

3

Creating the Village Building Relationships That Support Children



Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan

There is an African proverb that says it takes a village to raise a child. The challenge is, what does it take to create a village? In a real village, every grown-up has a valued, understood role in the education, health, welfare, growth, and development of the children who live there. Every grown-up knows this and every child takes it for granted. In early childhood care and education, we are still working to create that village for children—working on truly understanding and valuing each of our roles in raising children in the United States. Creating the village in early childhood care and education happens when you create processes, interactions, and activities that help turn a group of people into a team that is effective and efficient at meeting the needs of the children and families you serve.

You can create that village by creating new relationships between children, parents or guardians, other family members, teachers, and the community. In fact, we each help create a village everywhere we go; however, we may not be giving the process intentional thought. Everywhere we go, we bring our most important values, perspectives, communication styles, interpersonal interactions, and a host of other factors that serve as the foundation for how we want our village to function. Knowing what you want your village to look like is an important first step. The reality, however, is that we come together with others, so we have to carefully blend individual preferences, desires, values, and so on to create a cohesive environment for

children. Each of us needs to know what we bring to and want for the village, *and* we need to understand how our differences can work together.

Creating Your Village

Not all villages are alike, and not everyone envisions the same thing when they picture their villages. Imagine your perfect village, the one you would create if you were in charge. How big is it?

Some prefer small, intimate communities where everyone knows everyone else. Deep relationships can be formed because there are fewer people to get to know. There may be less diversity, but there may be more shared values and goals. The pace of life may be slower, with time to stop and smell the roses or stop and speak with friends and neighbors. It may not be very efficient, but it is very inclusive. For others, the village may look more like a city with lots of people who may not even meet one another, let alone know one another. In a large village, it is more likely that the population will be diverse in many ways, including how key values are prioritized. There may be fewer shared values, but with different values taking center stage, there may be more opportunities for creative problem solving and innovation. The pace in a larger village may be quite fast with everyone working more independently, which may be less inclusive but more efficient. Then there is the village that is neither small nor large. Those who like a medium-size village are looking for a mix. They want to build deep relationships with a select number while leaving open the possibility of meeting new people or going someplace where no one knows them. They want to move goals and objectives forward with a community of like-minded people while leaving open the possibility of meeting others from different cultures who have new ideas, new perspectives, and new solutions. This village may not be as diverse as the large village, but it won't be as homogenous as the small village. There may be more opportunities for people to change the pace of their lives—going back and forth between slower and faster.

The size of your village will deeply influence how the people in it interact with one another, so it is helpful to understand why you prefer large or small or somewhere in between. My own preference is somewhere in between. I love lots of diversity—many races, cultures, languages, religions, values, viewpoints, you name it. Within all that diversity, however, I like having a community of family, friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who share a common vision or mission in life. For me, the very large village seems exciting and adventurous and ever-changing, but I could only go there for vacations. Living there would leave me feeling like I'm trying to accomplish

my life mission on my own. The smaller, more intimate village would leave me feeling stifled or stuck—like I couldn't really do something daring or take risks, whether that be a daring, risky action or a daring and risky thought or perspective.

Where is your perfect village located? Is it surrounded by forests and trees? Is it out on the plains? Or are there mountains and hills? Is it surrounded by streams, lakes, and rivers? Is it tropical and lush, or do you prefer the quiet serenity of the desert? I always have a difficult time answering this question for myself because I like many different kinds of locations as long as there are only a few days where there might be extreme heat or extreme cold. I love green, so there would have to be lots of trees, grass, and other plant life. I also love water, so large bodies of it would have to be nearby. Mountains feel majestic to me, but they could be far out in the distance. I don't mind rain, but I couldn't live in a rain forest or somewhere too tropical. Of course, I just described Seattle, which happens to be where I live. This says a lot about me because I'm always striving for balance and trying to reduce extremes. In my role as a leader, I tend to create a village that is alive and organic. I understand, though, that this is possible because there are times when the interactions of those who live in my village look more like rainy, cloudy days. There will be a few times when our relationships might be extremely cold or extremely hot, but for the most part, my village will use these moments as opportunities to achieve balance.

