Chapter 1

From Bottom to Top
The Transformation of Two Schools

In the fall of 2004 I asked Larry Nucci what I should read. I was starting a new job, and had invited him to do a workshop for a group of educator-colleagues. No one – at least to my knowledge – knows more about the moral development of children than Larry. He suggested I look at Marilyn Watson's recently published book, *Learning to Trust*. It was a recommendation that ended up playing a role in the radical transformation of a school, and then another school, and ultimately influenced practices and procedures in an entire school district.

Marilyn Watson was Director of the Child Development Project's national Teacher Education Project. In *Learning to Trust* she documented, with co-author Laura Ecken, two difficult years in Ecken's elementary school classroom in an economically depressed area of Louisville, Kentucky. I bought a copy of the book and began to read, but was interrupted by other projects and set it aside for the time being.

My daughter was a first grade teacher at the time, in a school highly affected by problems of its own. In terms of family income, her school was the second poorest in the state of Oregon. At one point I heard what percentage of 911 emergency calls in the Portland metropolitan area came from that school's attendance area. It was far out of proportion to its size. The school had more students sent to the principal's office for disciplinary issues than any of the seventeen elementary schools in the district, and it had the greatest number of students suspended.

That year happened to be the hardest in Marie-Claire's career, to the point where she had thoughts about leaving the profession. I lent her my copy of *Learning to Trust*, wondering if something in it might be of interest. I planned to get it back a couple of weeks later. Three weeks passed, but she asked to keep it a little longer. Another six weeks, and she was not yet ready to surrender it. Weeks later, I bought a second copy, gave it to her, and took mine back. It had some marginal notes I wanted. The book seemed to be offering insights she found helpful.

What Marilyn Watson and Laura Ecken most wanted to impress on their readers was the importance of attachment relationships. Attachment relationships are not just pleasant interactions, but the kinds of close connections that fill children's need to feel unconditionally, trustingly, and "securely" connected to at least one adult in their lives. Without the security of attachment, children will not be ready for complicated tasks like learning to read or manipulating numbers. The problem is that some children live with adults who are too stressed, too affected by addiction, or for some other reason unable to act as secure attachment figures. If attachment does not happen at home, it must happen in the classroom, for the sake of children

as well as for the sake of education. The message rang true for Marie-Claire's experience with her students, especially that year. Guided by this insight, her following school year would begin, and progress, differently.

At some point during that next year, Marie-Claire asked her principal for permission to start a book group with fellow teachers. A few of her colleagues were aware of, and curious about, what she was doing and her occasional bits of positive news. The plan was low key, "We'll read a chapter at a time, and discuss – anyone who might be interested." She knew of a few takers, but did not count on twenty-two, the number of initial sign-ups. Wise and supportive, principal Sid Ong carved out time from other meetings, forty-five minutes twice a month, for their discussions. The next year, some of those book-group members were requesting (and were granted) permission to lead professional development sessions for the rest of the faculty based on their discussions, their learning, and their new experiences in the classroom.

The student-teacher interactions described by Watson and Ecken were guided by two complementary theories: attachment theory, as just described briefly, and self-determination theory, a richly documented theory of motivation, social development, and well-being based on – at this point, decades of – research by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (and now, many others). Self-determination theory addresses the interplay of three basic psychological needs: the need to feel that one has an appropriate amount of "say" over the direction of one's life (*autonomy*), the need to feel warm attachment to significant others (*relatedness*), and the need to feel a certain amount of confidence that one can effectively meet life's challenges (*competence*). For children in school, competence refers especially to children seeing themselves as able to learn and to be successful both as students and as community members. These three are critical if we are to do our best work, or be our best selves. They affect the quality of our interactions with others, and even the quality of our physical and emotional well-being.

The role autonomy, relatedness, and competence play in life has been examined, tested, and shown to be not just important, but essential, for children far younger than school age and adults well into their senior years, as it has with students both north and south of the equator, in "individualist" cultures as well as "collectivist" societies. Most important for this book, these three needs play a major role in the quantity and quality of students' motivation to learn, to cooperate with adults, and to care about others. What Marie-Claire's colleagues realized over the months of their working together was that while Mr. Ong was fostering teachers' autonomy – via professional development and certain classroom practices they began to endorse – and allowing their collegiality and competence to grow while collaborating with one another, their work to be effective in filling children's needs was changing the lives of students.

