

Kittens, Community, Kids, and Classrooms

Exploring and Embracing Empathy

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This story is not about a kitten. It's about Randall de Sève's book *This Story Is Not about a Kitten* (Random House, 2022) and how we used it to enhance a school community.

De Sève's story is a captivating and authentic tale of a diverse cast who acted with empathy and compassion to solve a problem. More than fictional elements, de Sève's characters teach readers and listeners about building a culture of belonging.

Belonging, or feeling invited, welcomed, known, accepted, involved, supported, heard, befriended, needed, and loved, as depicted on the Belonging Wheel (Creating Communities of Belonging), is a basic human need.¹ Belonging is at the center of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, coming after basic physiological and safety needs and preceding esteem and self-actualization.² Cultivating a culture of belonging is essential for schools and communities that support children. Without "belongingness," humans are challenged to develop self-esteem and a sense of self-worth and are at-risk for not learning, engaging, and reaching their full potential.

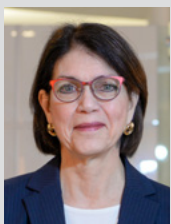
Belonging at school is essential to learning. Without it, students can feel disconnection, lack of motivation, and an inability to

access learning. Part of creating a culture of belonging is understanding, teaching, and encouraging empathy, or being able to put yourself in someone else's shoes.

Parents, teachers, and students in school districts across our nation complete annual surveys on school culture and climate. Survey responses in our elementary school indicated that parents, teachers, and students all agreed that empathy and compassion were areas in need of attention and improvement. Knowing the intricate interrelationship of empathy, compassion, and belonging and the importance of ensuring a culture of belonging to positive student social-emotional and academic well-being, faculty and administrators from Riverfield Elementary in Fairfield County, CT, sought out an ideal children's book for the annual One School, One Book project suitable for teaching about empathy and compassion. The choice was *This Story Is Not about a Kitten*.

The Logistics

Typically, Riverfield's parent-teacher association (PTA) purchases a copy of the chosen book for each classroom. Each teacher uses



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Author/Illustrator Carson Ellis

the classroom copy when working with the students. Studies, including Clark and Picton's research report on book ownership, literacy engagement, and mental wellbeing, speak to the positive impact of children having their own copies of books in the home environment.³ Providing a copy of the book for each classroom and also putting a copy in the hands of each student, would not only capitalize on the benefits of individual book ownership, but would be a vehicle to facilitate a home-school partnership, enhance engagement, and transfer learning. How could we make that happen?

Through collaboration with a faculty member at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT, Riverfield secured consultation, professional development, and funding to purchase a copy of the book for each of the 397 students in the school. Consultation and professional development were provided pro-bono and funding for books was provided through an endowment fund. Each book had a bookplate with the individual child's name to reinforce the idea of book ownership. The big reveal of the title was made at the October All-School Meeting. Teachers and administrators shared in reading the book. Next, students learned that during the fall months, their teachers would share lessons in class using the book. Beginning in January, each grade would have a chance to share how they connected to the book by presenting at a grade-level spotlight during an All-School Meeting. Finally, when students learned they would all be receiving a personal copy of the book, the excitement was palpable—and audible!

Parents and caregivers were encouraged to read the book at home with their children. Additionally, the principal and a joint committee of educators and parents developed a plan to engage parents and caregivers. The committee invited all parents and guardians to participate in conversations about our school community and improving the sense of belongingness at the school. The committee set up listening sessions where parents could sign up for an individual (in-person or virtual) session and share their experiences about belonging in our school community. The listening session invitation included a visual of the Belonging Wheel depicting the ten dimensions of belonging and some reflective questions for the adults to consider reflecting on before coming to the listening session. These included:



- What has your child's/family's experience of belonging been like at our school?
- What are your favorite parts of our community?
- What else is important to you as a parent in terms of feeling like you belong to our community and your child feeling like they belong?
- What qualities do you hope your child will demonstrate as they transition to middle school?
- What would you want a family new to our school to experience and feel as they join our community?

To encourage participation, incentives including coffee and a prize raffle were provided; this engaged the school and parent community in a collaborative partnership. Collectively parents and school faculty and staff identified common goals and aspirations for students to achieve during their six-year journey at the school. The faculty also created an action plan to enhance the culture of belonging in the school community for the subsequent school year and beyond, all based on parent input and collaboration of home and school.

The All-School Meeting grade-level showcasing of student connections to the book demonstrated the students' growing understanding of empathy and compassion and their central role in creating a culture of belonging. The third-grade students shared that the last pages of the book "inspired us to think about how we can connect the book to our school. We decided to write our own version." They quoted that at the end of the book de Sève writes:

"This story is not about the child
who asked, "Could we?"
or the man who offered some milk,
or the twins who brought a box,
or the woman who held the dog
for the dog's people who listened,
or the dog who stopped when it
heard the kitten —

now full-bellied and clean,
no longer alone, purring happily
HOME.

This story is about the
stopping
and listening
and holding
and bringing,
the offering
the asking
and working together
it takes, sometimes, to get there.”

The students then presented their version, *This Story Is Not about a Student*.

This story is not about the student who said, “I can’t do it!”
It’s about her friends who encouraged her to keep trying and
not give up.

This story is not about the student sitting on the bench at recess,
it’s about the
other three students who paused their game and asked her to
join.

This story is not about the student who was going to finish last
in the mile run.

It’s about the boy who slowed down so they could cross the fin-
ish line together.

This story is not about the student who raised her hand and
said the wrong
answer. It’s about her classmates, who didn’t laugh, but said,
“Good try.”

The meeting ended with a challenge to the student body to
think about other examples of how students at our school care
for others. When reading the book again that week, classes were
prompted to discuss the following ideas and questions:

- Belonging is feeling like you are an important member of a group. What do you think about that? Your thoughts and feelings matter.
- What qualities or characteristics would describe a person who cares about others and wants you to make sure others feel a sense of belonging?
- What behaviors or actions would you like all students to engage in or do?

At the end of the year, students met with de Sève via Zoom and interviewed her about her book. The university had published a story on the project, which was shared with de Sève. Heart-warmed by the story, she volunteered to meet with the students. Students developed questions for the interview and engaged in a lively conversation about how de Sève got the idea for the story, how long it took to write the book, and what she hoped readers got from her story.

De Sève shared that she was impressed and delighted by our deep work on belonging and by the students themselves. She even suggested that students act as ambassadors for this curriculum, bringing it to other schools in the area and (remotely) afar.

“I love how powerfully *This Story Is Not about a Kitten* impacted your school,” she said, “and that its message really came through. At first, I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to say with this story. I spent a lot of time writing and rewriting the ending. And then I put it aside for a while. It wasn’t until the pandemic—and one of many (way too) quiet moments at home during lockdown—that I realized that this story, inspired by a real-life kitten rescue in front of my Brooklyn home, was about the importance of community and belonging. We really needed that during COVID—and we always do.”⁴ &

References

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3. Christina Clark and Irene Picton. “Book Ownership, Literacy Engagement and Mental Wellbeing.” *National Literacy Trust*, December 2018. https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/National_Literacy_Trust_-_Book_ownership_report.pdf
4. Zoom interview with Randall de Sève.