A large part of the work of teaching is constructing the laboratory for learning: It must be sufficiently broad and varied to challenge a range of interests and abilities, and yet focused enough to offer students some coherent rhythms and goals. The learning environment is a complex, living reflection of a teacher's values.

When you walk into some people’s spaces, you are embraced with an identifiable feeling. Harriet and Efrem’s house always fills me with tranquility—to get there I have to follow a stone path that winds past a gate and through night lilies and mimosas and hibiscus, and so I feel that I’m discovering a little cottage in the woods rather than returning to a big-city basement flat. Inside, everything is neat and serene: surfaces are wood and tile, jars are filled with herbs and spices, I sleep on a cotton mat covered with a richly-colored print under a beautiful canopy. Paintings, masks, prints, sketches are arranged subtly on walls and shelves and they evoke Asian images. The bathroom is filled with ferns, and the extra-large tub is sunk into a wood frame surrounded by oils and bath salts. The space is calm; it would be difficult even for me to be loud or speedy here. I am touched with a sense of peacefulness and healing.

BJ’s apartment honors the work and intentions of young children. Tiny furniture is everywhere, including a table and sofa, make-believe sink and kitchen, adorable little rocking chairs. There is a climbing frame, two easels, a shelf of blocks, and a cozy reading corner with lots of books and pillows. A large cardboard packing box has been cut into a perfect play-house for three-year-olds, and the walls are dominated by children’s art. Every light switch has a clever extension so that a young child can control it, and a little half-refrigerator sits near the floor where juice and fruit and yogurt are easily available. A childproof fence encircles the stove in the kitchen, while a movable three-step staircase provides easy access to the sink or toilet in the bathroom. This is a place where preschoolers can be safe and yet powerful—it is an inviting, enabling space for “threes.” At BJ’s, the message is: Be a kid!

Coretta’s house speaks of efficiency, utility, and the importance of Jesus in her life. She lives here with her husband, several grown children, and many grandchildren, and she is always prepared to feed a crowd. Everything is clean—polished and gleaming—and the invocation to remove your shoes is a stark and symbolic reminder to leave the city streets behind. One small room in the basement is finished with wood-paneling and designed as a chapel: small pews pushed close together, an altar in the front, hymnals and Bibles everywhere. Coretta’s house invites you to pray.

Finally, Malcolm and Sue’s house is dominated by the kitchen: It is the physical and social center, and it flows naturally into every other space. Well-thumbed cookbooks, stained with spills and layered with penciled notes from generations of users, can be found in every room. Black cast-iron pots and skillets hang from hooks, and bins of flour and dried beans line the walls. A huge, sturdy table is home to canning and baking projects, card games, hearty meals, and political meetings. Something is always cooking at Malcolm and Sue’s, bubbling on the stove, baking in the oven, or “cooking” in the social activism of their community. A large screen door swings open into the garden and the boundary between outside and inside is further blurred by the fresh-cut flowers, the dried bouquets and garlic braids hanging everywhere, the bushels of plums and tomatoes, the baskets of onions waiting here and there. I love to eat and visit at Malcolm and Sue’s.

All of these homes begin with a physical area that is merely given. The raw space is a shell, determined, simply there. What happens next is active choice—life is breathed into these settings by people who have certain ideas in mind, specific beliefs to enclose. And that’s what makes each one more than background, more than floor and walls and ceiling. That’s what makes each whole ecology of intention—the embodiment of thought and value.

All human environments have some idea, some belief worked up in them, responsibly and self-consciously or not. Some people set out with specific ideas to create particular environments. But it works the
other way as well: We can look at a space and deduce ideas and beliefs from it. The space is a visible container of human action: at times oppressive or liberating; beautiful or ugly.

Environments tell us what to do. When I began teaching I used to take groups of kindergarteners to the airport to watch the planes take off and land. Now the concourse in any airport has a powerful message for all of us: move this way, keep moving, move rapidly. But to a five-year-old the concourse says, “Run!” It took me three trips to realize that my instruction—stick together, hold hands, don’t run—was trumped by the environment. I was literally overruled by the dominant environmental voice: RUN!

What does your environment say? How could it be improved like schools?

