



GROWTH & CHANGE

Jennifer Abrams

MODEL THE WAY TO NAVIGATE DIFFICULT TOPICS

Students notice how we handle our emotions, express ourselves, and respond to difficult situations. The way we interact with each other matters.

Many of us adults have said that it would be terribly hard to be a young person these days, with wildfires and floods, political polarization, violence in our streets, war in Ukraine, civil rights being questioned and denied to many citizens, and one medical challenge on the heels of another. As students navigate these challenges and so many others, they need educators to support them to think about, discuss, and take action on difficult topics. That requires helping them develop skills such as self-awareness and awareness of others, critical thinking, and conflict resolution.



As educators, we teach these skills in multiple ways. Not only do we teach them through explicit instruction and discussions in classrooms, but also in how we behave and what we model as we navigate these challenges ourselves. Students notice how we handle our emotions, express ourselves, and respond to difficult situations. The way we interact with each other matters, for our students' sake as well as our own and our colleagues'.

We can grow our own skills and support students' skills by focusing on three behaviors.

1. Do the inner work to contribute to the whole.

We must recognize that we are part of a community and have a responsibility to that community. Behaving in mutually respectful ways that honor the worth and dignity of all will assist us in navigating the tensions we are seeing and living with in school and beyond. That begins with listening. Fortunately, we can grow our ability to actively listen by paraphrasing, asking questions others want to answer, and offering our perspectives in ways that acknowledge others' perspectives and can be heard openly and honestly.

2. Work with cognitive conflict.

We can show students how to work out disagreements with empathy and respect. I find it helpful to use a distinction made by leadership expert Timothy R. Clark (2020): intellectual friction versus social friction. Decreasing social friction helps us feel safe, take risks, and share vulnerabilities. In contrast, increasing intellectual friction supports us to engage in discussions focused on ideas. With less social friction and more intellectual friction, we can stretch our thinking, hear new perspectives, and challenge ourselves to come up with new and innovative solutions. And when we engage in this type of encouraging and supportive conversation, we

Continued on p. 18

Jennifer Abrams (jennifer@jenniferabrams.com) is an independent communications consultant and leadership coach.

Continued from p. 14

model for students the potential to move into new territory and make progress on difficult issues.

3. Speak up thoughtfully.

We need to show students that we can speak up when we see a change that could be helpful and show that it's important to do so with respect, tact, and consideration. We can do that by modeling the sharing of productive ideas when asked for feedback, using words and messages that are solution-oriented and humane, and choosing to speak up only when we are ready to do so thoughtfully and constructively. As communication expert Liz Fosslien writes, we can proofread comments before speaking them to be authentic

yet mindful of our language so we can be heard (Fosslien & Duffy, 2019).

To reflect on whether we are modeling these skills, it's helpful to ask ourselves:

- Am I actively working to word my disagreements skillfully and considerately?
- Am I growing my ability to be uncomfortable with challenging topics to explore what is hidden?
- Am I taking full responsibility for managing my emotional responses?
- Am I actively working to improve my ability to remain resourceful in moments of tension?

We have agency over how we

communicate and behave around emotionally heated topics. Our words in all these situations are ours to craft, model, and teach. Asking, "How might I communicate my perspective humanely in a kind, supportive, and nonaggressive manner?" is a collective responsibility for us all. The students are watching.

REFERENCES

Clark, T.R. (2020). *The 4 stages of psychological safety: Defining the path to inclusion and innovation.* Barrett-Koehler Publishers

Fosslien, L. & Duffy, M.W. (2019). *No hard feelings: The secret power of embracing emotions at work.* Portfolio. ■

LEARNING LEADERS / Baruti K. Kafele

Continued from p. 15

in racism, it can be quite difficult for non-Black people, especially white people, to consider and discuss. But this discomfort is exactly what makes it important.

School districts — including professional learning leaders — must develop the courage and the skills to engage in difficult conversations about race, rooted in history. We can't meaningfully engage in conversations about eliminating racism

without a thorough examination and understanding of the history that got us here. And we can't truly prepare our teachers to educate students without having those difficult conversations about race — regardless of the skin color of the students they teach.

Because we're not used to having those conversations, it will take support and patience to learn how to have them. We must make this learning for educators a priority. If we continue failing to prepare our educators to teach

the fullness of history, we will continue failing all our children. We will continue to graduate students — Black and non-Black — who do not recognize the fullness of who Black people are.

This work is a moral imperative, and we can't wait any longer to do it. The children of America are sitting in our classrooms, looking to us and wondering about that thing that's missing, the thing they can't put their fingers on, but they can feel deep down. ■



LEARNING FORWARD'S

Learning Teams

Focus your learning teams' efforts on planning instruction that reaches all learners.

Pull your learning teams out of reactive modes and shift their attention to planning for original instruction that engages and reaches all learners with Learning Forward's Learning Team professional learning.

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, vice president, professional services, at sharron.helmke@learningforward.org | services.learningforward.org