As many teachers began to see improvements inside their classrooms and heard about others' similar successes, they began to look beyond the classroom walls:

> "This seems to work really well in the classroom. How could we all work together to apply it to the playground?"

> "How can we best share what we're discovering with the cafeteria workers and our custodians? They have lots of important interactions with the kids."

> "How can we get our families more involved with what we're doing?"

Faculty members continued to lead some of the faculty's professional development sessions, and Sid Ong continued to be supportive. And why not? Following two or three years of diminishing numbers of students sent to his office for "discipline," he was able to devote more time to meaningful interactions with his staff and students. At one point he commented "I'm feeling like an educator again." A school bus driver who was close to retirement approached Sid one day, asking what he was doing to his kids. The driver had seen his share of students in his career, and something "different" was going on here. Impressed with what Sid told him, the bus driver scheduled a meeting for the other drivers at the school, and asked Sid to come and explain. From that point on, most of the bus drivers (though not all) tried to use the same practices on their routes.

Five years from that first book discussion, Sid Ong's school no longer held North Clackamas School District's distinction of "most disciplinary referrals" and "most suspensions." Quite the contrary, its new distinction was that of having the fewest office referrals and the fewest suspensions of the seventeen elementary schools. It went from bottom to top. New academic and other initiatives also took place, but the school's demographics had not changed, basically the same teachers were there, and families faced the same challenges. But social and academic magic had happened. Scores in state achievement tests had soared. The year before teachers began their discussions, only 32% of the school's "economically disadvantaged" students had met state standards for mathematics on the Oregon State Achievement Tests. Four years later, 83% were meeting state math standards. In that same time period, students with "limited English proficiency" rose from 33% meeting math standards, to 81%.

In reading, progress was similar, perhaps even more dramatic. Only 24% of economically disadvantaged students met state reading standards as teachers began to work attachment and self-determination theory into their classrooms; four years later, an impressive 89% reached the mark. Students whose English proficiency was "limited" rose from 26% to 84% in reading. Meanwhile, as students were more engaged in the classroom, the number of school suspensions was cut by 95%.
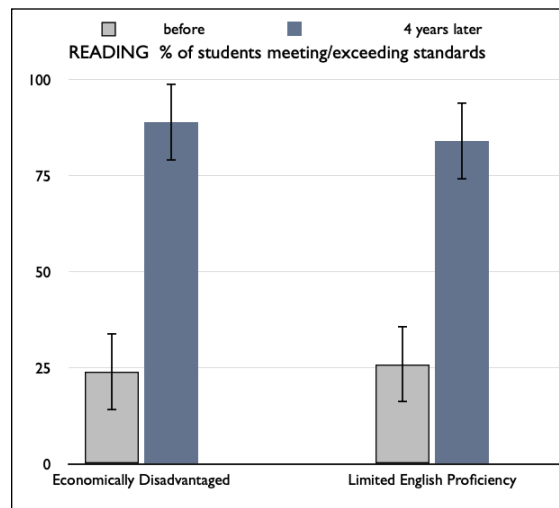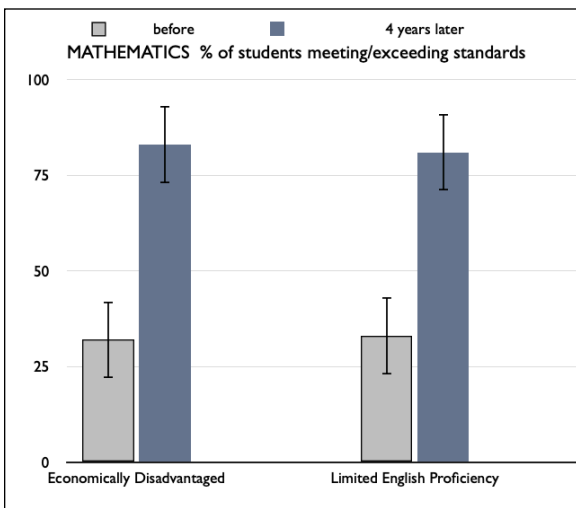
On psychological needs and flourishing

The chapters that follow explain what lay behind this success; they explain practices and strategies for adults in schools big and small, private and public, elementary and secondary. In addition to teachers, this information pertains to principals, cafeteria workers, and even bus drivers. Happily, the pages to come offer strategies with greater clarity and precision than was available to the teachers whose students produced the results seen here. The fact is, we know even more about fostering autonomy, "belonging," and competence now than we did two decades ago. My goal here is not primarily to stimulate academic success and reduce suspensions, however. Both are great benefits, but our deeper interest should be in students' sense of well-being, in pathways to flourishing. After all, are the intermediate aims – like participatory citizenship or "preparation for the job market in a fast-changing world" – so often proffered as *the* goals of education not because they might help pave the path to the ultimate goal, that of creating the best possible life one can create?