The most taken-for-granted, sanctified, commonsense and commonplace features of life in school carry messages about important issues: this is how people learn; this is how people think; this is the nature of knowledge; this is what is valuable; this is what you should attend to. And these messages constitute a major part of what is learned and what becomes assumed about school. Why do children change grades each year? Why is the day divided into periods? Why are math and science separate subjects? Why are the children lining up in the hallway? Why is the teacher standing in front of the class doing most of the talking, and why are the students sitting at their desks most of the time, mostly quietly? The more aware we are of our thoughts and goals, the more responsible we are for our values and beliefs, the more intentional we can be in creating spaces that speak and work for us.

Students tell us their experiences of the environments we create in provocative ways: I saw a twelve-year-old friend recently dragging himself slowly along the hallway looking defeated. “Where are you headed?” I asked. “Reading,” he replied glumly. “But,” I said, “you love reading”—he was carrying two magazines, several comics, and a dog-eared book. “Yea,” he said, “but not reading reading.” School reading, reading as a mechanical matter, held no allure, even though he clearly enjoyed reading for other purposes. School had somehow turned things upside-down.

Kids understand that school is about crowds—there is no privacy and there is little individuality. What’s good for the group had better be good for me. The schedule is in charge: There is a time to eat and a time to go to the bathroom, and we all go together. The intercom crackles on and whatever we’re up to becomes unimportant—it is essential that we all hear about the double-parked car or the changed bus schedule right now. In school, authority is established, and learning about hierarchy becomes crucial; democracy is talked about but not practiced, issues of larger community interest are rarely considered and never acted on. In school, a high value is placed on quiet: “Is everything quiet?” the superintendent asks the principal, and the principal the teacher, and the teacher the child. If everything is quiet, it is assumed that all is well. This is why many normal children—considering what kind of intelligence is expected and what will be rewarded here—become passive, quiet, obedient, dull. The environment practically demands it.

Kids see that in school, learning is linked to age more than anything else, and that growth, development, and wisdom are neatly divided into nine-month units. They figure out that knowledge is cut up into disciplines, disciplines into subjects, and subjects into units of study. The day is broken into short periods, even in the early grades, and each period is devoted to a specific subject. By the fifth or sixth grade, they are typically traveling from class to class every forty or fifty minutes to be taught by a subject-matter specialist, presumably a mathematician, a scientist, a writer or a scholar of literature. Bells ring, science books are put away, people move about, and math books come out. Kids discover that adults see learning as bit-by-bit, every bit lined up as in a series—after two hundred days of schooling, each student will have added two hundred bits of math, two hundred pieces of science, two hundred slices of literature, and so on. Successful students learn to line it up.

Questioning everything in the environment, from the bottom up, is an important task for teachers. We cannot necessarily change it all but we can certainly become aware of the messages, the hidden as well as the obvious, the commonplace as well as the gaudy. We can peel the cover back a bit, peek underground, disclose the undisclosed—at least for ourselves. And in telling what is untold, we can become stronger in shaping our own environments, until they become places that more fully reflect what we know and value. We can encircle what we know about learning, embody what we value about wisdom, comprise an ecology of learning. We can become better at creating what we intend for ourselves and for our students. If I am aiming to create a classroom where kids are eager to be, where they hate to leave, where I have to finally whisk them out the door, what would I do? If I want to build a community of learners, a space kids would sometimes find more
interesting than the playground, or the basketball court, or the street, how would I proceed? What would it look like? How would it be designed? What would its boundaries and its possibilities be?

A child running into my preschool classroom would see a huge collection of wooden blocks organized in a large, fenced loft space accessible up a ladder through a small hole, or along a stairway in the corner. She would be invited to build. Under the loft she would discover a dress-up area stocked with materials and “prop boxes”—milk cartons where children pull out specific items to create a make-believe hospital, pizza restaurant, shoe store, bakery, fire house, and so on. The dress-up area would feel cozy and home-like, hidden and impenetrable; a place to explore and experiment. If she wanted to work in another area, she could find paints, clay, water, sand, and art materials set up and available in a corner near the sinks. She could use something from the large collage table on wheels in one corner—a series of bins containing bits of cloth, shells, buttons, bottle caps, and corks, with small trays for getting what is needed and transporting it to the tables. Other youngsters would likely be involved with games, table blocks, dominoes, checkers, chess, and manipulative materials taken from the open cubbies close to the table and within easy reach. I want this space to say, “explore!”, “experiment!”

