Developing Together challenges systematic biases that have long plagued research with marginalized populations of children. It traces the unexamined assumptions guiding such research to definitions of subjectivity and the psyche based in Western cultural norms.

The book provides alternative paradigms, applying a comprehensive methodology to two unique schooling contexts. Through this new approach children’s development can be seen as an interactive, collaborative process.

The chapters highlight how theoretical assumptions directly influence research methods and, in turn, affect educational practices. Unique in its provision of a detailed alternative method for conducting research with children, the book explains how the study of collaborative competence would influence education and applied fields. It is an essential resource for researchers in developmental psychology, educators, and policymakers alike.

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DEVELOPING TOGETHER

Understanding Children through Collaborative Competence

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City University of New York
I dedicate this book to my children and all children who want to be seen for their full selves.
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Preface

My first job working with children was at a day care center in Philadelphia. I was an assistant teacher in a three-year-old room and had just begun to study psychology after having been an English literature major. There was a boy named Stephen in that room. He flapped his arms wildly all day and only spoke in a way that I later learned was termed “echolalia” due to its echoing and apparently meaningless nature. He almost never made eye contact. Shortly after he joined our class, I noticed Stephen bouncing and chasing a red ball on the rug. I decided I would get him to play with me. I caught the ball he had thrown, held it up to him to make sure he was watching it, then threw it in his direction. Each time I grasped the ball he would squeal with delight and flap his arms, jumping with anticipation before running for it. At first Stephen would only glance fleetingly at me and watch the ball, but after about a month of daily ball games he began to sustain eye contact, adjust his placement on the rug according to my position, and move in anticipation of my movements. My initial goal had been eye contact, but then Stephen uttered his first nonecholalic word “more” while looking directly at me and beaming. I knew instinctively that if I could achieve with Stephen what his classmates exhibited automatically – driving cars over their heads in tandem while making vrrrmn sounds, passing pretend tea back and forth in the dramatic play area, jumping into puddles together and laughing at the splashes – an entire world would open up for him, one that included language, but beyond that one in which meanings could be shared – the world of intersubjectivity.

Years later I taught four- to eight-year-old children at a high-poverty public school – the younger prekindergarteners during the day and the six- to eight-year-old children as part of a program for students deemed “at risk” for literacy failure in the late afternoon. I became intimately acquainted with how schools are microcosms of society and how oppression and social injustice, including structural and interpersonal racism,
misogyny, and xenophobia, play out at every level of human interaction. The macro-context of those years of teaching was an endless avalanche of injustices that comprised the overarching situation in which my students and their families lived. Yet, in the foreground, the micro-interactions between my students and their classmates, myself, their families, the educational assistants, and certain colleagues created an opposing context – that of an intersubjective world that was based in empathy, curiosity, and shared creativity. This intersubjective space of thousands of collaborative interactions and moments of shared meaning-making served as an implicit form of resistance to the oppressive forces of racism and savage capitalism surrounding us all.

I recall so many moments that transcended the oppressive mundanity of what one might expect life in an urban school to be like. There was the time when my first and second graders shared their final stories after multiple drafts, with every one of their classmates listening to their fellow authors with rapt attention before providing insightful critiques one by one without needing any prompting by myself – the teacher. Or there was the day when my most emotionally challenging four-year-old student decided to measure the entire classroom with Unifix cubes. All of his classmates, enthralled with his endeavor, pitched in by moving aside furniture, reattaching Unifix sections that had come apart, and helping record the mathematical findings once each section was completed.

These moments proved that classrooms can be spaces of transformation and that the human capacity for shared meaning-making has the power to transcend everything that oppresses. I knew that trauma and disconnection – a lack of trust – created a barrier to many students’ ability to learn in school. I knew that social hegemonies prevented families from feeling that they had a place within the school, and that so many complex cultural historical dynamics bred hostility among the adults that trickled down into the children. And yet, those intersubjective experiences – those times when each of the children was productively engaged in sharing materials and exchanging dialogue, when parents began to trust the safety of the classroom and share in the community it represented – continued to occur regardless of the oppressive realities that formed the backdrop of the school community.

Since entering academia, I have been committed to spotlighting the everyday brilliance of children like the ones I taught, who demonstrate their tremendous capacities for intersubjectivity and sophisticated collaboration out of their own drive to engage in shared meaning-making with their peers. I have also been committed to recognizing these capacities
more formally through the concepts and definitions that structure theories and research within psychology and education. Celebrating cultural diversity is not just about recognizing and appreciating differences but about realizing that all our assumed ways of thinking about human behavior are culturally grounded, and that the culture that looms largest in the Western social sciences and in American social institutions, like schools, is that of Anglo-European heritage.

