

RELATIONSHIPS CHANGE EVERYTHING

By Peter W. Cookson Jr. | Mar 25, 2024 | Current Issue, Feature Article



INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS THAT EMPHASIZE RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS HELP STUDENTS WHO LIVE IN POVERTY.

Everybody doesn't wake up in the morning and get greeted by two parents and sit down and have breakfast. A lot of my teachers have experienced that [as children], and so [they] wonder why a child is upset when it's first thing in the morning. . . . When I talk with children, I know where they're coming from, and I know I have to talk with the teacher. You don't understand all of what children come from. You just see what you see when they're sitting in your classrooms looking at you and you don't have a clue what happened before. So, we need to be mindful of that. When you build relationships with children, it changes everything. Relationships change everything. — **Hoke County, North Carolina, middle school principal, in 2020 interview with the author**

Several years ago, a Michigan foundation asked me to study high-poverty schools in the state to assess the impact of the schools' programs on student achievement and well-being. I visited schools in Detroit, Flint, and the less-traveled agricultural parts of the state. I talked with teachers and students, sat in on lessons, read strategic plans, and interviewed school administrators.

As part of my research, I visited two schools in Detroit, both located in communities of concentrated generational poverty. The differences between the schools were striking. One school felt like a jail — guards at the door, broken windows, security cameras in the halls, and locked classroom doors. Students and teachers appeared depressed and angry. Fights erupted in the hallways even as I interviewed the principal. Evidence of learning was absent. Survival mattered a great deal more. The young people at this school had been deeply betrayed.

Not many blocks away was a school with unlocked doors, few security cameras, and a gallery filled with student art. No guards in sight. I heard laughter in the halls. Classrooms were alive with learning, and teachers appeared to care for their students. The principal came from the neighborhood and spoke glowingly of the students as “our kids.” He invited me to join him for a student pep rally. On that day, teachers were trying hard to dance, to the good-hearted amusement of the students. The place was alive with the energy of happy young people celebrating life. Everyone was included, and everyone was somebody.

If I learned one thing in my study of high-poverty schools, it is that today, more than ever, children need authentic and affirming relationships. All our lives are infused with strong emotions — the heart often leads the head. Schools where a child's heart can beat in rhythm with others are schools where their minds flourish. Genuine inclusion comes when we connect deeply with others. When the poet E.E. Cummings (1926/2022) wrote “since feeling is first,” it was not only a poetic phrase, it was also a statement of fact.

As a teacher, administrator, and researcher, I have been privileged to learn what inclusion means in practice and lucky to witness what inclusion means in the lives of children.