In a classroom for older kids, I arrange three computers in one corner next to a large working loom where weaving is regularly going on; pin-hole cameras share a shelf with home video equipment. The walls are decorated with images of women in non-traditional roles, children in interesting or unique situations, African-American and Third World people engaged in productive work or interesting play. A large corner defined by a big couch, easy chairs, and a patch of carpet serves as a library where youngsters can find a range of reference books, as well as a good collection of children’s literature. We have a convection oven, a small refrigerator, and a hot plate on one counter for regular snack-making and other cooking projects. On the chalkboard, I have copied a series of questions that are becoming focal for this group: How do we know what we know? What is the evidence? How has it changed over time? How does it connect to other things? What difference does it make? The questions are surrounded by a thick chalk boarder with the word “SAVE” printed next to it. I want the messages to be about respect, curiosity, and critical, reflective habits of mind.

In a classroom in the detention center, we play classical music tapes on the boom box during work time, and then allow the kids to put on rap during breaks. We have a set of weights in an ante-room so the students can lift—something they love doing—during choice time, and we also have clay and a potter’s wheel, a small kiln, and lots of art supplies and tools. Student projects dominate the window sills and countertops. All students have a box of books that they take to a classroom down the hall when they become “reading buddies” to a group of “shorties.” Also in the box is a list of literacy activities to do with the younger kids, and forms to evaluate the reading progress of the buddy, as well as their own work as mentors. I want this room to call out to students’ creativity, adolescent energy, social responsibility, and goodness.

In my classrooms, from preschool to graduate school, the work of students always adorns the walls. Stories and essays, charts and surveys, big projects and little projects are always in sight. In kindergarten, I cut outlines of each child’s body from butcher block paper and ask them to paint and decorate their own images before suspending them from the ceiling. I ask college students to create reflections of themselves as teachers using construction paper, paint, clay, and found materials—these, too, go on the walls. I like children’s art and I think it brings a space to life. I also like the less spontaneous, more self-conscious efforts of adult learners. In either case, students see themselves reflected in my classrooms. They see their ideas helping to shape the environment, and they see that it is my job—but not mine alone—to design the space. They see their work publicly displayed and valued. And they become more present and more visible to me and to one another through the acknowledgment of the products of their thoughts and labor.

In this one small environmental choice—the choice to display student work—I am expressing larger purposes and more overarching values: I am encouraging students to control and shape a part of their lives; I am creating a larger audience for their efforts; I am attempting to reduce the distinction between school knowledge and personal knowledge; and I am bringing their initiatives, and their personhood, into sharper focus. In this choice, I am enacting locally a range of things I believe in globally.

As a teacher, I have tried to create learning environments that suit my own larger purposes and core values. I assume, for example, that children will learn important things without a lot of well-meaning intervention. Babies will babble and eventually speak words and then sentences; they will scoot and crawl and then walk. Adults can provide
safe places for them to explore and practice; we can support their efforts—sometimes crawling alongside, often babbling back, or interpreting their babble and responding appropriately, and always delighting in their accomplishments. While practically all children make these giant leaps and discoveries, we treat each one as important in its own right, unique and amazing. We don’t say, “Sure, sure, everyone can walk and talk. I’ve seen it all before. Big deal.” We don’t bring in “learning specialists” to develop a curriculum unit, behavioral objectives, a scope and sequence chart, and a bunch of lesson plans (although there is, amazingly, pressure in this direction). In short, we don’t do to learning to walk or to talk what we have already done to learning to read—and if we ever do, we will likely create as many non-speakers as we have non-readers.

When each of our children learned to walk, talk, swim, ride a bike, read, or add, it was the one and only first time he would ever learn those things. The event demanded our honor and awe. And that awe was easy for us, because we knew that the learning, the effort, and the accomplishment was theirs. We had avoided—knowing that it would be irrelevant—lectures on principles of gyroscopes or the biology of fish. We supported and pushed, held on and let go, practiced swimming until we were water-logged, or bicycling until our backs ached. We provided the environment for learning and the invitation to learn. But it was their choice, their action, and their courage that resulted in the thing learned.

All real learning requires activity on some level. When our son Malik began to speak, his first word was “ball.” He loved running across the kitchen floor chasing tennis balls or ping pong balls or marbles: “Ball! Ball! Ball!”

