

Metaphors of Hope

Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld

Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld began teaching in 1956. She works and plays with people of all ages and grade levels throughout the country. Among her books are *Teaching in the Key of Life* (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1993), *Teaching by Heart* (Redleaf Press, 2001), and *Creative Experiences for Young Children*, 3rd ed. (Heinemann, 2002). She lives in Columbus, Ohio. She dedicates this article to the memory of Pauline Gough, whose life's work, brightening the way for educators and children, is a stellar example of metaphors of hope.

Refusing to be disheartened by all the negative press surrounding education today, Ms. Chenfeld travels the country and encounters one inspiring educator after another. She tells four of their stories here.

On the Big Island of Hawaii, there's a forest of lava-crusted hills and bare corpses of trees called Devastation Trail. Old volcanic eruptions burnt the Ohia trees and left this once-lush terrain barren and ashen.

Walking on the wooden paths through the devastation, one could easily miss the tiny flowers remarkably pushing through the charred earth. The markers that identify these flowers read: Thimbleberry, Swordfern, Creeping Dayflower, and Nutgrass. While others aimed their cameras at the stark, mysterious lava hills, I focused on the flowers. In the midst of such a desolate scene, these perky "signs of life" seemed to be symbols of courage and persistence.

Reading daily the bleak headlines and articles that stress the stress by focusing on bullying, violence, gangs and cliques, and numerous random acts of unkindness and

hostility in our seemingly devastated educational landscape, one could easily sink into despair. However, as a stubborn optimist, I always search for markers of thimbleberry, swordfern, creeping dayflower, and nutgrass—metaphors of hope!

THIMBLEBERRY: MR. T

When Mr. T (also known as Tom Tenerovich) was moved upstairs after years of teaching kindergarten classes, he observed that second-graders were more vocal, more argumentative, more opinionated! A voracious reader of books about education, he was familiar with many theories and programs. But reading about ideas is different from doing.

One idea that intrigued Mr. T was that of Town Meeting. He and his students discussed building a structure that would enable all voices to be heard, problems to be solved, and good listening habits to be formed.¹

The class added mayor and assistant mayor to the list of jobs on their classroom helpers board. During the year, every student would be assigned to these jobs for a one-week term of office.

The Town Meeting works this way: each week, the mayor and assistant mayor, along with Tom, write an agenda for two, 30- to 40-minute Town Meetings. Any student can submit a proposal for discussion, but it has to be written and include name, date, and the issue to be discussed. Some of the issues concerning the students have included changing seats, playground rules, classmates being hurtful, picking team members, and activities for "Fun Fridays."

At the Town Meeting, the class discusses the topic and votes to resolve the issue. "Even if they disagree, it's so sweet

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to hear how they disagree,” Tom reports. “They’re really beginning to listen to each other.” He continues,

It’s amazing the way it works out. None of the kids are bossy when they become mayor. Even our most timid children became good mayors. Believe it or not, one of my most high-maintenance tough kids was the best mayor! He took charge in a fair way—he knew what to do—he behaved appropriately.

Even I became an agenda issue! One of the kids reminded me that I hadn’t done something I promised. That was important to the children, and I had to remedy it.

Committees formed from discussions: academic committees, playground committees (to see that no students were left out of games or weren’t chosen for teams), and classroom improvement committees. Tom was thrilled to see how the twice-weekly Town Meetings honoring the feelings and agendas of the students carried over into the everyday life of the group. “This really is democracy in action! Points of view are freely expressed. All opinions are valued and respected. You can see and feel the increase of courtesy and kindness.”

The school mascot is a bobcat. Tom and his second-graders added the idea of Bobcat Purrs to their Town Meeting. Like “warm fuzzies,” pats on the back, recognition of positive acts, observations of improvements, Bobcat Purrs were “built into our meetings,” Tom explains, “and became part of our culture. Children wrote up a ‘purr,’ decorated it, and handed it to the mayor, who read it and presented it. No one was ever left out. We promised not to just recognize our best friends. Children looked for what their classmates were doing well. They were very specific.”

One student, who had experienced alienation, low self-image, and loneliness in earlier years and whose posture defined his feelings, received a Bobcat Purr during a Town Meeting that stated how proudly he was standing. He was standing up straight! The boy beamed!

Another student who had difficulty finishing her work received a Bobcat Purr from a classmate honoring her for finishing all of her work. Everyone rejoiced.

When children live in a climate that accentuates the positive, their eagle eyes catch the flickering light of flames that are almost burnt out.

The picture I want to snap for my Album of Hope is of a proud second-grader standing up straight with the mayor, assistant mayor, his teacher, and all of his classmates honoring him with a Bobcat Purr during the Town Meeting.²

SWORDFERN: CATHY

Cathy Arment and her first-graders are not involved in the building of structures like Town Meetings. With their teacher, this group of students from diverse cultures, races,

and religions works hard and plays hard together. Cathy described a memorable scene in a telephone message: “I was reading the children Jonathan London’s *Froggy’s First Kiss*—you know, for Valentine week. Mim, I looked up from the story to see the children sitting in clusters, their arms around each other, their eyes wide as I turned the pages, so totally involved. I almost began to weep at the sight of their beauty.”