AT A GLANCE

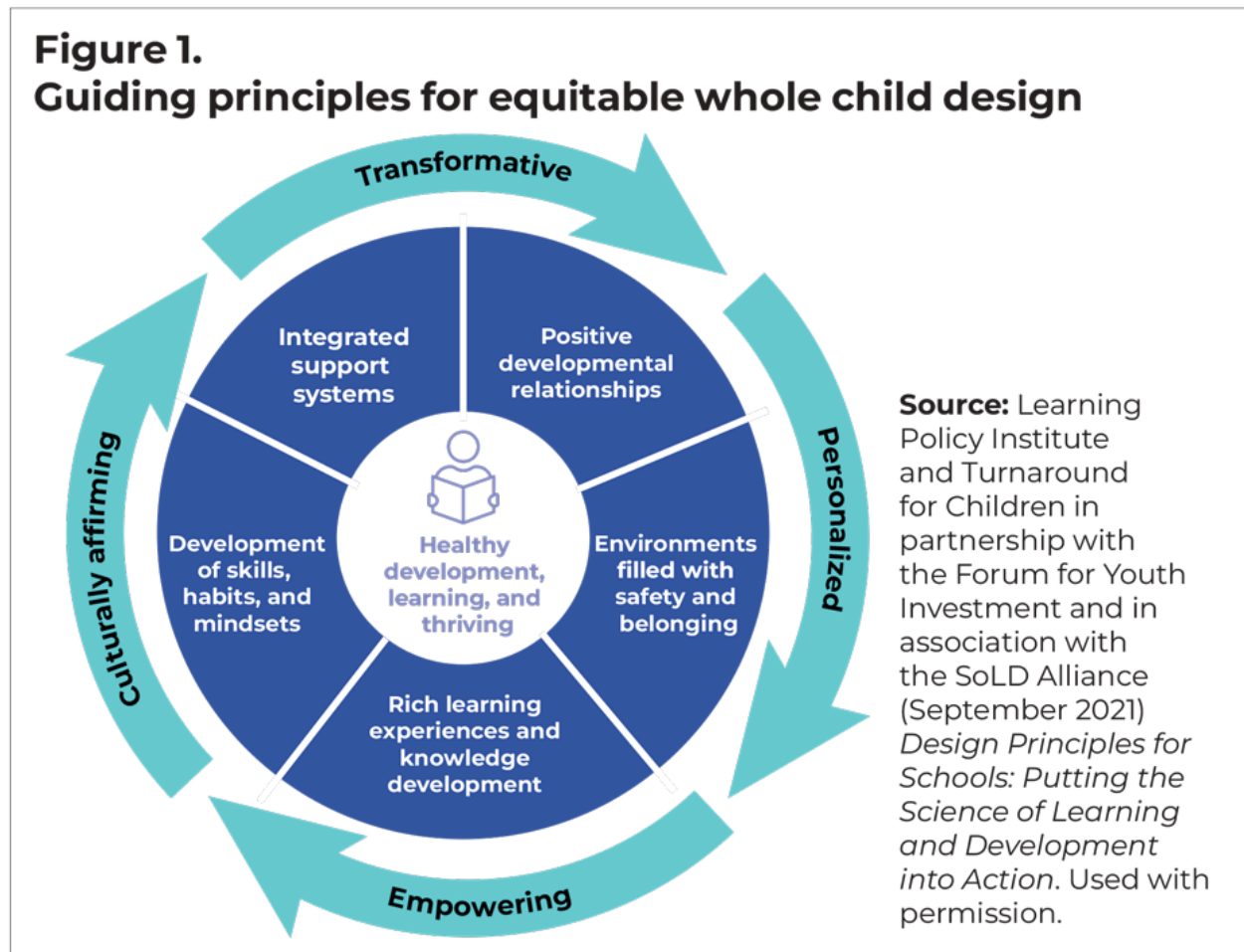


- Author Peter W. Cookson Jr. studied strategies for educating children who live in deep poverty.
- He observed that children, especially those living in poverty, need authentic and affirming relationships.
- Inclusive schools help children feel like they are somebody and that they have a community that cares about them.
- Creating an inclusive school means educating the whole child, connecting at a deep level, sharing our humanity, healing rather than punishing, leading from the heart and head, and protecting children from harm.

BEGIN WITH THE WHOLE CHILD

In American public schools today, some students arrive with empty stomachs. Some have shared a bed with siblings or slept on a couch, and many are being raised by working single parents, grandparents, or other relatives. Many will not have warm coats for the cold weather. Seeing the world through their eyes, school can feel forbidding. Will I be accepted? Will I get something to eat? Does my teacher care about me? These students are not statistics. They are whole children, and seeing and teaching them as whole children is how inclusion begins.

Figure 1, which was developed by the Learning Policy Institute and Turnaround for Children (2021), captures some of the guiding principles for educating the whole child. At the center of the figure is the whole child, who is a healthy thriving learner. The child is surrounded by positive developmental relationships in environments filled with safety, belonging, and rich learning experiences. Embracing the whole child requires a personalized, empowering, culturally affirming, and transformative community. We cannot create school communities of compassion and inclusion without seeing and caring for the whole child.



In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. reached out to the students at Barratt Junior High School in Philadelphia with these famous and stirring words:

I want to suggest some of the things that should be in your life's blueprint. Number one in your life's blueprint should be a deep belief in your own dignity, your worth and your own somebodiness. Don't allow anybody to make you feel you are nobody. Always feel that you count. Always feel that you have worth, and always feel that your life has ultimate significance. (Beacon Press, 2015)

In schools that are truly inclusive of the whole child, everyone is somebody. A school where everyone is somebody is a place where, in the words of author and educator bell hooks (1996), inclusion is celebrated “not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.”

WHAT SCHOOL COMMUNITIES SHOULD BE

School communities that embrace our shared humanity celebrate and practice compassion, inclusiveness, and identity-safety every day. We are wired to connect to each other. Perhaps essayist Fredrick Buechner (1973) said it best: “Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else’s skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace or joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too.” How can we unlock the geniuses of children if we don’t include them in our circle of compassion? Being compassionate doesn’t mean we don’t hold high academic standards, ignore self-destructive behaviors, or substitute for real change a soft racism and classism that says the right things but does nothing to dismantle them. On the contrary, compassion is the emotional fuel that fires real change.

If we want a school where everyone is somebody, our circle of care and compassion must include as many people as possible — all students and all adults. Writing in the equity-focused journal *Kairaranga*, Christopher McMaster (2012) defined inclusion as consisting of four qualities: relationships, shared experiences, advocacy, and a sense of identity. The word *Kairaranga* is Māori, used by the indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand to mean a “weaver of family connections.” When the four elements McMaster describes are woven together, they create a climate of transparency, honesty, and openness.

