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Acknowledge the painful history behind some common expressions — and don't repeat them

In a previous column, we discussed how deficit beliefs are often hidden in everyday language and serve to reinforce the idea that certain groups of people are not equal to others. Because such language is so familiar, the underlying message tends to go unquestioned until it is used in the presence of someone who takes offense and speaks out. Bridget Arndt, a graduate student in our educational leadership program, had just such an interaction in her high school math classroom that changed her perspective and demonstrated the power of words. See her story below and our conclusions on p. 58.

Casual comment demonstrates the power of words

By Bridget Arndt

One day early in my teaching career, classroom discussion was escalating out of control with complaints about an upcoming test. In an attempt to use sarcasm to regain control, I shouted, "Stop your cotton-pickin' bellyaching." A young African-American male student quickly responded, "You don't have to be so racist!" I didn't realize the impact of what I had said. The whole class fell silent. I asked him to explain what he meant. He said that my statement offended him as a black person whose ancestors included slaves who picked cotton.

To me, the phrase was just an expression associated with being frustrated, and I had used it often. I never equated any racial slur with the meaning. I can only imagine how this made him feel — the stories he had been told from his great-grandparents about slavery in the South, the oppression and the suffering that his relatives had experienced, and the negative connotation associated

with picking cotton. What had I been thinking when I used the expression all these years? Moreover, why had no one ever confronted me about this before? Had I used other deficit thinking and not been aware? It never dawned on me that I was a white woman making a racial comment.

After discussing the incident, I apologized for offending him and asked that he forgive my ignorance. He responded favorably, acknowledging that I don't display prejudice toward anyone and that I had not intended to discriminate against him.

When I got home from school that evening, I immediately called my mom. I needed to talk to someone about the incident. I needed to know if this made me a racist or if my childhood beliefs were seeping out — beliefs my parents and I had tried so hard to change after I was adopted. As an educated woman, I couldn't believe that I had used that phrase and never realized the implications of my words. My mom assured me that I am not racist. She told me that a racist would have used

the phrase purposefully to evoke power over a group or individual. I had no malicious intent when I said the phrase. I just chose the wrong words to express my frustration.

This interaction made me aware of what and how I say things every day as well as my perceptions of people. The student's response heightened my awareness of my behaviors and challenged my thinking. I had always considered myself compassionate and accepting of the diversity of others. The incident with my student made me take a step back and question myself. I needed to re-evaluate my interactions with all people, not just my students.

Nine years later, that classroom incident remains fixed in my memory. I believe that I am more aware of diversity and have better relationships with students because of that awareness. My classroom environment fosters a mutual respect for all people. I was able to turn a negative into a positive by using it as a learning experience that has benefited my daily interactions with diverse populations. ■

Bridget Arndt's reflection is an example of culturally responsive practice. Although initially unaware of the negative connotation of her words, Arndt accepted responsibility when called on it. Rather than react on automatic pilot or become defensive, she listened to her student's feedback and apologized for her ignorance. She also reflected on past interactions and considered other offensive phrases that she may have used. This experience made a lasting change in her professional practice and personal life.

However, Arndt's reaction is not typical. When confronted about the offensive nature of certain expressions and words, educators often become defensive. They may feel threatened by students' comments or perceive them as a lack of respect for authority. In turn, students may feel disrespected by the teacher's apparent lack of concern about using offensive language. When neither teacher nor student backs down, a power struggle ensues, often resulting in negative consequences for the student, such as a discipline referral. Misunderstandings like this contribute to the disproportionate representation of certain groups, particularly African-American males, in discipline settings. This is why Arndt's response to the student was so powerful. She accepted that her words could be perceived as racist even though that was not her intent. She did not waste time arguing about whether the phrase is or is not inherently racist. Taking responsibility for the effect of our words and actions even when no offense was intended is an important aspect of culturally responsive practice.

Because language is based in history

and culture, there are many words and expressions that we use casually without realizing they have negative connotations for some people. Almost every educator will eventually utter an offensive word or phrase. Many will be called on it. The key is to accept that the word or phrase has a negative connotation and stop using it. Culturally responsive educators do not argue about whether the word should or should not be considered offensive or whether it is offensive only to a small group. Once they know it is offensive even to one, they simply stop using it.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT

When educators are mindful of the power of words, identifying other words and expressions that may be perceived as offensive becomes easier. One expression resurging in popular language is the use of "off the reservation." This expression is commonly used to suggest someone thinks differently from the norm or is out of control. A columnist on the *Forbes* magazine website used it to describe Joe Biden's support of gay marriage (Ungar, 2012), a blogger used it to describe Colin Powell's assessment of the situation in Iraq ("Is Colin Powell's Endorsement Absurd?," n.d.), and AOL news used it to describe Pat Buchanan's actions ("Pat Buchanan Goes Off the Reservation," 2011).

Although this expression may seem harmless, one must consider the context in which it was coined. Originating in the 1800s when American Indian tribes were relocated and confined to reservations, tribes resisting and leaving designated land were said to be "off the reservation" and viewed as hostile and subject to military assault. This

resistance was seen as a problem that had to be controlled. Because of this association, regardless of the intent, some find this expression offensive. Given the few positive references made about American Indians in history and numerous negative symbols, pictures, and expressions such as "stop acting like a bunch of wild Indians," most readers might assume a negative connotation.

Since a number of our words and popular expressions used today were originally coined to describe dominant relations over groups in history, many have negative connotations. While this dominance manifested in overt acts of racism has decreased over the last 60 years, the words and expressions coined to describe these attitudes and practices continue to be painful reminders of the past for many students and their parents. Acts of intolerance resulting in humiliation and fear for these students' great-grandparents, grandparents, and even parents are part of their history and not easily forgotten.

REFERENCES

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