Preface

"Veronica gets it!" Allison said about one of the first-year teachers who had been hired to teach first grade at her school. She continued, sharing a perfectly simple story to illustrate the complexity of what "getting it" means to her.

"When I walked into Veronica's classroom on the first day of school, I saw that she had already posted 40 or 50 words on the word wall. Her room looked so great, and I didn't have the heart to point out that small problem—that since the need for those spelling words hadn't come from her kids, they probably wouldn't ever know what the word wall was about or how they could use it to help with their writing. But then last week I went in, and she had taken all of her words down. I asked her about it, and she said she'd noticed that her kids weren't ever using the word wall. She'd decided that for it to be useful for her students, the words had to be ones that they were actually using in their writing but didn't know how to spell yet. She'd decided that they had to build their word wall together.

"I was so impressed with that! As a first-year teacher, she was paying enough attention to what her students were showing her that she could say, 'I noticed they weren't using it.' And she could take this idea that she'd learned about in college and make it real by watching what her kids did with it. She gets it!"

Veronica is a promising new teacher. She understands what the phrase "student-centered" means in the real life of her classroom. Unfortunately, real life for Veronica also means that she is working 10- to 12-hour days and never feeling finished. Her classroom is artfully organized and is wonderfully warm, inviting, and kid-friendly—but she is tired and stressed and often seems to be running on willpower alone. One of Veronica's best friends has already quit his first teaching job, joining the ranks of the nearly 50% of new teachers who leave the profession within the first five years of their careers (National Education Association, 2006). Veronica "gets it," but the hard fact is that there's little better than a 50–50 chance that she'll still be teaching in ten years. She gets it, which means that while she understands why student-centered theories shape her ideas about what it means to be a teacher, she knows, now, that making this approach work is one of the most difficult challenges she will ever face. We hope this book will be of use for helping teachers like Veronica to put those theories to work in the classroom.

If you know what it feels like to struggle for balance between what you believe and what you can accomplish in the classroom, or if you've had the dismal experience of watching your ideals diminish into the distance as you fight to keep from drowning in the realities of day-to-day life at school, you're not alone. Virtually every teacher we know believes in a number of student-centered ideas about what it means to teach and to learn; yet in our experience, many tend to be more learner-centered philosophically than in practice. For some, this may be because they are not yet as confident as they want to be about how to do things like individualize instruction, engage different intelligences and learning styles, or facilitate the development of a strong and supportive community for learning. For others—and for new teachers in particular, many of whom may be working in "failing" schools in some of the most challenging conditions imaginable—the unambiguous message often heard is that the reality of test scores will trump student-centered ideals every time and that instructional efforts need to be more precisely focused on standards than on students. In such a climate, growing into one's potential as an effective, learner-centered educator can be more difficult than ever, since time—every teacher's most precious resource—is often increasingly controlled by those who are not actually responsible for doing the work of teaching and learning at the level of real life in the classroom. Whatever the reason, one thing is clear: learning how to connect genuinely with kids and to teach them well takes time.

TIME TO LEARN

With coaching from experienced others, we learn to swim by swimming and to read by reading. It follows that we learn to teach by teaching. Unfortunately, guided opportunities to learn by teaching tend to be woefully insufficient for new and experienced educators alike. The student teaching experience, while essential, cannot provide in a few semesters what will take years to learn; yet once licensed and hired, teachers are typically, illogically left mostly alone to become the deeply reflective, challenging, confident, and child-centered practitioners that they were probably encouraged to be in their credentialing programs. While the theoretical preparation for the classroom that many teacher education programs provide is essential for helping students of education to understand *why* learner-centered theories are important, the *how* of this approach to teaching cannot be fully learned in a university environment, nor in a 16- or 32-week internship. Undergraduate and

graduate students in education can learn about the theories of constructivism, multiple intelligences, learning styles, developmentally appropriate practice, and motivation, for example; but such theories hold real meaning only for teachers who have first implemented various strategies that embody these ideas, then tested those strategies by trial and error, day after day and year after year.

Figuring out how to translate learner-centered theories of education into everyday classroom practice can be a discouraging process, even in schools where external pressures to standardize teaching and learning are minimized and in which strong mentoring programs and genuine collegial opportunities for all teachers exist. Without consistent mentoring and other supports, though, the struggle to hold onto student-centered ideals—the ones that made such obvious sense in a college classroom—can be overwhelming for both new and experienced educators. For these teachers, the serious challenge of every day can become that of simply surviving it. Alana, a strong and highly capable young woman who recently completed her first year in the classroom, describes what she survived. “I worked 12-hour days all year, including at least one day on the weekend,” she said, “and I cried my way home, every night.” When asked what she wishes for now that her first year is behind her, she says simply, “I just wish I had more time with my kids.” From listening to Alana talk about her goals as a new teacher, it is clear that she made it to the end of the year with her ideals intact. It is equally clear that the emotional toll along the way was high.