Why SEL works, and possible drawbacks

Initially, an intended audience for this book was educators working in the fields of character development and social-emotional learning. Some SEL programs have documented both short- and long-term success in improving not only students' behavior, but also their attitudes toward teachers and school, their mental health, and their academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2022).

Why does SEL work? It works because it focuses on strengthening students' social and emotional competencies, via teaching skills – the building blocks of competency. Feeling competent to face life's challenges is a basic need for growth and integration and thus, as students get that need supported by learning important skills for life (especially at school), we see the positive outcomes SEL research has shown.

But there is a drawback here. The SEL research that most educators seem to quote (i.e., the three meta-analyses cited above) comes either directly or indirectly through the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Those large (and well done) analyses limited themselves to including programs that "*emphasize* the development of one or more *skills*"(Durlak *et al.*, 2011, p. 409; italics mine). Skills work. Skills are important. But who says skills are the most important factor, the best route to student social, emotional, and academic growth? The school just described, for but one example, was far more focused on relatedness and fostering student autonomy than on social or emotional skill development. If someone had decided to do a serious study of that school's process, the study would never have been looked at from and SEL perspective, because what it emphasized would have excluded it.

I would suggest that fostering students' sense of autonomy – as defined in chapter 3 here – has a better statistical record (larger effect sizes) than social-emotional competence for improving school success, and job success, and relationship success, as well as a sense of well-being. Search Institute, in Minneapolis (www.search-institute.org) may wonder similarly if strong and caring "developmental relationships" do not have a greater impact on student thriving than the learning of skills. Yes, fostering competence is essential, and it does lead to positive outcomes. And it should always be part of school life. But skills do not have a remarkable track record for fostering persistence in the pursuit of goals, or for mastery learning, or for internalizing

motivation. Autonomy, for example, does. Autonomy-supportive classrooms have much to offer, as is soon to be seen.

Oh, no, something else on our plate?

In contrast to what sometimes happens to schools implementing a new program (of any kind), I am not aware that any teacher in Marie-Claire's school, at any time, said "*One more thing?* Wait! Are Sid and Marie-Claire now expecting us to do *even more*?" Rather than more, these were colleagues deciding (autonomously) to make some adjustments, and they were doing so because it made sense in ways they now understood. Their motivation was internal. What they ended up with was less time "managing" behavior, and more time teaching. And when good things happen, others want to join. That bus driver certainly did not crave additional meetings, but it was he who called the meeting to get his colleagues together, and a number of his fellow drivers seemed to agree that he did the right thing. Those who joined him understood how they could contribute to something that they themselves endorsed. No pressure. Their contributions, too, were autonomous.

As time went on, some of the previously resistant teachers got won over by their colleagues' positive reports, and perhaps by some of their own observations. New members started a second round of book discussions. No, not every faculty member was on board, but enthusiasm did grow, as did faculty teamwork.
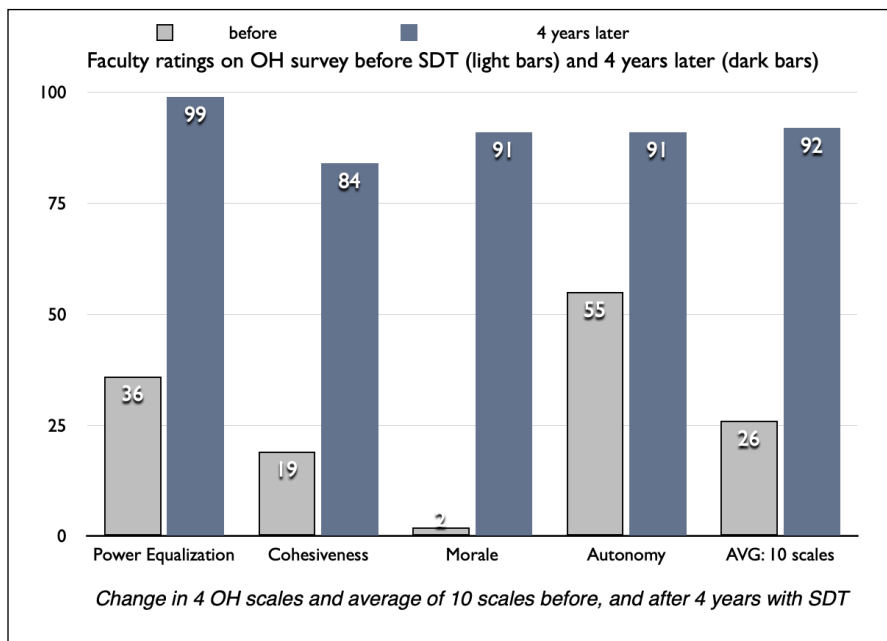
What happened then?

