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Use lessons in similarities and differences to help students understand diversity

A student teacher recently observed a troubling interaction between two students in a 1st-grade classroom. The two students were talking as they worked on a project. One of the students said something about his mom and dad. The other student replied, “I have two moms.” The first student looked up at the other student inquisitively and said, “Really? That’s weird.” The second student took offense, and an argument began. In addressing the issue, the lead teacher focused on the importance of being kind and always using nice words.

In reflecting on this incident, the student teacher questioned whether it was enough to simply tell students to be nice to one another when clearly there was a bigger issue at the heart of this incident. How, the student teacher wondered, do you address issues of diversity in the classroom with students? How do you help students, particularly young students, understand differences among their classmates, whether it’s race, class, gender, sexual orientation, language, ability, or religion? These are difficult subjects even for adults, and the potential for conflict is high when discussing them. What, the student teacher wanted to

know, do we recommend to teachers?

Discussing issues of diversity can be challenging, and many teachers feel unequipped to engage in these kinds of conversations. They fear that bringing up issues of diversity may lead to conflict. Rather than risk creating a problem, teachers often avoid such situations by steering the conversation in another direction. While this is understandable, it doesn’t resolve the problem and doesn’t teach students an essential skill — how to understand and address diversity.

Whether or not teachers talk about issues of diversity, students are keenly aware of differences in the classroom. Young students may innocently ask why another student doesn’t look the same or sounds different when he talks. Older students often question why they must be accepting of someone who doesn’t look or act “normal.” If such questions are met with indirect answers or are ignored, students learn that talking about difference is unacceptable. Over time, they tacitly learn that being different is unacceptable. As the student teacher in the story above said, “Diversity seems to be the elephant in the classroom.” Indeed, in many classrooms, diversity is the elephant,



ever-present, affecting everything that goes on, but never acknowledged.

TALK ABOUT THE ELEPHANT

For teachers who want to acknowledge diversity and teach students to value it, the place to start is by really looking at students and seeking to understand who they are. This sounds simple, but can be a challenge

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in today's data-driven classroom. In an effort to meet students' academic needs, too often the focus is on discrete pieces of data. Teachers can tell you a student's reading level, which questions the student missed on the previous year's accountability tests, how many points the student needs to improve in order to pass future accountability tests, what the student's English proficiency level is, how the student responded to academic interventions, and where the student's academic performance ranks in comparison to peers. In some cases, teachers even know the student's height-to-weight ratio and the likelihood the student will develop diabetes.

Knowing all of these data can give teachers the mistaken impression that they know their students. While data may be useful, it isn't equivalent to knowing students. To know students, teachers must look beyond data to see what values, identities, and experiences students bring to the classroom. With what race or ethnic group does the student identify? Does the student or someone in the student's family speak more than one language? What religion or belief system does the student bring to the classroom? Does the student live with one parent? Two parents? A grandparent? What talents and interests does the student have?

Knowing students in this way helps the teacher understand the diversity that is present in the classroom. Being aware of similarities and differences among students allows a teacher to strategically create opportunities for students to learn about diversity. Teachers can use a process for creating a classroom that helps students understand and value diversity.

START WITH SIMILARITIES

The foundation of a classroom that values diversity is the understanding that no matter how diverse a group of people may be, there are more similarities than differences among them. To help students recognize this, begin with

activities that highlight aspects students share. These activities can emphasize concrete similarities, such as learning about the history and traditions of the school, or they can be more abstract similarities such as drawing or writing about hopes and dreams. The key to these activities is to focus on what is similar so that students begin to see likeness rather than difference.

ACKNOWLEDGE DIFFERENCES

While it is important to recognize similarities, it is equally important to acknowledge and expect differences. It is natural for students to be wary of the unfamiliar. However, left unchecked, this wariness can cause students to avoid interacting with anyone they perceive as too different. In turn, this leads to students segregating themselves into groups of likeness that leave some students feeling excluded. Engaging students in activities that emphasize the positive aspects of difference can let students know that it is normal and not something to fear. Team-building activities, for example, draw on the concept of difference as a positive by bringing diverse people together to make a stronger team. Other activities that help students see differences include heritage studies that allow students to share family stories and artifacts, graphing activities based on student preference polls (e.g. food, music, or sports teams), and activities that highlight student interests and talents.

TEACH STRATEGIES

Even if students expect that there will be differences among people, they might not know how to address difference without conflict. It is one thing for students to have differing views on the best flavor of ice cream. It is quite another for students to understand religious differences. In order to negotiate difference, students must know how to discuss it constructively. They must then learn how to make accommodations

for differences when necessary. Teaching these skills depends on the student's age. Young children can learn to talk about differences through discussions that require them to discuss their preference for something such as a favorite book or activity without putting down someone else's preference. Older students can learn to discuss difference by debating current events using established rules of debate. Students of all ages can learn accommodation skills through problem-solving activities that require students to come up with a group solution that doesn't rely on voting or other forms of majority rule. Accommodation requires compromise and consensus, which is absent when a decision is made through majority rule.

PREPARE TEACHERS TO MOVE THE ELEPHANT

Teachers look to professional developers when they have questions such as the one the student teacher asked in the opening scenario. How would you have responded? What would you have said to the teacher in the room if you had witnessed the interaction between the two students? Professional developers must be prepared to help teachers address issues of diversity that arise in their classrooms.

Professional developers can help teachers understand that teaching students about diversity minimizes conflicts and gives students essential tools for interacting with people. By giving teachers the tools to help students talk about diversity, professional developers help to make classrooms places where difference is not only expected, but valued. Without support through high-quality professional development, the elephant is likely to remain in the classroom, and students will continue to be unprepared to negotiate the ever-increasing diversity in their schools, their communities, and the world. ■