

USE CONVERSATION STARTERS TO REMOVE BARRIERS AND DEVELOP RELATIONSHIPS

When we conduct diversity training in schools, teachers frequently ask why students of the same racial or ethnic group sit together in the cafeteria or hang out together in a particular area of the school. We often recommend they read *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Tatum (Basic Books, 2003) because it provides an excellent explanation. But this same behavior occurs with teachers. When teachers come into our professional development sessions, they tend to sit with their friends, which is human nature. Because the session is about diversity, one of our first steps is to ask participants to move into small, diverse groups. Many are quick to balk because they have to leave their comfort zone and interact with unfamiliar individuals whom they may perceive as different from them. Although these teachers have a desire to learn about diversity, they prefer to be with individuals who share similar experiences, values, and beliefs. These relationships provide a safe place to be who they are without judgment and humiliation.

As humans, we all need these safe relationships. However, establishing them should not be limited to others who share our skin color, economic class, abilities, religion, or any other difference because there are more similarities than differences among cultural groups. To discover these commonalities, teachers must move beyond their comfort zone and engage with others who are different from them. Since this process tends not to happen naturally, the person leading the group has the responsibility to create learning experiences in which this can occur. Once faculty members build these safe relationships among themselves, teachers may use these same skills to develop authentic relationships with students, families, and the community.

How do you get teachers out of their comfort zone to begin the process of establishing safe relationships with people who are different from them? One way is to use

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activities that foster dialogue by asking participants to respond to questions or sentence stems and then share responses with the group. We call these activities conversation starters; you can find a variety of them in resource books for professional developers and on the web. Some are lighthearted and fun, as in “Have You Ever?” (see <http://wilderdom.com/games/Icebreakers.html>), which asks participants to respond to questions such as “Have you ever sung karaoke, cooked a meal by yourself for more than 20 people, or been parachuting?” Humorous conversation starters are a good place to begin familiarizing participants with engaging in dialogue. Once that has been accomplished, move on to conversation starters that prompt participants to consider their norms, roles, values, and beliefs.

On p. 66 is an example of a conversation starter we created for this purpose. In this activity, divide the faculty into small, diverse groups (i.e. by race/ethnicity, sex, economic class, age) and ask them to take about 15 minutes to answer the questions individually. Once teachers have completed this step, ask them to select responses from four to five questions to share with their group and record each of these responses on large sticky notes. Next, post the notes on a wall or chart stand for the group to see while each member shares his or her responses to selected questions. After 30 minutes, reconvene the large group and ask teachers to reflect on the experience using the debriefing questions listed on p. 66.

When the small-group discussions begin, many teachers share responses to questions asking for deeper personal information (e.g. questions 9 and 11) while some share only surface information (e.g. questions 1 and 4) in order to maintain their distance. It is important to note who is in the latter group because at a later date they will need to participate in more activities of this nature to overcome this reticence. As teachers dialogue, the distrust fades and many begin to share inner thoughts, feelings, and experiences. At this point, it is not unusual to hear laughter or see a tear shed as teachers discover they share many similarities. In some cases, people once wary of each other strike up friendships when they realize they share so much in common.

Along with similarities, teachers also explore their dif-



In each issue of *JSD*, Patricia L. Guerra, above, and Sarah W. Nelson write about the importance of and strategies for developing cultural awareness in teachers and schools. The columns are available at www.nsd.org.



20 QUESTIONS

- 1 How would you describe the place you were born?
- 2 How would you describe the neighborhood or area where you live now?
- 3 Where would you live if you could live anywhere?
- 4 Who was the first person in your family to live in the United States?
- 5 What languages are spoken in your family?
- 6 What family tradition from your childhood do you continue?
- 7 What family tradition have you abandoned?
- 8 Who was the first person in your family to go to college?
- 9 What level of education did your parents obtain?
- 10 What historical event has most affected your life?
- 11 What is your most vivid childhood memory?
- 12 What is one thing your parents never wanted you to do?
- 13 What is one thing your parents always wanted you to have?
- 14 What is one thing you want for your own child?
- 15 How did your parents discipline you?
- 16 What physical characteristics do you try to accentuate?

- 17 What physical characteristics do you try to minimize or hide?
- 18 What aspects of your genetic makeup affect your life but are not visible?
- 19 If you could switch genders, would you? Why or why not?
- 20 If you could be any age, what would it be?

DEBRIEFING QUESTIONS

- 1 What similarities do group members share?
- 2 What differences did you notice?
- 3 What was the most surprising item you learned about one person in the group?
- 4 What additional topics were discussed that were not listed on the questionnaire? How did these topics arise?
- 5 What previously held assumptions were dispelled? How?
- 6 What apprehension or fears did you have at the start of this activity? Why?
- 7 Were these fears realized as you engaged with others or did they dissipate? Why?
- 8 Why did you select the questions you chose to share?
- 9 Which ones did you avoid and why?
- 10 What did you learn from doing this activity?

ferences. Through these interactions, teachers begin to learn about their own and others' cultural identities — the norms, roles, values, and beliefs influencing their world-views, interactions, and behaviors. Furthermore, they begin to learn that the color of one's skin doesn't necessarily equate to knowledge about a person's cultural background. They learn that assumptions and stereotypes about others are often inaccurate; the only way to really know an individual is to spend time getting acquainted with the person. Empathy, mindfulness, and trust begin to develop as teachers engage in conversation, and they form the basis of a lasting relationship.

There are many resources available for finding conversation starters (see a selection in the box below.) You can

also develop your own by simply substituting questions in the activity described in this column. When searching for activities, choose those that are easy to administer, can be done in an hour or less, spark dialogue about one's cultural identity, involve every teacher's participation, and do not require extensive cultural expertise to facilitate and debrief. One word of caution: Since the purpose of these activities is to build relationships among diverse teachers, avoid activities that ask teachers to discuss personal experiences around racism, discrimination, and prejudice. Until teachers build safe relationships, use of these activities could easily backfire and cause rifts between teachers. Once teachers have established strong relationships, the group is ready for activities on these sensitive topics. ■

START TALKING

Conversation starter activities are readily available on the web or in cross-cultural or intercultural training books. The books and web sites below provide several good places to start.

BOOKS

- *52 Activities for Exploring Values Differences*, by Donna M. Stringer and Patricia A. Cassidy
- *Developing Intercultural Awareness: A*

Cross-Cultural Training Handbook:

Volume 1, by L. Robert Kohls and John M. Knight

- *Experiential Activities for Intercultural Learning*, Volume 1, edited by H. Ned Seelye
- *Intercultural Sourcebook*, Volumes 1 and 2, by Sandra Fowler and Monica Mumford

These books are published by Intercultural Press (see www.interculturalpress.com).

WEB SITES

Information list

<http://wilderdom.com/games/TeamBuildingExercisesWebsites.html>

"Dinner Plans," "I'm Unique," "The Magic Wand," and "Marooned"

<http://www.lcc.edu/cte/resources/teachingettes/icebreakers.html>

Unique conversation starters

http://dating.suite101.com/article.cfm/unique_conversation_starters