The term *inclusion* also signifies the rights of people to be full members of society, no matter their race, family income, gender, immigrant status, religion, or ethnicity. The U.S. has a tragic history of discriminating against people of color and people who lack material resources and excluding them from opportunities to change their situation. Instead of continuing along this path, we should heed the words of scholar H. Richard Milner IV (2015): “Every child matters regardless of his or her race, gender, sexual orientation, language, religion, ZIP code, social status, or poverty status.”

If we want a school where everyone is somebody, our circle of care and compassion must include as many people as possible — all students and all adults.

Today, people determined to limit the rights of families and children to affirm their identities threaten our inclusive vision of school and society. School communities cannot be places of trust and learning if the identities and self-worth of their members are under attack. The identity-safe classroom fosters relationships based on trust, mutual support, and respect (Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). Being affirmed is inseparable from feeling accepted, cared for, and celebrated.

How do we weave these qualities into the life of a school to make it the kind of place where our students feel included? I suggest that we focus on connecting, sharing, healing, and leading.

CONNECTING AT A DEEP LEVEL

We start by connecting at a deep level. Several years ago, a school visit unexpectedly taught me the importance of deeply connecting to students. I arrived early in the morning and parked my rental car near the front door next to a police car.

Police presence is common in high-poverty schools, so I wasn't surprised, but saddened. Not too far away was a large turkey processing plant in full operation. In the distance, I could hear the whine of traffic along the interstate running just north of the building. The school seemed to have been forgotten in time, poverty cemented into its weathered facade. When I opened the front door on that hazy morning, the sounds of the interstate ringing in my ears, I expected to find a depressed institution, academically wandering. I was wrong. True, the school needed paint. It needed heat. It needed better lighting. But from the moment the principal shook my hand and welcomed me in front of a wall of student art, I felt like this school knew where it was going and why it was making the journey.

I followed the principal and his leadership team into the school's media center. Unfortunately, the state Department of Education had not found the time or resources to provide the school with new books or working computers. No one was feeling sorry for themselves, though. The adults were on a mission. This little school, living on the outskirts of hope, was anything but hopeless. They didn't see their students as problems. Instead, they were young people bursting with potential. The adults had established a covenant relationship with their students in *spite* of the obstacles. They had connected with their students at a deep level.

I sat in on a math class, where the students learned to play chess. The lively classroom buzzed with the sounds of learning, including happy chatter, laughter, and an occasional shout of unexpected understanding. Chess boards were open on every table, and a set of division problems was on the blackboard. The teacher was neither a sage on the stage, nor a guide on the side — she was the lead musician in a learning jazz ensemble, listening, explaining, and correcting in near perfect rhythm with her class. The word *synchrony* came to mind. Not surprisingly, her students did very well on the state standardized math exam. Connection is the human electricity of learning.

SHARING OUR HUMANITY

Schools are theaters where the drama of learning is acted out every day. Everyone follows a script written in an unspoken code that is easy to feel, but hard to define. In one school day, comedy, tragedy, happiness, sadness, boredom, and excitement can erupt — the inner life of a school is a Mr. Toad's Wild Ride of cascading emotions. These emotions are not obstacles to creating schools of care and compassion. On the contrary, they are the essence of how people, young and old, can find lasting friendships and connection to an optimistic and hopeful world.

Those of you who have taught 8th graders know that they are a handful, bursting with energy, humor, and just enough sass to test even the most patient, fun-loving teacher. When I started my career teaching 8th grade, team teaching was all the rage. Upside: Two teachers are usually better than one. Downside: Even with two teachers, a classroom of more than 50 8th graders is apt to be a bit raucous. On one spring day, I found myself alone in a class of restless students struggling to learn the three branches of government. In the back was a tall boy who, given his age, should have been in high school. He was a talker. Asking him to stop pestering the other students was a losing battle.

Social-emotional health in schools doesn't come in packages with lesson plans. It grows from within when authenticity, humor, humility, and our shared humanity come together.

During a class break, he asked me if I would like to arm wrestle. He was smiling. I thought: Well, this isn't in the first-year teacher's handbook, but why not? At least he was talking to me. He let me win without even trying. It was his way of apologizing for being a thorn in my side. He was never a model student, but from then on, he tried hard in class, and I learned a lesson: Social-emotional health in schools doesn't come in packages with lesson plans. It grows from within when authenticity, humor, humility, and our shared humanity come together.

