



deonna smith

rooted

in



joy

creating a
classroom
culture of
equity,
belonging,
and care

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Rooted in Joy

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**CREATING A CLASSROOM CULTURE OF EQUITY,
BELONGING, AND CARE**

Deonna Smith

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
Published simultaneously in Canada.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Smith, Deonna, author.

Title: Rooted in joy : creating a classroom culture of equity, belonging, and care / Deonna Smith.

Description: First edition. | Hoboken, New Jersey ; San Francisco : John Wiley & Sons, Inc. : Jossey-Bass Publishing, [2023] | Includes index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023010373 (print) | LCCN 2023010374 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119898030 (paperback) | ISBN 9781119898047 (adobe pdf) | ISBN 9781119898054 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Educational equalization—United States. | Anti-racism—United States. | Classroom environment—United States. | Teaching—Social aspects—United States. | Teacher-student relationships.

Classification: LCC LC213.2 .S63 2023 (print) | LCC LC213.2 (ebook) | DDC 371.102/4—dc23/eng/20230503

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023010373>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023010374>

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover images: Flowers: © komunitestock/Getty Images

Paper Texture: © Silmairel/Getty Images

This book is dedicated to every teacher who still believes in joy.

*To my mother, my biggest cheerleader, my amazing husband, and the rest of my
incredibly supportive family.*

*A special thank you to my support systems at school. The colleagues who have supported
me along the way, my mentors, and the people who believed in me and this book.*

*Most important, this book is for all my students—all the little humans who touched my
life. You taught me more than they'll ever know. I love you.*

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Rooted in Joy

INTRODUCTION

Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—James Baldwin

I'm hoping that this is one of those great books that you pick up over and over again. There are many books in my library that I visit when I want to laugh, when I need some inspiration, or when I want to feel I'm not alone. I've tried to include a little bit of all that in this text.

This book needs a spot on your shelf where you can pull it out from time to time and revisit the ideas and concepts. You can pick it up and put it down again as you navigate the ups and downs of the classroom. The reality of teaching is that we don't often get time to invest in ourselves and our craft, but I hope you will take the time to work through this text and reflect on the content and its messages.

I've poured myself into this book. I've included many stories about my time as a teacher—having changed the names of others, of course—because I want you as the reader to know that I see us as accompanying each other on this journey. I've studied anti-racism and teaching for many years, but that doesn't mean that I'm the ultimate authority and expert. I'm learning with you. I wanted to create something that would resonate with teachers and administrators, something that they could see themselves and their students in. I intentionally mix experience with anecdotes, theory, and frameworks. Many of the ideas that I talk about in this book warrant some extra time for study and consideration. Because I couldn't fit everything that I wanted into

this text, I instead tried to synthesize and chunk everything so it's clear what you need to know to move forward.

And though this book is primarily written for teachers, it applies to everyone engaged in K–12 schooling. Teachers can't do it alone. We need school and district leaders who are also committed to belonging, care, and joy. In fact, equity work is even more impactful when it's taken on school-wide. So, if you're, say, a school administrator, the mindsets that are detailed here are just as important for you as a leader, and the strategies that you'll find here can be shared with your teachers. Or, if you're a parent or caregiver, this book can give you insight into how you can center joy, belonging, and care at home.

When you visit the following pages, I invite you to do so with an open mind and heart. I invite you to think about the students in your sphere and reflect on your interactions; I'm guessing you'll read something that will remind you of a particular student or incident. And although you might find yourself reflecting on mistakes, I also hope you'll find at least one story that affirms what you're already doing.

As you proceed, take note of the strategies that might transform your classroom(s)—and reject the ones that don't apply to your situation. But more importantly, stay grounded and open minded. Ask yourself what brought you to this profession? What did you hope to accomplish? What expertise do you already bring to the classroom? What more do you need to know?

The truth is, education has perpetuated harm in this country. Our schools and systems have been used against our students. Halls and classrooms have problematized students and made them feel unwelcome. Too many kids struggle through classrooms and leave hating school and hating learning. I'm saddened but not shocked when I hear someone say that they "hated" school. How we experience school affects the rest of our life. Not enough teachers are grappling with this reality. However, I know there are thousands who want to fight for equity, but they might not know how. I hope this book will find its way into the hands of those who really need it. Those who are open to building a healthy and safe classroom ecosystem where all their students can thrive.

But before we dig in, let's get a few questions out of the way.

Why do we need to talk about things like "equity" and "anti-racism"?

Certainly with all the negative press and all the confusion, contention, and flat-out fake news about critical race theory (CRT), anti-racism, and cultural responsiveness, specifically addressing anti-racism and equity could be controversial. So why call it by name?

Because until we face the fact that racism and other systems of oppression have affected education, we can't undo that impact. Unless we are honest about the fact that our educational

system was designed to produce inequitable outcomes, we will never experience equity. For example, consider the following.

In Florida, a proposed Advanced Placement course in African American studies was banned because it “lacks educational value” (Mazzei & Hartocollis, 2023).