Who gets to live in your village? Who doesn't? Often, when I ask people this question, someone will say everyone gets to live in her village. Then I'll ask if mean people get to live there, or people who don't like children, or people who are selfish and self-centered, or people who lie, cheat, and steal. If everyone gets to live in your village, you'll have to really think about how to treat people you may not like. Most people know when they are not liked, when they are not welcome. On the other hand, most people do not want to make a list of people who can't live in their village—at least not a public list. Secretly, we all have at least a mental list of those with whom we prefer not to associate or with whom we just interact. In my case, I would not be happy if people who lie, cheat, steal, or who harm children try to live in my village. This does not mean that if you tell a lie you'll be exiled, but a generally dishonest person would not be welcome. If you happen to steal a loaf of bread to feed your child, I can be forgiving, but if you steal candy from a baby, you have to leave. Again, it is important for me to know this about myself because this is the environment I'm most likely creating everywhere I go, whether I'm aware of it or not.

How are decisions in the village made? Who makes them? There are lots of ways to make decisions. They can be made by one person, a team of

people, or the whole group. Decision making can be based on fact, on priority values, on emotions, or even on the amount of time available to decide. For some, a majority rule is preferred because it is the most efficient way to go. For others, consensus is preferred as the most inclusive way. And, again, there are those who are most comfortable with something in between. I've often spoken with people who claim to want a very inclusive, collaborative, consensual form of decision making in their village—but they want inclusivity to be more efficient. That's a very difficult balance to achieve. Others prefer efficiency but often find that decisions made in a vacuum or by a small group of people leave the implementation vulnerable because those responsible for that implementation were not included in the decision-making process.

I once copresented a workshop on team building. Part of the workshop focused on decision making and the role of inclusion and efficiency. The workshop participants were primarily of African and Asian descent who were challenged by their attempts to create a culturally cohesive environment for the children in their preschools. My copresenter was a Burmese woman. We were a good team because she's an Asian woman who grew up in Botswana, Africa, and I'm an African American woman who grew up with a lot of Asian family members. The workshop participants were surprised to find out that we could appreciate and incorporate both the African and the Asian perspectives around team building, decision making, inclusion, and efficiency.

My copresenter's decision-making experience in Botswana was extremely inclusive. The town made major decisions at annual town hall meetings. Everyone in town was invited and everyone got to have his or her say—no matter how long it took. You could speak for one second or one hour, and everyone who wanted to was given a chance to speak. This tended to drive many of the westerners there crazy because there seemed to be a never-ending stream of input, and no one knew quite how long the meeting would last.

On the other hand, I'm quite familiar with the more Western town hall meeting where everyone has a set amount of time for input (for example, two to five minutes) and the number of people able to provide input at the meeting is limited by the end time of the meeting. This process would have seemed insincere to someone from Botswana because it would seem as if the attempt at inclusiveness was just a gesture.

Our friends, Inclusion and Efficiency, do not always play well together, but there are ways to help them get along. If you want to be as efficient as possible, be very clear that not all voices will be heard and not all input will be sought. I think what offends people most is being asked to provide input that is not really wanted. If you have a good relationship with your team and are very familiar with what they want and need, your efficient (or even

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solo) decision may be representative because you have their input received over a long period of time together. If you want to be as inclusive as possible, start early. People are also offended if everyone is expected to provide input but they have to provide it right now because of short deadlines. Although endpoints are necessary, try to provide as much time as possible to receive authentic, thoughtful input.

Are there common areas, shared spaces in the village? For some folk, their village needs lots of common and shared spaces to increase the likelihood that people will run into each other and spend time together. Of course, others will want people in their village to have opportunities for replenishing alone time or simply for more privacy. And my favorite—surprise, surprise—is the choice in the middle. The best balance of shared and private space for me is a village that resembles my favorite layout in a house. After age ten, everyone has a small bedroom, maybe just enough room for a single bed, a dresser, and a desk. The kitchen, the dining room, and the living room areas would all be shared space, and they would be large enough to accommodate the whole family plus friends and neighbors. There would be a big yard in the back with grass for lounging and rolling around and a couple of small, private spaces for outdoor getaways. In my perfect village, every family or family group would have their own living spaces, but they would not be large. They would still have all the spaces that describe my favorite house layout, but the village itself would have space large enough for village gatherings, potlucks, meetings, and other group activities.

