

## **The Just Me Project in Education**

Research has shown definitively that children without social and emotional literacy will be limited in what they can do in the academic setting. Emotional literacy is the foundation upon which we build other important academic skills. The curriculum pressures generated by *No Child Left Behind* leave a teacher little room to help children develop this social and emotional foundation. The inspiring story of a feral cat that lost his leg is an extraordinary and effective tool to help children learn tolerance, resiliency, moral courage and self-esteem. As they become aware of the impact of emotions, they also learn how important it is to choose their responses to challenging experiences.

*What's the Matter with Henry? The True Tale of a Three-Legged Cat* tells the story of a cat whose unhindered sense of adventure, in spite of his physical challenges, convinced dog lovers to adopt him and share his lessons with others. Via email, this 'therapet' has inspired over 33,000 responses describing human efforts to heal, to struggle, and to transcend adversity. This book and its new companion book, *What About Me? I'm Here Too!*, written in the voice of the black poodle who *was* an only pet, engage children in learning how to develop resilience and acquire a vocabulary of feelings. These books have been given to the children of military families dealing with a wounded member, to the young victims of Hurricane Katrina, and to children overcoming the stigma of disability. They also have been used in classrooms, in anti bullying programs, and in art classes.

The Just Me Project, which is the structured program beyond Henry's story, is designed to initiate a national conversation about dealing with wounds and illness, both internal and external, helping to develop a positive perspective and an emotional language to deal with life. The innocent voice of the cat helps frame the questions and translate the answers around issues of healing, tolerance, and compassion.

This project can help teachers become skilled at a simpler language of health, social and emotional responsibility, and storytelling. It can help teachers reframe their knowledge into the words of trust, courage, and resilience.

The Just Me Project and Henry's Kibble for Thought combine in one effort these several approaches. Not only are Henry's lessons preventive as they teach us to overcome prejudice, to love what we thought we hated, to trust learning and curiosity, and to believe in our own capacities, but they reach across all ages and conditions with guidance and comfort.

Currently the focus of education is on measurement, not on well-being and the complex responsibilities of leading a good life. Henry's innocence helps our professional educators transcend these constraints by basing caring in a trusted conversation. The Just Me Project can provide a vehicle for the cultivation of individual authenticity and professional and institutional wisdom. The workbooks and teaching tools ground the student in the realities that hard things do happen but we can choose our responses to these challenges. The lessons taught by Henry the cat and Dolly the dog are easily integrated into the various existing required components of school curricula so that no teacher need feel these are 'extras'.

By addressing directly the issues of social and emotional learning, the Just Me Project can help schools better serve their students, families, and teachers, and show the way toward more meaningful learning.