The school's success did not go unnoticed, of course. But when one school rises, a different one inevitably ends up at the bottom. District administrators shifted their focus to other buildings of concern. What happens so often when that bottom school is struggling? A principal from a "successful school" gets sent over to turn it around. Principal Ong was transferred to Oak Grove Elementary as his next assignment.

During the first year in his new position, Sid asked Marie-Claire if she would be willing to join his faculty the following year. There were no teaching positions open, but he did need a reading coach – a position that would allow her to interact with a number of her new colleagues on a daily basis. He hoped to give his faculty some of what he had been able to witness (and had contributed to) the past few years.

The new situation presented challenges of a different sort. At the previous school, change was grass roots: a respected teacher with a new idea and enthusiasm had colleagues who liked their friend and wanted to know more. The colleagues got support from a principal they knew and respected. At the new school, at least a few staff members were of the opinion that they did not need "fixing," and some had strong opinions about outsiders thinking this school and its teachers needed improvement. One teacher explained, "We are not like where you came from. This is a different school, in a different part of the city, we have different kids, different families, and a different faculty. And no, we do not need to be fixed." That teacher might not have been aware that her school's Organizational Health profile the year before Sid arrived placed faculty morale only at the second percentile. The Organizational Health survey was filled out yearly in each of the district's schools. The faculty score on staff cohesiveness was slightly higher, at the 19th percentile – so that teacher might not have been speaking for the whole group.

Cooperation did increase as the months went on, especially with the help of a small number of talented teachers who saw the logic and believed in the possibilities. Teachers began to read and discuss *Learning to Trust*, and their numbers grew as others noted signs of interest, maybe even excitement, in their colleagues. Some asked if Marilyn Watson could come for a workshop to teach them more. The following years a number of Oak Grove's teachers read a precursor to *Moving Motivation Inside*, to deepen their knowledge of autonomy, relatedness, and competence; and they later read Watson's *Discipline for Moral Growth* (2009), which helps teachers both prevent and respond to disciplinary situations while keeping autonomy, belongingness, and competence in mind.

Bit by larger bit, month by month, the faculty's discussions and sharing of ideas and successes led to greater *esprit de corps* and clearly an uptick in morale. In just four years, Organizational Health's school profile said the faculty's sense of cohesiveness had risen from the 19th to the 84th percentile. Morale moved from the 2nd percentile to the 91st. When Sid arrived at the school none of the ten Organizational Health scales was higher than the 55th percentile; the average score was 26. Four years later, none of the scores was below the 83rd percentile; the average OH score was 92. The school and its faculty may not have been "fixed," but things certainly seemed to be going well.

Faculty ratings on OH survey before SDT (light bars) and 4 years later (dark bars)

Legend: before (light bars), 4 years later (dark bars)

	Power Equalization	Cohesiveness	Morale	Autonomy	AVG: 10 scales
before	36	19	2	55	26
4 years later	99	84	91	91	92

Change in 4 OH scales and average of 10 scales before, and after 4 years with SDT

I happened to be in a meeting two years after Sid had retired and Marie-Claire had left for a new position, where a district representative told educators from outside the district, "When people want to see our best school, we send them to Oak Grove." The faculty, with a supportive new principal, were carrying on.