In 2021, the Texas state senate voted to end the requirement that women’s suffrage and civil rights be included in social studies curriculum. The move means that Texas students are no longer required to learn about Susan B. Anthony, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or Cesar Chavez—to name just a few (Williams, 2022).

Across the nation, an estimated 2,523 books were banned in schools. Of these, 41% included LGBTQ+ characters or protagonists, 40% included people of color, and more than 30% dealt with issues of racism, activism, and race (Martin, 2022).

From school boards to political debates, the “anti-CRT” movement has been a highly debated topic. In some states, like Iowa and Colorado, districts ask teachers to post all their lesson plans online for approval. Other states have laws that give parents the right to approve or reject lesson plans. The Stop W.O.K.E. Act in Florida—“Wrong to Our Kids and Employees”—heavily regulates how teachers are allowed to even talk about race in their classrooms (Waxman, 2022).

I’ve even heard of school boards banning anything having to do with the words *diversity*, *equity*, or even *social-emotional health*. This disturbing wave has been called many things, from whitewashing history to fascism.

And it’s certainly affecting our classroom cultures.

There are many “-isms” that we face in our classrooms, both interpersonally and institutionally. We have to fight classism, sexism, xenophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism . . . the list goes on. This book seeks to embrace all intersections of identity, but will specifically focus on race and culture. And yet, the practices can be used to reduce all kinds of inequity in the classroom—to actively work toward an inclusive classroom that honors the diversity of all students.

Is all this just good teaching?

Yes! It is absolutely important that we specifically address the way that racism has affected our classrooms, but you’ll notice that many of the strategies in this book are just good teaching practices that will help *all* students thrive.

There will of course be practices, suggestions, and frameworks presented that seek to specifically dismantle the legacy of racism in education. Some teachers may face scrutiny for pursuing asset-based or other equity work. Ideally, teachers wouldn’t be persecuted for wanting the best for their students. In fact, equity work is even more impactful when done on a school-wide or district-wide scale. The reality is, in many states and districts this work has become vilified. But, even if you work in an “anti-CRT” state, that does *not* mean that you can’t build a joyful,

inclusive, and asset-based classroom ecosystem. Ultimately, you're seeking to improve outcomes for yourself *and* your students—you just might need to be strategic about your messaging.

We do need activists and allies who are ready and willing to push back against these harmful laws and book bans. Many teachers across the country are experiencing burnout and/or “compassion fatigue” and don't have the bandwidth to organize against these laws. But, ultimately, we need teachers and their allies to organize for change.

There are so many terms: Black, Brown, BIPOC, and so on. What do they all mean?

Labels and words matter. In this book, I sought to be intentional about word choice when discussing different groups. First, *Black* is capitalized because it refers to a collective history, culture, and racial group. In most contexts I'm talking about Black American students. You'll notice that the term *white* isn't capitalized. Many major publications, such as the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, don't capitalize *white*. When *white* is capitalized, it's typically associated with white supremacy groups and white nationalists. In an effort to delegitimize those organizations, I am sticking with the lowercase *w* for this book.

But what about the term *Brown*? You've probably heard the phrase *Black and Brown*. So whom does that include? According to Chow (2017), there is no set definition of *Brown*. Many people in the South Asian community refer to themselves as *Brown*. Some Indigenous communities, Southeast Asian, and Latinx communities identify as *Brown*. There does appear to be some dissension in regards to whether East Asian folks are *Brown* (Chow, 2017). But there is no definitive answer. In this book, *Black and Brown* refers to *non-white* people in the United States, a synonym for *people of color*. (The term *BIPOC* stands for Black, Indigenous, [or] people of color.)

It is important at times to be very specific. For example, some data and references will refer specifically to Black students or Indigenous students because, although there is a need for collective solidarity and a coalition between Black and Brown folks, we have different experiences in the US education system. This book will always strive to use the most specific and accepted term by the group referenced. Black and Brown people are not a monolith, and neither are individual ethnic or cultural groups. There might be terms used in this book that do not suit all members, but the intention is never to minimize, reduce, or offend—it is, rather, to find the most commonly agreed-on and updated term.

No doubt in the years to come a new, better, or more appropriate term will arise, and that's good. Language is fluid, and we are constantly in the process of decolonizing and liberating our minds and the ways that we refer to and understand ourselves.

How do things like anti-racism and other equity work interact with other strategies that I'm already using like Class Dojo, Classroom Economy, or Dean's List?

Centering equity and anti-racism is not a strategy. It's an approach and a pedagogical stance. It's what you do in the classroom, but it's also who you are. Being an asset-based teacher doesn't mean that you can only use strategies that are labeled as asset-based. Rather, it means that you operate with a few understandings, such as the following:

- What we do in the classroom matters; in the small interactions and choices that we make we can either enforce or dismantle systems of oppression.
- Systemic racism is pervasive in education, both on a grand scale, like school funding, but also on a small scale, like who gets expelled versus who gets a second chance.
- You'll have to commit to this work holistically. It's not a switch that you can turn on and off but rather a mindset that you need to adopt. Let it grow with you and help you be a better and more intentional educator.