What is the economic gap, and how would you deal with it in your village? Why and how do these gaps happen? These questions always generate lively discussions because some feel there has to be an economic gap if not everyone is pulling their weight. In other words, those who work harder have access to more financial and monetary resources than those who do not work as hard. However, not everyone has the same idea about the root of the problem and, therefore, the economic gap. Some feel that most people want to work hard but do not have equal access to opportunities that make that happen. They feel that if their village has lots of jobs so that everyone who wants to work can and if *all* jobs provide a good living wage, then most people would work and work hard. And, of course, there are those who envision villages where there is no economic gap because everyone makes the same amount of money and has free access to anything that is determined to be a basic need.

What about the academic achievement gap? Why and how did that happen? Imagine a lake with different villages on either side. In one village people feel that an academic achievement gap is an inevitable consequence of the fact that some are smarter than others and some try harder than

others. On the other side of the lake is a village where people think that all children can achieve at high levels if they all have access to excellent schools, excellent teachers, and excellent curricula. Naturally, there is an island in the middle of the lake, and I'll take you there to visit momentarily. There are as many schools of thought around intelligence and academic achievement as there are educational leaders, philosophers, researchers, and advocates. There are just as many schools of thought as to why not everyone excels academically in our country. Intelligence and academic achievement have been linked to a number of factors, such as race, socioeconomic status, gender, age, teacher preparation, parent involvement, culture, values, curricula, educational leadership, monetary support—you name it. As the creator of your perfect village, you need to be very familiar with your own views and beliefs about intelligence, intellectual capacity, and academic achievement. If there is an academic achievement gap in your village, you as the leader of your village should know why it exists, what caused it, and whether it is fixable. If it cannot be changed, you should know why. If it can, you should know how. If there is *not* an academic achievement gap in your village, you should know what was done to eliminate it or why it never had a chance to exist. What factors, circumstances, efforts, and so on allowed you to create a village where all children excel and have access to a great education?

Now let me take you to the island in the middle of the lake. Imagine that the people who live in the island village have decided that academic achievement is a consequence of hard work and inherent intelligence. And they have decided that it is possible to create an educational system where all children excel academically through the intentional collaboration of all the grown-ups in the village. That's my perfect village. No time is wasted arguing about who is to blame for underachievement and unequal access to an excellent education. As the leader of my island village, my role is to create a team of grown-ups who stay focused on our goals: to create the optimal learning environment based on the needs of each and every child and ensuring that all of them—yours, mine, and theirs—have equal access to it. Yes, it is hard work. Yes, we do not all start on equal footing. Yes, meeting the educational needs of each and every child takes time and energy. To me, that is what "every child is valuable" and "every child can learn" look like.

What do people outside of your village think about your village? As you envision your perfect village, you may be quite sure that it's a place where everyone wants to live. I'm always convinced that my village is ideal and that people outside my village are trying to move in. Some may have been planning to visit only for a while, but once they get there, they don't want to leave. I'm also convinced that people who are stuck in other villages are

secretly jealous of my village. I know, though, that some people are apprehensive about coming to my village. It really takes a lot of time, communication, reflection, collaboration, interaction, effort, patience, and perseverance to live there, and not everyone is sure that the outcome is worth the input. Some do not think my village is even possible, so why bother?

My village may also be a bit too extroverted for people from other villages. They think they would have to work extra hard to find time alone for self-reflection and recharging—and they would be right. For introverts to thrive in my village, I have to be intentional about making sure they are not forced to assimilate to an extroverted existence. This fits directly with my village accepting all children, too, because introversion is not something that comes on in adulthood. Many children are introverted. So, if I plan to meet the needs of all children in my village, I have to be mindful of the needs, wants, and requirements of children who are not extroverted like me. I think outsiders might also think that my village has too many gray areas. I'm not big on dichotomy: right/wrong, subjective/objective, either/or, yes/no, true/false, fact/feeling. My most common answer to most questions is "it depends" because I have a tendency to want to consider and weigh many options, answers, solutions, perspectives, and values. And I usually reserve the right to change my mind if I receive new input. I'm quite comfortable with this type of ambiguity, flux, and evolving processes, but it doesn't work for everyone. My village does make progress, accomplish goals, meet objectives, solve problems, and come to conclusions, but it takes more time and involves more people.

