

Identity Safe Classrooms

Places to Belong and Learn

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Teaching for Understanding

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WHY TEACHING FOR UNDERSTANDING?

Take a minute to watch a television program in a language you do not understand. How did it feel? Did you feel lost or disconnected? Did you have a sense of disorientation that sent you on a goose chase to grasp for meaning? Instead of making meaning of what is going on, did you feel frustrated, as if you were spinning in circles?

Becki discovered that even missing a key word can lead to the same feeling:

As a fluent Spanish speaker, I observed a hands-on science lesson in a Spanish immersion classroom. However, there was one word that I did not understand, and I could not make sense of what was going on. The word was *paper clip*. That was a word I learned in Nicaragua, where, as in many other Spanish-speaking countries, they just borrowed the English word *clip*. In other Spanish-speaking countries, the word is *sujetapapeles*. What struck me was how lost I became without that singular key word, even though I understood all the other words and even though there were paper clips all around, as the children were using them to measure. When they told me the meaning of the word, suddenly it all made sense to me, I *understood*.

Understanding is the core of engagement. The words *teaching* and *learning* are used together for just that reason. You may be teaching, but are they learning? Understanding is the bridge between teaching and learning.

2000; and Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005, for a more thorough discussion of these concepts and their theoretical underpinnings.)

USING DIVERSITY AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING: HOW TO DO IT

Cultivate an Equity Lens

Identity safety teaching practices are based on teachers' attention to the way that each student is affected by what is going on in the classroom. Throughout each day, teachers can ask themselves, "How is this lesson or assignment or activity being experienced by each student?" It is obvious that a teacher cannot look at each of her students every time she asks herself this question, but by considering two or three different students at a time, soon she will come to be more aware of how all her students are experiencing the class.

A central question for teachers to consider is how to equalize status in the classroom. This is a difficult, but important, aspect of eliminating stereotype threat and creating identity safety. Ongoing efforts to create equal status are necessary for the reduction of prejudice. Many teachers address diversity only with what is known as the "tourist" curriculum, which reduces multiculturalism to a superficial tour through various cultures via holidays. It is hard for teachers to avoid thinking about traditional holidays in ways that may actually instantiate stereotypes (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998). For example, Becki commented, "More than one African American parent has pointed out to me how year after year their children study Dr. Martin Luther King's 'I have a Dream' speech, asking why teachers can't go beyond it to the rich traditions of African American literature."

A sense of equity is created when teachers intentionally help students explore shared and different histories, languages, and perspectives throughout the year and across the curriculum. Students flourish when they see themselves and the groups they belong to reflected on a daily basis, and so they are not seen as an "other."

Ann described ways she incorporated diverse histories to teach geography to her second grade students:

I have a beautiful set of photos of children around the world on the wall. They are arranged by continent, and each one has the name of a country posted underneath it. I use these along with books about different cultures. I have a collection of ABC books from countries around the world. I use these books for our first

Responding With Authority Without Humiliating Students

Is it possible to validate a child's sense of self even when a serious incident has occurred? At one school where she was the principal, Becki handled a seriously dangerous situation when sixth grade girls lit matches in the bathroom and started a small fire. Luckily, the fire did not spread, but instead of reporting it, the girls hurried out to avoid being detected. After investigating to learn who did it, Becki brought the girls into her office. Her tone was firm and her words were respectful, but by the end, the students knew that by starting the fire, they put everyone in the school at risk. Yet, even in this extremely dangerous situation, she was careful not to shame or embarrass the students publically. The girls were upset, and many tears ensued as they were suspended after a private session with each of their parents. The goal was to make this a learning experience they would never forget.

Humiliating a student can have the opposite of the intended effect. Students can shut down in defense, become resentful, and want to lash out. Or, instead of coming to view themselves as a responsible people, they may feel self-loathing. Young people need to be held accountable, think of the cause of their behavior, and not blame it on others. Talking it through and asking them to write about what they did and what they learned helps them develop self-reflection skills and allows them to take responsibility and maintain dignity.

Use Intrinsic, Not Extrinsic, Motivators

Becki shared,

When I first started teaching, I thought I needed to constantly control student behavior. I began by giving out hundreds of points, M&Ms, and all kinds of incentives. The class seemed to always get to the right amount of points for a class party around Halloween, Thanksgiving, or Valentine's Day, but I wanted them to behave well because it made the classroom a better place, not just because they wanted to have a party. I wanted the students to behave well because of an intrinsic sense of "doing the right thing." I gradually decreased the incentives and found their behavior was still good. Eventually I found that they needed no extrinsic rewards at all.

Over time, I found student behavior had a different quality when my expectations were specific, but my approach was less controlling. Their behavior improved dramatically. I told them that I trusted they would know how to control themselves, so I allowed