Teachers develop toolboxes and strategies to cultivate classroom cultures and respond to student needs. These come from many places: our credentialing programs, professional development, or the other teachers. When you adopt an equity mindset and approach, you may very well still use many of those tools.

You might find that some of your tools and strategies no longer serve you and your students. There is no checklist that says what's asset-based, equitable, or not. The more you learn, the more you'll be able to see what systems, practices, and tricks move you closer toward an equitable classroom—and which ones move you further away from it.

Many practices in our classroom are informed by carceral practices and ways of thinking. Because of this, many common practices that teachers employ are not equitable, and end up perpetuating -isms like racism or sexism.

When you start to build a healthy classroom ecosystem, you'll want to critically interrogate those harmful practices and adopt new ones that are centered on belonging and care.

Is anti-racism for Black and Brown folks, white folks, or both?

Black and Brown folks have personal experience with racism, but that doesn't mean that we—I'm using *we* because I'm including myself—don't need to understand asset-based and equity work. Racism isn't just about individual actions and attitudes, so Black and Brown people can unintentionally perpetuate harm and racism simply by reinforcing the systems around them. That's because the status quo—what's normal and accepted—is deeply rooted in racism.

White folks need to be deeply engaged in asset-based and equity work, and not just because they want to “help.” It is imperative that white folks recognize that in a society where racism

thrives we are all harmed. As long as there is one system of oppression, others thrive and build on each other. Our collective liberation must be the goal.

Racism harms everyone. In the classroom, policies that are rooted in inequity or racism harm all students, even white ones. Let's say all your students are white; maybe you're thinking that perhaps that means you don't need to engage in this work. But remember: students learn about how to "be" in school. They receive messages about right and wrong, society, relationships, and just about being human in general. Because your students, regardless of their race, will have to learn to navigate racism and all the other -isms in this world, they need to start learning as soon as possible, and that includes white students.

This book is for Black, Brown and white teachers. All teachers. You might notice that there is quite a bit of advice and time spent on strategies that are more geared toward white teachers. This is because in the United States there are simply more white teachers; according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2020), almost 80% of teachers are white. But the strategies and tips in this book are applicable to everyone.

Will this book help me master behavior and classroom management?

Spoiler alert: a huge component of behavior management is letting go of the idea that all behavior needs to be "managed." This framing is problematic, and I'll discuss it in Chapter 3. It is not the intention of this book to make you a manager. A successful teacher is not one who goes about the classroom managing and responding to every behavior that they don't like or that doesn't align with a cookie-cutter view of what classrooms could look like.

The trouble is that that's what many of us understand classroom culture as being: management—so we talk about "classroom management." The goal, however, is to move away from this thinking and start talking about things like culture, belonging, and joy. This book will help you along your journey of evolving out of that mindset. If you want to be asset-based and equitable, and you want to create a culture of inclusion in the classroom, this book will help you do just that. But it's not an easy fix. It'll be work, and it'll require some mindset shifts. But it is possible.

Before we jump in, just a few disclaimers.

You'll have to give something up. If you want something to change, you'll have to do something different. When you start to see the classroom and the world differently, and start to view the world with an equity lens, your mindset will change and so will your practices. If the classroom ecosystem is to be truly rooted in joy, any practices, policies, and even your own

behaviors that don't facilitate joyful, caring, and inclusive communities will need to be retired. Maybe it's a reward system that you've always used, or a book you've always taught. Recently many teachers have moved away from Dr. Seuss because of his long and well-documented history of racism. You might have very fond memories of using Dr. Seuss or even reading him as a child—you can honor those memories *and* let your teaching practice evolve at the same time. It might not be easy, but it's so very worth it. Know that it's okay to do things differently than you always have.

No one book can solve the entire education crisis. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in many ways is still an ongoing crisis, an unprecedented wave of truly extreme student behavior has swept through classrooms, putting both teachers and students in danger. This book is in no way suggesting that teachers can single-handedly eradicate or are responsible for these issues. This book is about daily challenges in classroom culture and student behavior. We will certainly explore de-escalation strategies, but there are some behaviors that are too severe for teachers to face alone.

The practices and approaches in this book work best when coupled with school leaders who are committed to both students and teachers. Additionally, these strategies will be even more meaningful in districts that sufficiently fund schools so they have all the resources they need. Policies that limit teachers' ability to meet the needs of their students undermine the frameworks in this book.

Even if you don't feel supported by your school leader or your district, you can still find great value in this text. The practices in this book are designed to help you create a flourishing classroom ecosystem, despite the significant system-wide challenges educators are facing.

So here's where we're headed. In Chapter 1 I'll start with talking about who we are, and what we bring to the classroom as individuals. Then, in Chapter 2, I'll talk all about asset pedagogies and how to develop an asset-based lens.

Chapter 3 is hefty. There are all sorts of ways that we need to shift our thinking if we're going to be able to effect real change. So I've broken them all down into bite-size portions and grouped them by themes. I encourage you to take your time with them; don't overwhelm yourself with too much at once.

Chapter 4 is where we start building a healthy ecosystem. We'll talk about laying the foundation for the classroom culture. Then Chapter 5 is all about maintenance—how to keep your healthy classroom ecosystem thriving.