Your Village, Your Team

The purpose of this whole exercise is to think critically about the kinds of environments you re-create wherever you go. Your values, your interactions with others, the spaces you create and decorate, your approaches to problem solving, your preferences for decision making, your beliefs and perspectives, your values—everything you've envisioned—are all part of you and what you carry with you wherever you go. This is the village, the environment, you want, what you strive for, what you hope to achieve and accomplish. Creating the village is team building. Who lives in your village and who's on your team? Who are the other adults connected to your work? Who are the welcomed ones and who are the people you really don't want there? Keep in mind that these last questions are not always about people you like and don't like. These questions are more about who's part of the team or not—for whatever reason.

As an example, I often use a story from my daughter's preschool from many years ago. There was a cook who prepared the lunches and snacks for the children, and every day my daughter would come home and tell me what the cook had made and how she made everything just right for every child there. My daughter is not a big cheese fan (How did that happen?), and it made her feel so special that the cook would serve her the crusty outside of the mac and cheese instead of the gooey middle. I did professional development at the center for my parent volunteer hours, and the cook was never there. When I'd ask the other staff why she wasn't, they would say the cook didn't need to be there because she isn't a teacher. When I'd ask the cook herself why she never came, she would say she's just the cook, not a teacher. Yet, to my daughter (and probably to the other children as well), the cook was an equally important grown-up in the village that was her preschool. But she wasn't part of the team; she wasn't a recognized member of the village. Are there people in your village who are not part of the team because of their position? Their language? Their religion? Their age? Their education? Their gender? Whatever the reason, there may be those who decide for themselves that they are not part of the team, and there may be those who have just been invisible to you. You haven't ignored them on purpose; you've just never really interacted with them or paid attention to them.

Another factor in the team-building process is that every member of your team is bringing her or his envisioned village to the team. They are most likely doing just what you are doing: trying to re-create their perfect village. Having everyone describe their perfect village is a good way to know what kind of team each person is trying to create. Even if you are the leader, the mayor of the village, you will be a better one if you ensure that the people who live there feel represented, included, and welcomed. If every grown-up has a valued, understood role in the education, health, welfare, growth, and development of the children who live there, then leaderlike actions must come from every director, driver, teacher, assistant, parent, cook, custodian—every single adult. Your leadership task is to know what gift or strength each grown-up brings to the team. What would your village be missing, what would the children be missing if that person were not there? As a leader, you have daily opportunities to talk about your team and talk with your team members. You can be a part of recognizing that everyone is on the team and acknowledging the leadership that takes place on every level in your work setting. You have the opportunity to create the ideal village by building relationships that help children grow, thrive, and excel.



Holly Elissa Bruno

Finding Core Values and Working Principles

Thank you, Debra, for thoughtfully and thoroughly articulating questions and considerations to help us imagine a village where all children, and all community members, can grow and learn.

Five years ago, I asked colleagues around the country to write their own ground rules for such a community, and law professor colleague Art LaFrance suggested several thought-provoking ideas.

He said (quoted in Bruno 2012, 143), "Our community must

1. Have a purpose/function beyond itself.
2. Agree upon a process for inclusion, action, and dissolution before commencement.
3. Have leadership that is time limited.
4. Recognize me as leader for life, and anyone who doesn't like that should get out now!"

I love Art's final ground rule. Tongue-in-cheek as he is, Art knows power is difficult to share. Power dynamics in any village need to be clarified up front to avoid internecine and Machiavellian struggles than can shove a community through the shredder.

Art also wisely mentions a kind of village "prenup" wherein members agree before they enter into the community how they will end the community or at least terminate their involvement in the village. I find it interesting that part of the compact for a community includes envisioning the end of the community. The Sisters of Charity is an example of this. The sisters, in assuming their numbers will dwindle to extinction, have agreed upon how to invest their assets to further their charitable mission after the last sister dies. Communities often do have an ending, but that doesn't change the fact that they can be valuable while they exist. So what can we do to create a community that is supportive and effective for as long as it lasts? What makes an ideal community?

