two very different answers to this quandary. In a classroom of eight- and nine-year-olds at the Bank Street School for Children, I saw prominently displayed on a half-dozen charts taped to a long bank of windows children's questions about human sexuality: Do you have to kiss when having sex? Do women have to have sex with men? Do people like their old friends after puberty? Here was the beginning of a curriculum that was clearly designed to respond to the concerns of pre-adolescents.

Just weeks before, in an ex-urban community close to my own, a bitter controversy had erupted when an experienced nurse/health teacher invited a county health educator to talk about HIV/AIDS to sixth graders as part of the school's acknowledgement of World AIDS Day. In a contentious school board meeting, parents complained that the county health educator, who had been working at the school for many years with seventh and eighth graders, had introduced topics for which the children were ill prepared, and of which they were frightened. Some parents, speaking with tears in their eyes, claimed that the school had "stolen our children's innocence."

In this *Occasional Paper*, four educators describe their approaches to tough topics in the classroom—gender, sexual identity, death, and diversity. Despite differing subject matter, the essays have much in common from which we can learn.

All the topics, for example, involve at least three kinds of learning—cognitive, emotional, and social. As young children struggle to understand the finality of death, they also grapple with the impact of a real or imagined loss, the significance of the rituals surrounding death, and the changed status of those who remain. When third graders discuss gender, there are biological questions as well as questions of individual affect and social equity. Despite the assumptions embedded in many fragmented and narrowly conceived contemporary curriculums, children's minds are not compartmentalized. And surely within any group of twenty-five eight- and nine-years-olds, what isn't in the thoughts of one child will be in the thoughts of another.

As evidenced in these essays, addressing tough topics is a critical component of building community in the classroom. Real community is based on the full acknowledgement of difference, as well as the establishment of common purposes. When children are comfortable sharing their unique histories, there is the potential to uncover shared experiences and to identify themes for investigation. What are the pros and cons of gay marriage? How does membership in diverse racial and ethnic communities affect values and political commitments?

The authors in this volume understand the exquisite tension between voice and silence that must be respected in the classroom if community is to flourish. Each attends closely to individual differences. One recently bereaved child needs and wants to talk about his loss in the classroom. Another prefers to remain silent. One ten-year-old is comfortable expressing curiosity about her own sexual identity and another isn't. A teacher, too, balances her desire to address stereotypical gender remarks with third graders and her recognition that an unrelenting focus on the topic can cause children to shut down. A teacher of color wants to promote dialogue in her school about racism at the same time as she believes that the responsibility for changing the social landscape belongs to everyone, not just minority group members.

As teachers nurture voice and respect appropriate silences among their students, they also reflect on their own motivation for talking about tough issues in the classroom. The authors here model how personal passions can be successfully transformed into vibrant curriculum. Muslin brings her own experiences growing up in Puerto Rico and coming to work in New York City to her discussions about diversity. Nelson describes how developing friendships with gay and lesbian contemporaries helped her grasp the importance of addressing sexual identity in the classroom. Sexton-Reade is prompted

by the early loss of her husband to explore death with young children. Each must grapple with how much of her own experience to share directly with children and how much to simply allow that experience to inform her work.

Finally there is this: At its core education is about uncertainty, about not knowing what our students have learned. Despite our best efforts to inculcate a particular set of values, students make of their lives in our classrooms what they will. Boldt and Nelson are especially insightful about the ways in which children quickly learn to provide expected, politically correct answers in the morning, and then later during the same day can be seen at lunch or on the playground displaying the very behaviors about which they strongly objected just minutes before. The only solace is knowing that we have acted authentically in addressing tough topics, that we can always return to the chalkboard to revise our work, and that if we have fostered a community in which dialogue is continuous, then there will be many opportunities to ask new questions and prompt further conversations about the things that really matter to us.

Among the things that matter to our editorial board is that the majority of the authors presented in *Talking Tough Topics in the Classroom* are teachers who are appearing in print for the first time. Half are Bank Street School for Children faculty, and half are not. All are committed to making school a more meaningful place in which the lived experiences of students and the critical social issues facing our society are part of the everyday landscape. Thus, all are contemporary exemplars of the long progressive tradition that seeks to promote social change through curricular innovation.