What did they do? It all began with relationships. At both schools, the principal and his teachers enlisted custodians, cafeteria workers, playground and instructional aides – everyone who had a regular presence at the school – to do what she or he could to help each student feel known (by name), cared about, and welcomed. One commitment was to have each student be greeted –

warmly – by at least three different adults before even reaching the classroom door to be welcomed, a fourth time, by their teacher. Among other practices they adopted:

• No prizes, no trinkets, no gold stars, no tangible rewards. Readers under the impression that kids need tangible enticements for either behavior or learning are invited to keep these two schools in mind. Tangible "motivators" disappeared in both places, yet in their absence even those students considered the most "disadvantaged" and previously the "least successful" seemed even more capable than before of paying attention, cooperating, getting along, and learning. These students were internalizing their motivation for both academics and behavior.

• Behavior problems were approached first with belongingness in mind, but quickly thereafter with the other two needs. Did the child in question have a close attachment with an adult at school? Behavior problem solutions always sought the child's opinions, suggestions, and cooperation; they sought to nurture the child's sense of autonomy.

• The school worked to let parents know what teachers were doing, how they were doing it, and how parents might help. School staff knew that the families with the greatest numbers of economic, social, or psychological problems facing them were usually the least likely to attend family information evenings, but a free, simple evening meal and child care provided during the meeting made a huge difference.

Neither of these schools reached perfection, nor did they expect to. Problems arise everywhere; what matters is how we deal with them. The transformation in both of these schools suggested greater success than any school's progress resulting from any "formal" SEL, character education, or positive youth development program that I am aware of or have ever read about; and it resulted primarily from educators' specific focus on working with children to support three basic needs. It must be added here that this success was not due to a shining star in a single classroom; it was a group effort, and both Sid and Marie-Claire insist on crediting the collaborative efforts of their numerous colleagues for what their schools were able to accomplish. Working together, these same teachers, teaching the same kids from the same families, got flourishing results. Foremost in these results was a greater motivation – a more internal motivation – to participate in school life. Analogous results should be possible everywhere.

Meanwhile, back at the District Office

District administrators could not help but notice Oak Grove's success, of course. Someone in the office surmised, "Hmm, given that transformation in one school, and then the same kind of transformation at another school, shouldn't we maybe think about trying some of *whatever-that-is* in our other schools?" A new position was created, to train and work with faculties in all eight of the district's Title 1 schools (those with high percentages of students from economically disadvantaged families). Marie-Claire was chosen for the position (no surprise?), which expanded two years later, as district administrators hoped to reach not just Title I schools, but all the elementary schools. Requests for consultation or assistance also began to come from middle schools and high schools, some of these requests resulting from incoming student comments, like "How come you don't do things here like they did at our other school?"

As I write this, not just Oak Grove, but all elementary schools in North Clackamas School District are expected to place an intentional focus on children's needs for Autonomy, Belonging, and Competence – their ABCs. If a school has special concerns about a student's behavior, any evaluation of the behavior must consider the possibility that needs are not being supported in one of those areas. Appropriate interventions must follow, as needs dictate. All elementary schools begin the day with a "morning circle," and even staff meetings begin with a welcoming ritual. "Circles" take place in lots of schools in lots of districts – sometimes in beautiful and meaningful ways, sometimes in ways that are quite perfunctory and or blatantly uninteresting – but in North Clackamas School District the emphasis, in all classrooms, is supposed to be on community, on creating a sense of belonging. Class meetings (different from morning circles) for Oak Grove students, usually held weekly, were specifically designed to nurture student autonomy.

Along the way the district formally began working with restorative practices to address certain behavioral issues. Why have restorative practices gained such a following in schools over the last two decades? Part of the answer is that they work, when done correctly. They work for at least three reasons: a) because they give students a meaningful role to play in the restorative process; that is, they respect and support students' autonomy; b) because their main focus is on making, and keeping, relationships as warm and supportive as possible; and c) they foster competence in teaching students a process and the skills to resolve interpersonal and social problems. (See more in chapter 10.)

Helping students internalize their motivation can take place, and it has taken place: in elementary schools, in high schools, in universities – in the United States, in Canada, in Peru and South Africa and Russia and Belgium and Hong Kong and Korea and Israel and more. Teachers like what happens and students like how they feel. And yes, good teaching is still hard work – but in the two schools addressed above, the hard work of teaching became increasingly pleasant hard work. Given the many benefits, moving motivation inside and keeping it there is more than just a good idea. It is essential.