In Search of an Ideal

The creation of ideal communities, sometimes called *utopian* communities, has always fascinated me. What, if anything, endures from utopian villages

with alluring names such as Harmony (Indiana), Kaweah (California), Icaria (Illinois), Roycroft (New York), Halcyon and Fountaingrove (California), and Drop City (Kansas), or even Holy City (California) and Fruitlands and Brook Farm (Massachusetts)? What were their visions? What caused some to thrive and others to crumble? What can they teach us today about the village we would like to create to make the world better for children and families?

Whenever we come together to create a village, we bring our complexity, for better and for worse. We need practices that enforce the rules of the village, and yet those practices can become discriminatory and harmful. People with differences, especially those whose “morals” are at issue, are often not tolerated. Sometimes the very people who want to be inclusive end up enforcing exclusivity.

American history includes the rise and fall of many experimental utopian communities. These communities had varying levels of success, but their dreams continue: communities of people wanting to live together in peace, happiness, lifelong learning, and productivity. And doesn't every community grapple with human nature and our perfect imperfectness?

Vision for the Community

One of the most forward-looking, compassionate, and, in fact, spiritual visions for a village today is that of the country of Bhutan in southern Asia. Bhutan doesn't just pay attention to their gross national product, Bhutan pays equal attention to their gross national happiness index. The well-being and contentment of the people is every bit as important as their financial well-being.

Now this sounds like a child care program! Every member's well-being and happiness affects every other member. Everyone works to cocreate a dynamic environment where children, families, and the team are happy, learning, and growing. What ground rules might be the basis for an ideal community like this? We can thank the drafters of NAEYC's (2011) *Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment* for establishing a vision: “Respect the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual” (1).

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

That's it: respect. I believe that to build a community, the first of our shared values must be respect for everyone's differences, needs, and contributions. Without respect at the core of our village, we have little chance. The challenge,

however, is this: when we beat ourselves up and don't treat ourselves respectfully, can we hope to respect others? My colleague Ann Terrell works in the Milwaukee Public Schools and says she puts her efforts of self-respect toward two things: making appointments with herself and taking responsibility for her own energy (Terrell, Neff, and Flanagan 2012).

When was the last time you showed respect to yourself and not just to others? Self-compassion as well as altruism appear to be essential in our hoped-for village. If we could find practical everyday ways to respect ourselves as well as others, and keep our eyes on that prize when the inevitable conflicts and power struggles emerge, we have a chance at sustaining our village.

Letting Go of Egocentrism

One other dynamic is also essential: melting the ego. Melting the ego is my way of reminding myself to get out of my own way and to get over myself. Melting the ego is necessary when I get that holier than thou conviction that my way is the moral high ground. Explosive face-offs emerge when my right makes you wrong and vice versa. To prevent and address these power struggles, I remind myself to set my ego to the side and remember the bigger hope and goal. This means reminding myself of a few things:

- I am not the center of the universe. It's not (often) about me.
- Success is not measured by my winning or losing.
- Am I thinking about what I can learn from this experience rather than how my will can prevail?
- Will I look back in five, ten, or twenty years and say integrity prevailed over ego?

As Maya Angelou (2012) reminds me, "I've learned that people will forget what you said; people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Building the Village

If you were asked to draft ground rules for your ideal village, what would they be? Now imagine all the other people in your community coming together with their ground rules. Do you think you could pull together and draft

something enduring, or would you end up with a hodge-podge of watered down, unrealistic, unenforceable rules and values? I believe that if we truly value respect for differences at the heart of our community, we can begin to draft ground rules that will allow our communities to endure.

Creating a village is not just an exercise. It's a reality. Every time I meet another person, work with another person, fall in love with or disagree with another person, a microvillage is created. Therein lies the test: can we come together in the moment and climb to the mountaintop together?



Luis Antonio Hernandez

Real Villages

With all due respect to my colleagues Debra and Holly Elissa, every time I hear "it takes a village" I want to turn around, get on a bus, and run to the biggest urban spot around. This village usually comes with aromas of exotic spices, children skipping and running, women humming songs that put babies to sleep in seconds, and strong men doing hard work under ever blue skies. And don't forget birds up in the trees, clouds in the shapes of bunny rabbits, and a barking dog somewhere in this surreal village green.

My reality-based village is a child care center in a South Bronx housing project, the family child care home in eastern Tennessee, the Head Start program at the bottom of the Grand Canyon, or the church center in suburban Chicago. Many times villages are difficult places; sometimes they are the best places. What makes each of them hum along is the spectrum of relationships between one and all. It is about the drums of humanity beating for connection, identification, and respect in the work of caring for the children and looking out for each other.