Here we have students with Ethiopian, Mexican, Appalachian, Southeast Asian, and African American backgrounds—children who are newcomers, some from dysfunctional homes, some from foster homes, some with hardship home lives, some at risk. How did such a diverse group of children learn to love one another?

Cathy and I talked at length. With all the realities of alienation, anxiety, insecurity, and mean-spiritedness that these students face, how is such a warm and loving environment created? What is the strategy? What are the techniques? Cathy thought long and hard about these questions. She realized that she did not have a preconceived plan for helping her students build positive classroom relationships. She hadn’t adopted a program specifically aimed at such outcomes. Nowhere in her plan book were consciously chosen activities based on proven behavior management theories. She just did what she did because of who she was and what she believed. Reviewing her ideas, she said:

All I can think of is that from day one, we are together. We verbalize feelings—good and bad. We’re not afraid to share. From our first moment together, we talked about respecting everyone. Some of my children have heavy accents. They are “different.” Many of them have been made fun of. We talk about how hurtful it is to be teased, to put people down and to be put down. We begin to listen to each other. To care about each other. My children never, ever tease! And—I’m a human being, too—I share with them. They’ll ask me, “Teacher, what did YOU read? What did YOU do over the weekend? Did YOU have a fun holiday?” When a child has a low day, we all try to cheer that child. Sometimes I have a gray day. The kids will go out of their way to brighten me. They know we stick together, that I care for them very deeply. They know that we are all safe in our room.

When the children wrote and illustrated their “I Have A Dream” papers inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous speech, many of them expressed the warm feelings they experienced in the classroom and wrote dreams like these: “I have a dream to be with my family and to give love to everybody and to care about everybody” (Abigail). “I have a dream that people would be nice to other people and, if people are hurt, other people could help them just like other people help me” (Carissa).

The Israeli-Yemenite dancer Margolith Ovid once said, “The greatest technique in the universe is the technique in the human heart.”

The picture I would snap for my Album of Hope is of Cathy’s kids, arms around each other, sitting in clusters, listening to Froggy’s First Kiss.³

CREEPING DAYFLOWER: MS. GIBSON

Before the new school year even begins, Dee Gibson sends warm Welcome to the Family cards to her future students! These fortunate first-graders know—from everything said and done, from words and actions, activities and discussions, planning and projects—that their class is a second family in which each and every family member is important and connected to everyone else. This is not a theme or a curriculum item or a subject area—it’s the way it is in Ms. Gibson’s class. Because she is passionate, articulate, and committed to creating, with her children and families, a safe, encouraging, caring community that really is a second family (and for some children over the years, a first family!), the experiences of her students are very special. They help one another. They cooperate. They plan and talk together. They are totally involved in the life they share together in this home away from home.

When the children were asked such questions as “What is it like being in this kind of class family? What do you do? How do you feel?” the responses were honest and forthcoming:

We’re all together. We get in pods. We work together. If two kids are having an argument, the whole class stops till we work it out. We really feel like everyone cares about each other.—Jay

* * *

We’re like teamwork. We help each other with work and to pick up. Everyone here sticks together.—Lauri

* * *

All the kids are friends. Arguing doesn’t really happen much—everyone cooperates.—Ryan

* * *

Our teacher treats people fair. The other kids act very kind together. She teaches us how to work together.—Barrett

* * *

We don’t really get in fights!—Nikki

* * *

Everybody is nice to each other, and they act like a family. Ms. Gibson is like one of the family.—Danielle

The language in this class is the language of respect, acceptance, courtesy, responsibility, and cooperation. It’s not limited to a week’s celebration of a theme! It’s the vocabulary of a close-knit family. That’s an everyday reality.

The picture I want to take for my Album of Hope is of the children holding up their summer “Welcome to the Family” cards. A sequel to that picture is of children discovering that the welcome cards were not a gimmick! They were the real thing.⁴

NUTGRASS: ANNE AND CLAUDETTE

Partners in Educating All Children Equally (PEACE), Anne Price and Claudette Cole travel to schools, programs, and conferences, spreading very simple messages—especially to administrators who too often don’t attend workshops that are aimed directly at the heart. Anne and Claudette remind those directors, managers, principals, and superintendents that their influence in the creation of positive, life-affirming school climates is immeasurable. They really can make the difference between the life and death of an entire program or school.

Claudette and Anne discuss ways of helping teachers to develop positive relationships with their students and to motivate the students to develop caring and respectful relationships with one another. What are some suggestions for doing so? Usually, without hesitation, most of the administrators offer such actions as recognizing students, paying attention to them, appreciating their talents and efforts, encouraging them to cooperate with and be considerate of one another, and inviting students to share ideas and input so that they are directly involved in the success of the school.

Claudette and Anne gently turn these ideas around, directing them to the administrators. “Just as we advocate developmentally appropriate practices for teaching children, so we have to apply those ideas to our staff.” Anne explains their simple, direct approach: “It’s our responsibility to pay attention to the needs of staff so they can meet the children’s needs.”

What are some of the greatest trouble spots in the dynamics of any school or program? Absenteeism, turnover, bullying, discipline problems, low morale, lack of trust, miscommunication—to name just a few. It’s so obvious to Anne and Claudette that these problems, often reflecting a disconnected and resentful staff, carry over to the students and poison the atmosphere. (Think lava!)