When he was three, he began to hit a whiffle ball outside with a little plastic bat. In the city, he would play wall ball for hours on end; when we visited the country, he would stand in the yard, self-pitching, and whack the ball over the house. He’d let out a whoop whenever he “roofed it.”

Malik was completely satisfied to play ball—with friends or brothers when that could be arranged, or all by himself if that was necessary. There was something inherent in playing ball that held him.

As he grew and his skills developed, he learned more and more about baseball. He began to collect baseball cards and soon had a world-class collection that he would sort and re-sort in seemingly end-

less new organizational schemes. He memorized batting averages and he learned the lore and mythology of the game. He listened to games on the radio, went to the field when possible, and could recount heroic moments. He longed to play little league.

When he was in preschool, he asked José Vega, an assistant teacher, to play ball with him. José pitched a couple of balls and Malik “roofed” each one. Impressed, José began to pitch to Malik every day, and they developed a deep, satisfying friendship that centered around the game and continued for several years. When Malik was finally old enough to play in an organized league, his reputation was found to match his skills. The scouting report noted: “good speed, coordination, power to all fields, serious.”

The point of all this is that learning requires assent and action. Learning requires practice, correction, self-correction. Learning is sometimes hard work, but if that work ties in with a sense of purpose, it can be deeply satisfying.

I reject the idea that learning is passive, that the teacher is the “one who knows,” and the students the “ones who don’t know.” My classroom, then, never looks like a mini-lecture hall, with an imposing teacher’s desk in front and rows of students facing forward. In my room, I use the same desk—a table, really—that students use, and the “teacher’s desk,” a hefty oak job, is pushed to one corner where it serves as storage area and work space.

I want to build spaces that are laboratories for discovery and surprise. In an early childhood classroom of mine, this meant having a large, open area for block building and an ample set of wooden unit-blocks. The block area was surrounded by materials that suggested dramatic play with blocks—little people, animals, signs. The block shelves were adorned with magazine pictures of skyscrapers, shantytowns, and row houses, and the walls were covered with photographs of block projects gone by.

In this classroom, I made several easels, and there were canisters of red, yellow, and blue paint available. Paper was stacked nearby so that children could take a piece and snap it easily into place. There was a convenient drying rack, and children’s paintings hung around the painting area.

Some educators would say that blocks and painting are for preschoolers, that they are fine for play but that by kindergarten or first grade, they must make way for “real work,” meaning some form of skill and drill. Perhaps these teachers have never explored the materials adequately enough to understand the potential and power in paint and blocks, or have never seen the astonishment on the face of a six-
year-old who invents the wheel for his truck, a seven-year-old who figures out how to get cars up on her massive, two-tiered bridge, or an eight-year-old who recreates Central Park and essentially retraces the landscape architect’s dilemmas regarding multiple and contradictory use. Perhaps they have never witnessed the discovery of purple—a discovery that is as common as mud when children play at the easel in this type of environment, and yet dazzling in its particulars every time.

Eleanor Duckworth (1987), an amazing teacher and an intrepid investigator of children’s learning, argues that the essence of cognitive development at any age is “the having of wonderful ideas” (p. 1). She has in mind the importance of discovery and surprise in all intellectual growth. For Duckworth, the discovery of purple is not trivial but profound: It provides the basis, in an amazing and memorable encounter, for constructing deep knowledge about primary and secondary colors. Along with the color purple comes confidence, self-esteem, curiosity, and a sense that knowledge is open-ended, and that knowing is active. The learner feels strengthened, energized, powerful in the world, and the lesson is deeply embedded in his or her consciousness. It is more efficient, perhaps, to teach primary and secondary colors using a work sheet and a sequence of lessons delivered by the teacher. The problem is that the collateral lessons in this more anemic approach include a sense that knowledge is finite and knowing passive, that teachers “know” and students “don’t know,” that somehow the important stuff will all be brought to you in order and on time—absolutely disastrous lessons if curious and critical dispositions of mind is a goal.