Call for Responsibility

Fred Rogers said, "We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility. It's easy to say 'it's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."

I want to take up Mister Rogers's call for responsibility. The word *responsibility* carries the weight of an individual and collective charge to do and

respond, all for the sake of a greater good. One can be responsible for the well-being of one's family, for the outcomes of one's work, or for simply following traffic rules. We are, therefore, responsible for others. Debra outlined a number of related outcomes or intentions in her introduction that have a subtext of responsibility in their delivery.

Where to start? I will start with the core values inherent in the notion of responsibility that I bring from my family. As many children do, I saw my mother and father diligently go to work. For them it meant meeting the responsibilities of our home and their life in a new country. Beyond our immediate home, my parents were also helping other family members by sending regular money transfers—family came first, so we always helped relatives in need. My parents also taught my brother and me about our responsibilities at home, from taking out the garbage and cleaning up to our weekend night curfew. Going to school was our primary responsibility, but if we wanted extra money, we needed to find a job. Both of us worked from early on—delivering groceries, recycling bottles and cans, shoveling snow. Working was a responsibility that provided values about work: being pleasant, showing up on time, and opening our first savings accounts. Family teaches values about taking care of oneself, helping each other, and—by extension—seeing the world through the lens of what is important. Most importantly, our grandparents and parents were our role models—much as we are to the next generation—transmitting values that we only later recognize as important and essential in life. The joys, the sacrifices, the determination to do good and move ahead was a path of responsibility for each of us. Our parents are gone now, but my brother and I delight to see the next generation carrying on those core values, all with the care and humor that runs through our family.

My Village

In the village of my mind, we would all get along and be happy. I know it is easier said than done! My expectations for this community began early and have survived through many rough patches of tensions and difficult times. Looking back, I see that my faith in different communities stems from living in a very diverse and difficult neighborhood. We lived in Hell's Kitchen on the west side of Manhattan—the setting for *West Side Story*—where there were certain blocks you did not walk down. There were Irish gangs from the West Side, Puerto Rican gangs from the Bronx, and black gangs from Harlem. And I almost forgot the Italian crew from Little Italy. What a mix, what tensions, what good times. Interestingly, we went to the same schools from elementary to high school. And in school we all got along, sometimes with a few scrapes

here and there. But we learned to appreciate, tolerate, and accept each other, resulting in relationships that have lasted a lifetime.

A lesson for me was to not be intimidated by those I didn't know but to make an effort to connect and turn the fear of a stranger into the potential for a friend. Those initial encounters meant friendships based on sports, music, or just hanging out. We are older now, and I wish I'd gotten to know others in my class in a deeper sense. By now all the school cliques and in-groups are forgotten. For me, it was a responsible act to meet others, get to know them, and get along. Although it may seem like a survival strategy, it also gave me a wider world of friends—as an honorary member of every gang!

The Infamous Village

So, how are we going to be part of this infamous village? What are my responsibilities as a member of this community? A compilation of interviews (Bryant 2011) of organizational leaders indicated a sense of curiosity as a key element for any leader. To be curious is to be open to discover, explore, and experiment—to do what comes naturally to a young child. To be curious means one has to be genuinely interested in others, ask questions, inquire deeply for explanations, and be outside one's own world. It is the Margaret Mead approach. As a world famous anthropologist, Dr. Mead lived with a native people to learn from them, never to judge but to observe, ask questions, and appreciate their uniqueness and differences. In being curious, she highlighted the humanity in each of us. For who can say who is more civilized or advanced or better than another human being? And she observed and noted, no matter the size or composition of that human village, children were always central to community life. In her observations, adults all cared for the children and children learned their roles and responsibilities within the group.

Having that curiosity provides a winning strategy, for people are social beings interested in other social beings. An example is when a person is astonished when someone takes the time to ask about their lives in an open manner, without judgment, assumptions, or bias: "Tell me about the religious holidays you celebrate." "Why is it that women in your culture cover their hair?" "What is it like being a teen mom?" Find the anthropologist within you, be respectfully curious about others, and see what you discover about them and about yourself. Even though it is hard work and takes practice, a degree of curiosity provides a fountain of knowledge and information that makes us attuned to the rhythms of our community. We respect individuals, we appreciate and understand differences, and we can truly say, "I know

where you're coming from." Trust and respect are the keys for entering the village that Debra has outlined. I encourage and challenge you to enter your new village with a deep sense of responsibility.



