

PREFACE

This book is written for any educator who has ever looked out across your classroom, school, or district and had a nagging feeling something's gone missing. Maybe it was once there, long ago, but has since been buried under an avalanche of unfunded mandates, unrelenting pressures, and unintended consequences of policies landing on the doorstep of your school or classroom from far off places. Or maybe you've *never* really felt it at all, even though it's what drew you to the profession in the first place.

Nonetheless, you have a hunch that what's missing could be restored in our schools—likely because you've seen it happening everywhere *outside of school*—when children run excitedly across a museum to marvel at an exhibit, search for tadpoles in a summertime creek, take something apart to see how it works, or listen in rapt attention when grandparents share stories from a distant homeland or days gone by. In those moments, you've seen learning in its purest, deepest, and most powerful form—when kids experience the joy of wondering and wandering, chasing horizons, making discoveries, expanding their minds, solving puzzles, and getting to the bottom of mysteries. In a word, when they're *curious*.

In many ways, this book reflects my own long journey that began years ago when, as a teacher, I had a similar nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right in my classroom. I'd hope to inspire passion for learning among my students (picturing myself like Robin Williams standing on a desk in *Dead Poet's Society*, intoning, "Captain, my Captain!"). But when I looked around, I couldn't shake the feeling that my students were just checking boxes, jumping through hoops, and scoring points for a grade so they could move onto the next class and do it all over again.

At first, I wasn't sure exactly what was wrong or what to do about it. All I knew was I couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss in our education system. So I kept exploring and poking around for the answer—something I've had the unusual luxury of doing while spending two decades working at and eventually being honored to serve as the leader of McREL International, a nonprofit organization that for 50-plus years has helped educators translate research into solutions for their most pressing problems of practice.

This book reflects many treasures I've accumulated along the way—insights gleaned from hundreds of scientific studies and, more importantly, from real-life experiences of educators like you, who asked and found answers to their questions about how to restore the joy of learning to their schools and classrooms. That said, it doesn't offer a simplistic, cookie-cutter recipe for creating a curious school. That's because there is no such recipe. While curious schools share many similar elements and often follow similar guiding principles, as you'll see, they each experience their own journeys of exploration and discovery and thus seldom arrive at exactly the same spot.

So what you'll find in these pages is less of a checklist and more of a travel guide for your journey toward curiosity—one that invites you to explore and make your own discoveries. The first waypoint of this journey, captured in Part I of this book, unpacks the many facets of curiosity and ways we and our students demonstrate curiosity. It also explores what research and brain science tell us about the powerful effects of curiosity on learning and long-term memory.

In Part II, we'll explore together how current approaches to teaching often quash curiosity in the classroom and uncover some important principles for creating classrooms that unleash student curiosity. You'll also receive the first of many tools this book offers to provide you with a tool kit of powerful and practical strategies for building a curious school.

Part III is based on the simple idea that if we want students to experience curiosity, we must also let *teachers* experience curiosity and the joy of discovery in their own professional learning. It provides important questions for leaders to ask as well as tools for creating school cultures that foster curiosity among students and adults.

Part IV shows how a complex form of curiosity—*interpersonal* curiosity—supports social-emotional learning, including greater compassion, better relationships, and stronger social bonds. It provides tools for helping students connect with one another and develop greater curiosity about other people’s experiences and perspectives.

The last stop in our journey, Part V, describes what is arguably the most important correlate of curiosity: its link to well-being and happiness, often because curiosity can be a powerful consort to help students navigate emotional crises. We’ll discover together how reflective curiosity can help students reexamine their own negative thoughts and develop personal formulas for happiness. As with the previous sections, it offers tools for helping students use curiosity to support their well-being.

Certainly, this isn’t the first or only book written about curiosity. A plethora of researchers, academics, and journalists have crafted well-written books that offer important, compelling insights about curiosity. However, many of these books are written for a broad audience and thus offer few specific connections to classrooms and schools. This book, on the other hand, is **written for you and your professional learning community**, helping you learn together about the power of curiosity for students and providing you with practical strategies and tools to unleash curiosity in classrooms. This book is also unique in that it **aims to help entire school teams unleash curiosity across your whole school**, so all students can benefit from curiosity.

Perhaps, most importantly, this book draws upon McREL’s deep knowledge of evidence-based practices of educators and, in so doing, **integrates brain-based research on the power of curiosity with research on effective schools and instruction** to help you and your colleagues create positive school cultures and classrooms that support deep, joyful learning. It also builds on an earlier McREL book, *Out of Curiosity*, by incorporating more practical tools and guidance for educators and a deeper discussion of the connections between curiosity and social-emotional learning.

Ultimately, while the book aims to be both interesting and practical, it aims to do something larger—something that goes beyond just tweaking lessons to make them a bit more interesting or adorning school hallways with inspirational posters about curiosity. It aims

to help you put words and ideas to that nagging feeling you've had that something has gone wrong with our approach to teaching and learning. It aims to help all of us start a movement—coming as educators and school communities to push back against the forces that for too long have quashed our students' curiosity and joy of learning, so together, we can help students (and teachers) experience the joy of curiosity-fueled learning.

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