In classrooms for older children, blocks give way to other materials and activities but the challenge remains the same: to create laboratories for discovery and surprise, spaces where children can be active and experimental in following their own compelling goals, places where knowledge opens into future knowledge. Children in all classrooms need a project (or several projects) to pursue during some part of each day. Projects can integrate and give meaning to other aspects of school and the curriculum; projects can engage and focus children’s energy; projects can be phenomenally economical, doing double duty, triple duty, quadruple duty in fulfilling linear mandates and impoverished guidelines. In a classroom for ten-year-olds, where block building was a recent memory, I worked with children to build a space station out of Leggos, and later a city out of balsa wood and glue. When the problem of bridging a highway and then a river presented itself, I issued a challenge: Using toothpicks, glue, and twine, small groups constructed the strongest possible bridges of a given height (‘This boat must fit under the bridge.’), and established space (‘And the bridge has to connect this street to that shore.’). Once the bridges were designed and built, and the process recorded in diagrams, written descriptions, and on film, the bridges were tested for maximum strength by adding small weights to them until each collapsed. Along the way, there was a lot of hypothesizing, predicting, observing, drafting, speculating, hilarity, and open-ended discussion. There were journeys to nearby bridges, and bridge photographs clipped from newspapers and magazines. Trips to the library, research, sketches, and architectural investigation followed. There was ongoing talk of bridge safety and bridge repair, suspension bridges, and trestles and viaducts. We read about the history of bridges, bridges in art, Three Billy Goats Gruff, The Bridge Over the River Kwai, For Whom the Bell Tolls, and more. Artfully done, bridges (like most anything) can open up the whole world, and they can never be completely finished. I suggested a culminating project—“Let’s build a bridge we can actually walk across from the chess boards to the computer area, constructed with two-by-fours, one-by-twins, nails, and clothesline”—but I never suggested that we had “covered” bridges. No such thing. If you keep going, you can get a Ph.D. in bridges—bridge design, bridge engineering, bridge history.

In a classroom for twelve-year-olds, we were challenged one winter morning by the sight of a snowy owl nesting near a Chicago steel plant, far south of what one would imagine its territory to be, and an inappropriate urban space for such a mythic creature. A project emerged: We wanted to figure out where it came from, how it got there, and how it was living. We searched for owl pellets (yuck), interviewed naturalists (wow), headed back to the library. We put out a simple newsletter for the school called “The Snowy Owl Investigator.” We pulled out a sextant and star charts to pursue navigation, and we mapped all of North America in search of its path here and its way home.

In all of this, the goal was to make the classroom environment a learning laboratory, an active workshop for discovery. I wanted to challenge youngsters to pursue their work, their interests, their knowledge. I wanted to demonstrate to them that they were capable and potentially strong in that pursuit, that knowledge was available to them and was not some fixed entity locked up in textbooks, and that learning can be exciting, potentially awesome, and deeply satisfying. I also wanted them to read, write, figure, and so on, but my larger purpose demanded that I teach reading, for example, in the service of discovery and becoming powerful; that I resist reducing mathematics
to a purely technical skill. Reading, math, science, geography, history—all of these were attended to seriously, but always in light of larger goals and purposes.

I want to build spaces where each person is visible to me and to everyone else, where students are known and understood, where they feel safe and valued. I want the context of students’ lives to provide a lot of the raw material for learning, and I want there to be an easy flow between their worlds—an interactive, porous, integrated, and relational environment for living and learning. In other words, I want their home and community lives to impact the classroom in positive and apparent ways, and I want the classroom to influence their larger arenas of living as well. I want every youngster to have a respected private space in the room, and I want everyone to find something familiar, as well as something interestingly strange there.

In my space, there must be a wide range of ways to succeed, multiple interests to pursue, a variety of possible contributions to make. This means the room is decentralized and characterized by lively work stations or interest areas, rather than by straight rows. In an early childhood classroom of mine, there was a block area, an art space, a sand and water table, a library or reading corner, shelves for manipulative materials like rods and cubes, and a dress-up or dramatic play area. Remember? In a middle-years classroom, the space shifts somewhat: The block area gives way to a wood-working space, the sand table to a diorama in construction, the math manipulatives to more sophisticated puzzles and board games, and the dress-up corner to a fantasy adventure area. In an adolescent classroom, there are other changes: a game center featuring chess, go, and backgammon; a mapping space with cartographers’ tools and surveying equipment; an architectural center; and a photography lab.

Every area, of course, serves multiple purposes. The early childhood dress-up area allows children to experience, talk through, and recreate in play important issues in their lives, but it can also be a place that is rich in written language and beginning math concepts. Teachers thoughtfully label parts of the area, and props are available (pizza boxes and pizza rounds cut into eight pieces, stethoscopes, elastic bandages) that suggest counting, organizing, correspondence, and interrelation. Similarly, the photography lab is related to visual arts, but it also intentionally involves chemistry, physics, math, and reading.