Janet Gonzalez-Mena

My Village Experience

I wish I could have recorded the feelings that arose in me as I read about villages from my three friends. This is a hard job—building a whole village, an ideal one at that. I tried to figure out in which parts of my life I lived in a village in its broadest sense: a village that honored and supported children and families. Then I started thinking of taking up Debra's original challenge to design my ideal village, but that thought was overwhelming. Both Luis and Holly Elissa gave me things to think about when it comes to designing a village, but then it came to me: I don't have to design one, I lived in one once—a village made up of diverse grown-ups who had a role in the education, health, welfare, growth, and development of the children who were in the village. This happened in an early care and education program by creating relationships, interactions, and activities that turned parents, teachers, and communities into a team! Here's the story—starting way back when I was a child.

The village I grew up in as a child was segregated. I didn't know that. I must have realized that there were people who didn't look like me and my family, but that they weren't part of my life. They weren't part of the media either—or my education. Those were the Dick and Jane days. Even though I grew up in California, I didn't know any Mexicans. I did know about tacos, though. They were called "Spanish food" and were served in "Spanish restaurants." I probably didn't hear the word *Mexican* until sixth grade when we studied Mexico and South America. I still hadn't met anybody who wasn't a European American like I was.

Fast-forward to 1970 when I met my husband, who was born and raised south of the border in Mexico. He arrived in California as an adult in 1956 with his parents, so by 1970 he was a United States citizen and well acquainted with the language and culture. Plus, by then he had a college degree and a teaching credential. This was a time when there were no teaching jobs in California due to a decline in the number of children. This was also a time of change in California (and across the nation) as oppressed people began to demand equal rights. At the time I met him, my husband

had declared himself a Chicano and was attending demonstrations, sit-ins, and even a pray-in or two.

At that time, segregation was still occurring in Northern California. It wasn't legal, but it effectively separated middle-class children and families, who were mostly white, on my side of town from children and families on the other side of town, who were mostly from black and brown low-income families. By that time, I did know Mexicans, partly because I started my career as a volunteer in a preschool for Spanish-speaking children and families.

The staff was divided, half English speakers and half Spanish speakers. The English-speaking teachers were middle-class white women; the Spanish-speaking aides were from the low-income community across town. Status and salaries were higher for teachers than for aides. My soon-to-be husband and I felt that situation wasn't good for the self-concept of the Spanish-speaking children. We came up with a solution. Why not just train Spanish speakers to be preschool teachers? That way they could give the children strong messages about retaining their own language and culture.

It was about that time that we got married and rented an apartment on the other side of town from where I had been living. We then came up with the idea of a new bilingual home-centered preschool. We started with meetings of interested Spanish-speaking families. We discussed the value of a home-centered program where teachers moved with a group of five four-year-olds to the home of each so that every day of the week they were in a different home with a different parent to help the teacher. Thus, parent education became part of the program. The group was enthusiastic and decided on a name right away: La Escuela Cuauhtemoc. (Cuauhtemoc was the last emperor of the Aztecs.) The idea caught on, and we found all kinds of support from both sides of town, including some high-ups in the county office of education.

We started up and operated first on a volunteer basis with four teachers from the Spanish-speaking community. My husband, with his credential, was the director. By that time I had become a preschool teacher, so I was the curriculum expert. We were ready to go to work training the teachers and needed a place to do so. The director of a community center in a low-income community offered us space in the center at no charge. We were delighted for more than one reason. This was during a period of the federal war on poverty, and the federal government was the source of funding for the community center. At that time, there was enormous competition for federal funds, which had created bad feelings between the African American community and the Spanish-speaking community, who were in competition for funding. The director of the community center was an African American man; his reaching out to us and the Spanish-speaking teachers was a huge step toward creating positive relationships between the two communities.