FIGHTING FOR HOPE

The sense of disconnection between educational theory and real life in the schools can be professionally and personally debilitating. Untold numbers of the nation’s 3 million teachers work fiercely every day to cultivate a child-centered, constructivist pedagogy, often in the face of great financial, social, political, and institutional barriers. Others learn to cope by abandoning the progressive philosophy of education they had once embraced in favor of the teacher-centered strategies of behaviorism (i.e., the prediction and control of students’ observable behaviors), which tend to be simpler and easier to implement than the student-centered strategies of constructivism. It seems probable that at least some of the 1,000 teachers who leave the profession every school day in the United States (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005) do so because they lack support in learning how to put deeply held beliefs about what it should mean to teach and to learn into practice. Hope is

at stake. It is our newest colleagues and our most fragile student populations who are living on the front lines of a devastating teacher attrition rate that reveals two clear trends: attrition is "roughly 50 percent higher in poor schools than in wealthier ones," and "teachers new to the profession are far more likely to leave than are their more experienced counterparts" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2005, p. 2).

It is clear from where we sit that years of school reform and accountability efforts have not inspired hope. They have not made classrooms more enticing places for teachers or students to want to be. Instead, they have contributed to a profound disconnect between child-centered pedagogy and real life in many schools. This book is intended for teachers who have felt the uncomfortable, even painful divide between their philosophical beliefs and the realities of day-to-day life in the schools. It is also intended for administrators and classroom mentors who are devoted to supporting others' growth, as well as their own, toward the goal of integrating learner-centered theory and practice—despite the many real and varied pressures they are under to abandon a constructivist ideology.

It is important to acknowledge what we see as an unfortunate reality for those who value learner-centered schools and classrooms (which we define as genuine learning communities in which all students, parents, and educators feel safe, valuable, and capable enough to risk engaging their real selves in their experiences at school): we are working against the dominant paradigm of behaviorism—that is, of predicting and controlling others' behaviors—when it comes to defining what it means to teach and to learn. Going against the norm is always hard, but it can seem next to impossible alone. It's *hard* to resist falling back on deeply engrained habits and strategies (or on the worksheet packets helpfully offered by the well-intended teacher next door) when we are not immediately successful in helping our students to be the respectful, inquisitive, courageous, and capable learners we want them to be. This is particularly true when our students are old enough to know very well how school is *supposed* to work, with minimal investment of effort and courage on their part and with responsibility for control being solely the teacher's concern.

This book, then, is written for teachers who want to be more genuinely student-centered in their classrooms, who have discovered important questions about their practice and who look forward to finding more, and who are willing to make mistakes and try new things every day to figure out how to engage students' real selves in their learning. It is intended to help both new and experienced teachers with these goals by offering concrete strategies for making a fundamental

shift in educational thought and practice: from behaviorism to constructivism; from control to cooperation; from achieving standardized, age-based expectations for students' development to using standards for individualizing expectations and instruction; and from coercing students' obedience to facilitating their authority and autonomy. In short, the book provides educators with ideas for ensuring that the processes of education are done *by* the students in our care rather than *to* them.

In the upcoming chapters, we offer our best "how-to" thinking about teaching, and we do our best to show how the strategies described are aligned with learner-centered ideas about education. We do so, knowing from experience that it is possible to maintain the sturdy sense of authority that students need their teachers to have while sharing power with them, purposefully helping them to develop the sense of agency and authority that every engaged citizen requires. We want to be clear, though, that while our own teaching experiences in New Mexico and Alaska have been in settings characterized by great cultural and socioeconomic diversity, largely in Title I schools serving poor families and neighborhoods, we recognize the distinction between teaching children who are poor and teaching those who live in chronic, generational poverty. We do not speak from experience in working with large numbers of children and parents who are living in deeply impoverished circumstances. While we believe the student-centered theories and practical strategies we describe are effective and beneficial for all learners, we do not presume to know, in fact, what our teaching colleagues in America's most impoverished schools and neighborhoods know better. Further, we appreciate the cultural chasms that significantly define the educational landscape when teaching "other people's children" (Delpit, 2006), and as white women who are economically privileged, by world standards, we recognize the limits of our perspectives and understandings. We simply offer these approaches for critique, hoping they'll be of use for teachers who are also interested in finding ways to put students at the center of our conversations, our practices, and our profession.

The melding of theory and practice is our goal in describing the following aspects of teaching: (Chapter 1) facilitating community development in the classroom; (Chapter 2) classroom organization; (Chapter 3) observing and assessing what students know and can do; (Chapter 4) planning instruction; (Chapter 5) evaluating and reporting student growth; (Chapter 6) facilitating community development with parents; and (Chapter 7) leading with heart.

These topics are relevant for teachers at every grade level and are described in general rather than age-specific terms. We trust readers to modify and apply these ideas as needed in a variety of settings. We hope that this text (and the conversations it can provoke with colleagues, parents, and students) will help to strengthen your own learning community and to provoke ongoing and justifiable optimism as you continue the challenge of putting learner-centered theories to work in your classroom. You will be doing such important work with the hundreds of children who will be in your care over the course of your career. May you inspire each one.