HEALING RATHER THAN PUNISHING

Today, more than 2 million Americans are imprisoned. Many inmates began their journey to incarceration in school because of minor infractions that were criminalized rather than resolved through mediation and reconciliation. The school-to-prison pipeline continues to violate simple principles of fairness. For example, researchers Juan Del Toro and Ming-Te Wang (2021) found that Black students in a mid-Atlantic school district were more likely than white students to receive a suspension for minor infractions, such as dress code violations, inappropriate language, or cellphone use. Biased perceptions about children's behavior can show up as early as preschool (Sabol et al., 2022).

Inclusive school communities are founded on principles of justice, fairness, and a belief in redemption. There are many ways to infuse justice into a school's culture. Restorative justice is one proven method to change a school culture from punishment to healing. The practice provides a path to genuine accountability and reconciliation that connects all involved to a just and educational outcome (Darling-Hammond, 2023).

Feelings of being treated unjustly do not go away. They remain buried in the hidden places we keep to ourselves, waiting to erupt in ways that damage ourselves and others. Turning injustice on its head by elevating understanding and healing can transform a school on the verge of social collapse into a thriving community of learners.

LEADING FROM THE HEART AND HEAD

Most university libraries house thousands of books and doctoral theses exploring the complexities and complications of school leadership. According to the literature, school leaders can be autocrats, bureaucrats, coaches, pacesetters, servants, visionaries, and, from time to time, heroes. I confess that having survived numerous leadership fads and witnessed the work of some great and some less-than-great school leaders, I've concluded that labels aren't always helpful. What matters is authenticity, moral purpose, and the ability to communicate. Are they an *I* leader or a *we* leader? Leaders of inclusive school communities must be *we* people who embody the collective values of compassion, inclusion, and identity-safety. A Hoke County district leader captured this commitment to bone-deep *weness* this way in a 2020 interview with the Learning Policy Institute research team:

To me that's a matter of culture. Before you restructure, you really have to re-culture. When you hear little flag statements like, "Well my children or these children," you pick up right away where their bias is. That's not acceptable. We're not the ones saying, "Well our kids can't do this or we can't do this, why would we do this?" We always say, "Why wouldn't we? Why wouldn't we do this for all of our kids?"

THE DUTY TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM HARM

Today, more than ever, children need authentic, affirming relationships and schools where everyone is somebody. As one school superintendent said to me, "all means all." Every child is a whole child, and yet so many feel invisible. Many of our children are living in a world where antisocial behavior, bullying, and random violence have become part of the social landscape. In 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child, and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), and the Children's Hospital Association declared a national emergency to address the youth mental health crisis. In their statement, the organizations observed that "we are caring for young people with soaring rates of

depression, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, and suicidality that will have lasting impacts on them, their families, and their communities.”

Children spend many hours every day on social media and other unregulated online platforms, where they can be exposed to misinformation, sexual content, violence, and cyberbullying (AACAP, 2020). We know that students yearn to feel socially and emotionally secure and connected to others. Creating places and spaces of hope is not a mystery if we remember feeling is first and inclusion comes from our shared humanity.

References

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. (2020). *Screen time and children*.

American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Children’s Hospital Association. (2021, October). *Declaration of a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health*.

hooks, b. (1996). *Killing rage: Ending racism*. Owl Book.

Cummings, E.E. (1926/2022). [since feeling is first]. In *Poem a Day*. Academy of American Poets.

Darling-Hammond, S. (2023). *Fostering belonging, transforming schools: The impact of restorative justice*. Learning Policy Institute.

Del Toro, J. & Wang, M.-T. (2022). The roles of suspensions for minor infractions and school climate in predicting academic performance among adolescents. *American Psychologist*, 77 (2), 173-185.

Buechner, F. (1973). *Wishful thinking: A seeker’s ABC*. Harper & Row.

Beacon Press. (2015). *Martin Luther King, Jr. What is your life’s blueprint?* [Video]. YouTube.

Learning Policy Institute & Turnaround for Children. (2021, September) *Design principles for schools: Putting the science of learning and development into action*.

McMaster, C. (2012). Ingredients for inclusion: Lessons from the literature. *Kairaranga*, 13 (2).

Milner, R.H. (2015), *Rac(e)ing to class: Confronting poverty and race in schools and classrooms*. Harvard Education Press.

Sabol, T.J., Kessler, C.L., Rogers, L.O., Petittclerc, A., Silver, J., Briggs-Gowan, M., & Wakschlag, L.S (2022.) A window into racial and socioeconomic status disparities in preschool disciplinary action using developmental methodology. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1508 (1), 132-136.

Steele, D.M. & Cohn-Vargas, B. (2013) *Identity safe classrooms grades K-5: Places to belong and learn*. Corwin.

This article appears in the April 2024 issue of *Kappan*, Vol. 105, No. 7, p. 8-13.