Already we were having an integrated "village experience," and it felt *wonderful*. The low-income community was coming together in a way it hadn't before. We were also integrating with the white community on the other side of town by including two English-speaking families in each group. We all operated on a volunteer basis—doing various kinds of fundraising for essential needs. By that time, the county office of education had taken us under its wing. People there helped us write a grant to apply for federal innovative-education funds. A call came one morning that we had gotten the money and that our application scored higher than any other. We were *numero uno*! Those were very exciting times! Once we got funded, we were able to rent the space at the community center, which helped us continue our integrative experience as we were trying to work on bringing the two communities—brown and black—together.

It wasn't an ideal village, but it was one where children and their futures were our main focus, and we were supported by a wide range of people and institutions. Looking back, I have to say it was a highlight in my life. The memories came flooding back while I was writing: memories of relationships and team building—the integrating of lives. We were all working together: administrators, teachers, families, volunteers, and the community. We were definitely a village.

Summary



Debra Ren-Etta Sullivan

The notion of a village and the prospect of creating one brought up a number of important themes. Power was certainly one of them. Yes, power can be quite difficult to share. I found myself thinking that, on some level, there are people who want equity but don't necessarily want everyone to be equal. In any well-functioning community the power dynamics need to be quite clear. There would be no doubt or misunderstanding about who is in charge of Art's village, but when it's unclear or when not everyone agrees, challenges and struggles will arise. Those who want to retain all the power will find themselves confronted by those who refuse to relinquish their power. Maybe this is where the "village prenup" comes into play. The Sisters of Charity example helps us see what continuing a legacy after a community dies out could look like. But what would it look like for a community at its inception to discuss dissolving the community if members

are no longer in agreement or in a case of irreconcilable differences? In other words, what would it look like for a community to plan its “divorce” while it is planning its “wedding”? How does a community split apart without going to war?

Another theme that emerged is that of rules and practices that are inclusive and those that are exclusive. As stated earlier, even those who want to be all-inclusive end up having rules or practices regarding those they really don’t want to live with. Some may be quite upfront and direct: “Those people” can’t live here. Others just make “those people” feel so uncomfortable and unwelcome that they leave. I think love and fear are related to the themes here. Communities built on love may be more welcoming and inclusive than those built on fear. The fear of the unknown—of those who look different, of those who think different, of those who believe different—and fear of “not the same” can lead to the creation of a community that is exclusive by design, even if no one wants to say that out loud. We may also ask about who gets to say that one group is more civilized or advanced or better than another. The truth is some really do believe such differences matter, and that will have an impact on any leadership situation.

A third theme is that sense of curiosity about others. My bachelor’s degree was in cultural anthropology, and I think I majored in the field because, like Margaret Mead, I wanted to know more about others. All four of us carry strong aspects of curiosity in our lives, our stories, and our paths. Luis made friends among the Irish, Puerto Rican, African American, and Italian “gangs” at school. I first met Holly Elissa because she always (yes, always) takes time to initiate intriguing, meaningful, friends-forever conversations with perfect strangers. Janet has countless examples of stepping outside of her own community to learn about, advocate for, teach in, and communicate with the Latino communities she encounters. Creating a village—be it a neighborhood, a preschool, an office, a family, or a utopian society—requires a healthy and strong sense of curiosity about others. Yes, it is hard work and takes time to really get to know, understand, and appreciate someone who is not like you, but when children see grown-ups work, struggle, problem solve, and thrive together on their behalf, that’s when they learn the most about why it takes a village to raise a child.

Discussion Questions

1. What is your ideal village? Define it, describe it, and explain its core beliefs, practices, and values.

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2. What are your beliefs about power? Should a few have it? Why or why not? Should a lot have it? Why or why not? Should you have it? Why or why not? We will often find ourselves in challenging situations where it appears that my right makes you wrong or your right makes me wrong. Creating a village requires imagination, openness, traversing new territory, and exploring third space, so instead of either/or, take a look at both/and. What if we're both right? Your first thought may be that we can't both be right, but what if we both really are? What would that look like?
3. Think of a "village" you have very little contact with or knowledge about (for example, another ethnic or racial group, a group belonging to an income level that's different from yours, a group facing discrimination or prejudice that you don't face, a group that speaks a language you don't speak). Find the anthropologist within you to be respectfully curious about others and see what you discover about them and about yourself. What are their core values and beliefs? What do they want most for their children?

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