The point here is to broaden the range of skills, interests, talents, and intelligences that are stimulated and developed in this space. Rather than narrowing to the most meager, easiest-to-test strand of cognition and calling that intelligence, I want my space to say, "Intelligence is broad, open, and sparkling—whatever intelligence you bring can find a home as well as a challenge here."

My space has lots of books—lots and lots and lots of books. I want students to read a wide range of materials for a variety of purposes—for information, entertainment, adventure, knowledge, fun, wisdom, perspective, growth. I want them to see themselves in books and to see, as well, worlds that are dazzling in their diversity. I want them to find people—women as well as men, African-American and Third World people as well as whites and Europeans—acting intelligently and compassionately, solving problems, overcoming obstacles, and helping one another.

I have always had a research area where students can find dictionaries, encyclopedias, almanacs, atlases, and a wonderful, eclectic collection of weird and classic reference books—Birds of Africa, Folksongs of the Catskills, Gray's Anatomy, The Complete Book of Canoeing, A Fisherman’s Guide to Fly-Tying, and on and on. This accounts for a common refrain heard in my space: "Look it up."

I have always had a closet bursting with stuff we might need in order to extend or support our work: cloth, needles and thread, all manner of found and scrounged materials (buttons, bits of plastic, rubber tubing), magazines, newspapers, cameras, tape recorders, computer paper, yarn, wood, clay, cardboard, and more. I have a computer, a small potter’s wheel, a little loom, and a silk-screen frame. Not everything is in use all the time, of course, but day to day, year to year nothing is thrown away, either. Another common refrain: “Let’s see if we can find something in the closet for that.”

My space has always had plants to care for—big, hearty survivors as well as little seedlings we are coaxing to life—and animals to look after; fish, gerbils, turtles, a rabbit. Plants and animals can help to set a caring and responsible tone in a classroom. They can also provoke thought and questions that lead to careful observation and record-keeping—can lead a class in a hundred different useful directions if they are an integral part of the learning environment.

In my classrooms—preschool through high school—something was always cooking. Cooking is a class job, a responsibility, and so four or five people cook every day. In the beginning, we were cooking without heat—“cool cooking.” There were a lot of fruit salads, peanut butter play-dough, coconut balls, and celery boats. Later, I learned how to make an oven using a cardboard box with a tight-fitting lid, tin-foil, wire hangers, light bulbs, and sockets. Making the oven was interesting in its own right—it took days and days—and our ovens successfully baked granola, pies, and quick-baked breads. Of course,
when I got a hot plate, a toaster oven, and then a microwave, we cooked to make money for special projects, and we baked to celebrate special events. We became world-class. I didn’t want any kid graduating from my class who couldn’t bake a cake, a pie, and a loaf of bread, or make one main dish: roti, tortillas, pasta putenesca, pizza, farm tofu. Cooking is engaging for lots of children, and it is an area into which they can bring their own knowledge and skill, as well as deepen and develop their understanding. When a teacher carefully creates the time and space to cook, she can thoughtfully build in reading, math, science, history, culture, mapping, and more.

Bringing together several of my core beliefs about learning and the purposes of schooling will help me shape an even more appropriate classroom environment. For example:

- I believe that people create and construct knowledge, and that learning is an active process that requires energy and ascent. Learning involves physical and mental interaction with things and ideas, and it is most often characterized by discovery and surprise.
- I believe that human development is complex and interactive, and that it is not useful to separate physical, emotional, social, and intellectual growth. We are all whole people—cognition is entwined with affect, and my mind (and yours) is embedded in spiritual, cultural, and psychological being.
- I believe that people learn best when they are nurtured as well as challenged, when they are allowed to explore, experiment, and take risks. We learn when we feel good about ourselves and others, when we trust the environment and the people in our lives, when we are safe.
- I believe that learning is powerful when information is integrated into experiences and larger personal contexts. Discreet bits and pieces of information, random and disconnected, are not strong building blocks toward knowledge.
- I believe that culture is the frame through which all of us make sense of the world. All culture is dynamic and porous, and exploring both our collective culture and our various cultural differences can become an incredibly rich intellectual adventure at any age.

