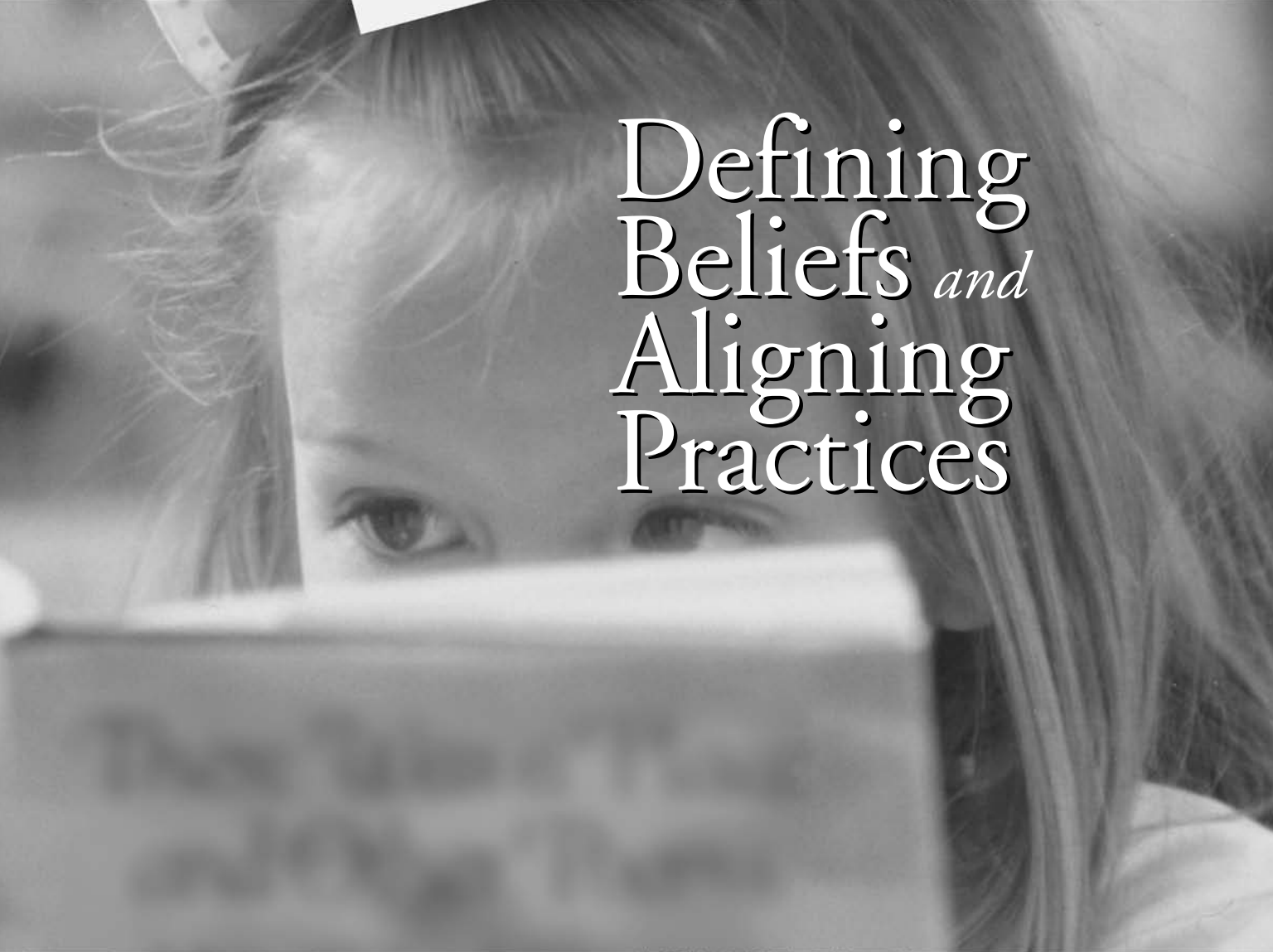


PART  
I



Defining  
Beliefs *and*  
Aligning  
Practices



CHAPTER 1

Picture Perfect:  
How Does Your Ideal  
Classroom Look,  
Sound, *and* Feel?