There are status and power differentials between what is represented by schooling (its norms, subjects, and methods) and students—their cultures, languages, and family histories. The former becomes the entrenched representation of what is aspired toward, while the latter become subsumed beneath the goal and promise of adopting the former. This striving toward the school—representing power, opportunity, and prosperity—is contingent on a simultaneous striving away from everything that is not school: family, community, culture, and language of origin. Only now, over 100 years since the assimilational goals of the American classroom were clearly articulated by the founders of American public schools, are education scholars taking seriously the benefits of maintaining students’ native languages, even when those languages are associated with nations considered less powerful or prosperous or with races that had been deemed inferior for most of American history.

However, despite some critiques of Eurocentric approaches to education, the central premises and assumptions of American education remained unchanged. The values and norms embedded within white middle-class culture are seamlessly incorporated into the functioning of schools and classrooms by the 90 percent of American schoolteachers who are from white middle-class family backgrounds. Teacher training programs within departments of teacher education in university schools of education are similarly almost entirely composed of white middle-class faculty. It is almost impossible to look critically at the norms of a culture that one is entirely entrenched within and when most of one’s professional relationships are with people entrenched in that same culture. Enacting one’s own cultural norms just feels right, whereas attempting to understand norms that conflict with one’s own culture feels awkward and foreign.

Criticisms of Eurocentric societal functioning that marginalize, disenfranchise, and disproportionately incarcerate people whose speaking styles, interactive norms, and relationships to American institutions derive from distinct historical and sociocultural experiences have been acknowledged recently among American progressives and considered within academic
institutions. The historical and contemporary oppressions and violations of the human rights of many have, after decades of effort, become impossible for the mainstream American society to ignore. However, in the classrooms where young children seek to engage in collective meaning-making with their peers and teachers, they often find themselves misunderstood, misrepresented, ignored, or even vilified. There is enough research to show the extensive implicit biases of educators toward students based on race, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Yet there is no clear method for addressing them.

This book lays out the multilayered complexity of what might comprise an education based on the strengths that have been shown to predominate among minoritized children in the United States. Education would begin with supporting and facilitating collaborative competencies and the development of intersubjectivity with peers and teachers rather than with the false promise of meritocracy. Rather than organizing schools according to hierarchies of individuals, they would be organized into teams of those who share common goals and whose skills complement one another’s. Each child’s unique set of abilities would not be ranked according to relative degrees of inferiority and superiority as compared to their classmates, but rather children’s sets of skills would be recognized holistically, and they would be grouped with peers who would fill one another’s skill gaps to create a well-rounded team. Assessments would no longer be based on the false pretense that it is possible to extract the mind from the social world wherein all meaning is created and functions, but instead assessments would keep track of the learning, creativity, and problem-solving among groups of children and adults working together to solve authentic social problems.

This hypothetical redesign of schooling would ensure that the transformative intersubjective moments that defined the true meaning of education in my classroom and in many others were consistently placed at the center of education rather than the periphery. Children should not have to wait until recess to engage in joyful, collaborative, meaningful shared activities with their peers. Rather than separating the concerns of children and adults, multiaged groups should work together to collectively solve the problems that affect their lives. In so doing, the social hierarchies that have long plagued American society and education will no longer define schooling and classrooms. The power of intersubjective interactions to breed joy, empathy, and shared knowledge creation will become primary, allowing all members of the classroom community to participate equally.
This book reviews a wide variety of research findings in developmental psychology and education to provide both an argument and a method for making such changes to how children learn in American schools in concrete terms. In addition, new questions for psychological and educational researchers are raised by the proposal of new methods for capturing collaborative competence. At the same time, preexisting psychological theories of the past decade that offer pathways for expanding the focus on human experience as inherently collaborative and transformative are reviewed. This book aims to serve both educational and psychological practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and theorizers. By presenting practical methods of assessing and structuring learning activities and providing a trajectory for supporting the development of collaborative competence throughout childhood, the hope is that new concepts that take such interaction seriously as a primary unit of analysis will be spawned.
Acknowledgments

The first impetus for this book came from the children who shared their brilliance with me and showed me that there was so much more to their development than the research was showing. Their families and the educators who continue to work in classrooms while advocating for holistic forms of education also inform this work. I am grateful to the scholars in the Department of Human Development within the Graduate Center of the City University of New York who first introduced me to concepts like distributed cognition and interobjectivity, freeing me to pursue new models of development. Chief among them is Anna Stetsenko, my doctoral advisor, whose work continues to inspire and shape my own. I thank my colleagues Jeremy Sawyer and Jennifer Gilken for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of this manuscript and the ideas behind it. I am grateful to Yolanda Medina and Cara Kronen for their continuous support of my research and teaching. Finally, I thank my husband, Jocelyn Azandossessi, whose insights have pushed me to decenter aspects of Eurocentrism that I could not have perceived on my own.

I am also very appreciative of the editorial team at Cambridge University Press for all their assistance in preparing this book for publication.