- I believe that all children can learn, and that every youngster should be afforded multiple occasions to accomplish something of value in school. The range of opportunities to experience success must be wide and not narrow.
- I believe that the purpose of school is to open doors, open worlds, and open possibilities for each person to live life fully and well. School must provide students access to all the important literacies of our place and time, and it must help them develop the dispositions of mind that will allow them to be powerful in shaping and reshaping the future. In a democracy, schools have a specific responsibility to educate for active citizenship and democratic living.
- I believe that life in school must be thought of as life itself, not simply preparation for later life. Life in school—for adults as well as for children—must be lived fully. And, again, in a democracy, school life should embody democratic (rather than say, authoritarian, autocratic, bureaucratic, or feudal) principles.
- I believe that teachers must create opportunities for learners to become more skilled, more able, more powerful. Teachers must ask themselves what is most worthwhile for people to know and experience, and what are the best ways to provide access to that knowledge and experience. Teachers must issue a compelling invitation to learn, and then become guides and mentors to learners in that immense journey.

These beliefs—these core values or basic principles—can be brought to life in thousands on thousands of ways. There is no fixed, one-to-one correspondence between a large idea or value and a specific classroom practice. I have tinkered, adjusted, struggled over big questions, and fine-tuned tiny details—and I have never been completely satisfied. The environment—like the students—is a living thing. It changes every day, every hour, and it can be unpredictable, strange, idiosyncratic. Visiting my classroom in September offers one snapshot; a return visit in November will find a very different space. This laboratory is a space of ongoing experimentation for about thirty people; it is constantly being torn down and rebuilt. There is always room for growth and improvement.

Noting, for example, that “learning is characterized by discovery and surprise” does not, in itself, tell me what to do. It is not a blueprint for action. I still need to think, explore, imagine, and finally choose a course of action from a dazzling array of possibilities. But in
that journey, I can hold this belief as a useful reference point, a lens
to make my choices clearer. In this case I can know that some of the
materials and activities and routine in my classroom should not be
entirely structured, pre-specified, or one-dimensional; some should be
open-ended and organized around the unforeseen, thereby inviting
astonishment and wonder both from the students and from me.

Mara Sapon-Shevin (1990), an exemplary teacher, argues that one
central organizing goal in our schools must be the creation of communi-
ties of care and compassion. She has in mind building classrooms
that honor learners as whole people, and teachers as moral agents.
The primary obligation of educators, she insists, is to assist in the
realization of each student’s full humanity—and this obligation may
include direct instruction, but it goes way beyond conveying any spe-
cific facts or body of information to children. It includes creating envi-
ronments that challenge and nurture the wide range of learners who
actually appear in our classrooms, and developing spaces that embody
what we take to be valuable and worthwhile. And it means structuring
opportunities for cooperation, active participation, decision-making,
and moral reflection.

Even though we long for community—for places of common vi-
sion, shared purpose, cooperative effort, and personal fulfillment
within collective commitment—we most often settle for institutions.
That is, we generally find ourselves in impersonal places characterized
by interchangeable parts, hierarchy, competition, and layers of su-
permision. Communities have problems and possibilities; schools and
universities have departments. We are too often reduced to clerks or
bureaucrats in these places, and our sense of purpose and agency is
diminished.

While this is a universal problem of modern life, it impacts teach-
ers in specifically harsh and brutal ways. Teaching, if it is to be done
well, must be built on vision and commitment; learning, if it is to
be meaningful, depends on imagination, risk-taking, intention, and
invention. Stripped of these elements, teaching is mechanical and ste-
re, and learning is the stuff of pigeons pecking for food or mice run-
ing a maze.

For Sapon-Shevin, the teacher is neither an autocrat nor a cipher,
neither lecturer nor do-nothing. The teacher establishes the bound-
aries of safety, trust, truth-telling, and fidelity. She is focused on the
persons before her—whole persons with bodies, minds, feelings, and
spirits—and she resists thinking of teaching in terms of test scores or
control. She invites youngsters to enter as whole people and to bring
their skills, interests, experiences, and dreams into this collective space,
and then to shape and reshape it in their own images. She will be fully
present too: Her passions—singing, quilting, hiking, dancing—will
be well represented. Now she is set and the drama can begin—the
next step is building bridges from the known to the not-yet-known.