The room's organized. From books to materials, it's clear there's nothing random here. Books are mostly in tubs and baskets throughout the room, labeled for easy access by series, author, topic, type of text, or level (see Figure 1.1 in the color insert). A collection of anthologies lines one shelf. I watch two children talking quietly in the meeting area, browsing through a basket of books. Before I know it, they find just the book they're looking for.

Paper, markers, scissors, and more are organized on a shelf, accessible to all. Two children carefully tape the torn page of a well-loved book, another matter-of-factly fills the stapler. I wince when its long arm springs forward, but there's no need for worry. This child knows exactly what he's doing.

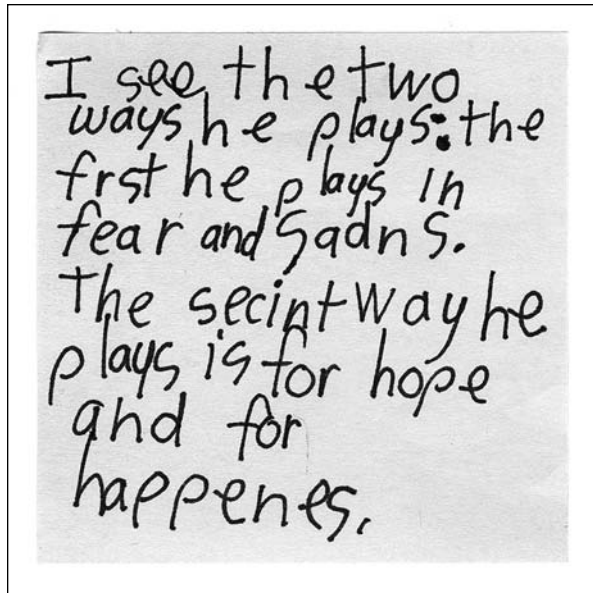
The walls of the classroom speak; student work and anchor charts are everywhere (see Figure 1.2 in the color insert). New learning and the mental processes readers, writers, mathematicians, and scientists use to construct meaning and enhance comprehension are made visible, public, and permanent. The questions, ideas, and big understandings recorded sound like real voices of real kids. "Come learn with us!" they seem to say.

I see a huge chart along one wall that showcases student learning and thinking about the Underground Railroad, detailing not only the learning but its source, relevant vocabulary, student questions about this time and place in history, and children's handwritten responses (see Figure 1.3 in the color insert). I can tell they've been reading historical fiction up to now—books including *Barefoot*, *Escape on the Underground Railroad*, *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, *Freedom River*, and *Journey to Freedom: A Story of the Underground Railroad* line the ledge below the chart. I can't help but think that once kids get into that tall stack of textbooks nearby, they'll have so much background knowledge that understanding the content will be a breeze!

Three boys off in a distant corner attract my attention. They're crowded around a copy of Tony Johnston's *The Harmonica* (2004), talking and writing, mostly about their impressions of the story, but also last night's soccer game. They can't believe they beat The Crush! I smile at the soccer talk—if you beat The Crush, wouldn't you just have to talk about it, too?

*The Harmonica*—a powerful picture book inspired by the life of a young Holocaust survivor—is a story about a family split apart when Nazi soldiers invade Poland. When the commandant of the camp forces the little boy to play the harmonica for him night after night, the boy thinks of "my

FIGURE 1.4  
 “Whoa. That’s a good one!” One  
 child’s synthesis of *The*  
*Harmonica* by Tony Johnston.



father, who had given it to me. Of my mother, who once had danced. And of prisoners, without hope, who might hear the notes and be lifted, like flight of birds.”

“Let’s go back to this page,” says one boy who wears a grass-stained black-and-white soccer shirt, “this one here, where he goes back to the camp and someone whispers, ‘Bless you’ in his ear. Look what I wrote.”

And he proceeds to read these words from a small blue sticky note (Figure 1.4): “I see the two ways he plays. The first he plays is in fear and sadness. The second way he plays is for hope and happiness.”

“Whoa,” says another boy in the group. “That’s a good one. I never thought about it like that before.”

“Me neither,” says the third. “That is reallyreallyreally good. You should go and stick that on the Synthesizing *The Harmonica* chart” (see pp. 61–62).

I’m in love. I think it’s reallyreallyreallyreally good. And I’ve never thought about it like that before either.

And it’s apparent that the Harmonica Kids are not the only ones having conversations that focus on big ideas . . .

*“Do you get this part? Why would some of the black people NOT want to escape to freedom on the Underground Railroad?”*

*“When the shoes say, ‘Step inside, we’re big and bruised and scuffed, but down past the tough we’ve worn ourselves soft,’ do you think it’s about the grandpa, too? Like the shoes and grandpa are both deep down warm and fuzzy inside?”*

*“Let’s go get the Leo Lionni tub! He’s my favorite author and I want to study all his books. Let’s make a list and then we can check them off after we read them!”*

“Hey! Where’s the teacher?” I suddenly wonder. It dawns on me that in the midst of falling in love, curious kids, and walls that talk, I’m not even sure she’s in the room. And then I spot her, seated next to a child, eye-to-eye, conferring. This lucky boy has his teacher’s full attention. No one is looking at the clock; there’s not a hint of rush. There’s simply the luscious feeling of endless time.

Next, she quietly gathers up a small group of children for a quick lesson on book selection . . .

“Girls and boys,” she begins, “I was looking through your conferring notebooks—these right here—last night after school, and guess what I learned about you as readers? What do you think all of you have in common?”

She acknowledges their responses as thoughtful ones, and says, “When I conferred with each of you last week about the books you were reading, I noticed that N’Dia’s books were all fiction, Jade’s and James’s books were all nonfiction, and Bianca’s books were all poetry! And as I look back through your conferring notebooks, it’s been that way for a while. Think about that a minute. What else do you know about yourselves and each other as readers?”

Students and their teacher have a conversation about what else they know, and before she leaves them, she says, “So . . . are you up for a challenge? Perfect! Let’s try this. For the rest of this week, finish up with the books you have. On Friday afternoon, when everyone chooses their books for next week, I want you to be adventurous! When you choose your new books, make sure that you have some fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in your selections. Take your time, and make thoughtful choices.

“It might be a good idea to talk with each other—I bet Bianca has some great poetry suggestions, James and Jade know a lot about nonfiction, and we know that N’Dia knows fiction. Right? So I’m asking you to think

about what you know about yourselves as readers, the suggestions of your friends, and what you know about the other books in our library to make good choices. Does that make sense?

“Great! Why don’t you talk a little bit about that now? I can’t wait to see what you choose, and what you learn about yourselves and each other as readers next week!” And it’s here that she leaves them.

The soulful voice of Keb Mo singing “I’m Amazing” is all it takes for these kids and their teacher to gather in the meeting area.

The Harmonica Kids open the discussion by sharing their thinking about the differences between retelling and synthesizing. Their theory is that if everyone were to retell *The Harmonica*, the retellings would be very much the same. But if everyone were to synthesize it, the syntheses would sound “totally different.” And then they want to know what everyone else thinks about that. Kids seem to know just how to join into the discussion. They talk and look at *each other*; responses are not directed to the teacher unless she joins in with a question or comment. And no one feels the need to raise their hand.

And what’s the teacher doing during all of this? She’s off to the side, listening carefully, taking notes. The kids are very much in charge.

I find myself thinking about that room, those kids, and their teacher well into the night. Could it have all come together due to some magical alignment of the stars? Could it be that this teacher, by some lovely quirk of fate, got all the brilliant, motivated, well-behaved children? Deep down I think we both know the answer. *Not a chance*. Deep down, I’m pretty certain her classroom looks and feels this way every year.