

Identity Safe Classrooms

Places to Belong and Learn

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These four domains reflect the foundational assumption of identity safety that learning is a social process. Learning occurs in every social, intellectual, and procedural transaction between the teacher and students and among the students. Therefore, it is important to foster positive, caring relationships with the other students and the teacher in the classroom. Because relationships matter, who you are and what you know and can do matters. While a teacher may have the idea that being colorblind and ignoring differences shows equal acceptance of all, even young students are very aware of their differences. Instead, in identity safe environments, student differences are recognized and validated. Consideration is given to every aspect of the classroom, to all the subtle and overt messages that recognize that diverse ideas, perspectives, and materials can actually enhance learning.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH BEING COLORBLIND?

Part of what makes it difficult for teachers to fully appreciate group differences in lived experience and their role in academic achievement is the well-intended cultural injunction *not to see* group differences. Since the civil rights era, the social norm has been to remedy the negative effects of historic group prejudice by not seeing group differences. The goal, then, has been to be colorblind. It is linked to our idea of fairness and the strongly held belief that, in America, if you work hard you can achieve anything. This belief is based on the notion that people are equal, so that race and ethnicity should not affect opportunities in life such as education, housing, and employment. Yet, in reality, people are not colorblind and, from a young age, children in this country are exposed to the powerful influence of race. And such efforts not to see differences can often magnify the impact of differences (Markus, Steele, C. M., & Steele, D. M., 2000).

It is important to note here that the theory of stereotype threat is not based on the assumption that teachers are personally or explicitly prejudiced. Quite the contrary, we believe that the goal of most teachers is to be fair by being colorblind. However, this well-meaning goal to ignore differences inadvertently creates an environment that can lead to stereotype threat among students. By not paying *particular* attention to who each student is and by failing to address each student's *particular* experiences and interests, teachers unintentionally convey that what these students know and can do, and how they feel, does not matter. Without cues in the environment that reflect the lives, interests, and value of these students, they become, in the term of Ralph Ellison (1952), invisible.

FROM THEORY, TO RESEARCH, TO TRANSFORMING PRACTICE

Many of the numerous explanations for the persistent gap in achievement between white children and children of color focus on attributes of the children and their families as the source of the problem. This perspective about the source of the gap has been dominant since our earliest attempts at school integration. There have been alternative perspectives, though, that shift the focus from the troubled characteristics of the students to the experience they have in schools. As long ago as 1933, historian Carter G. Woodson wrote in his book *The Mis-Education of the Negro*,

The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker people. . . . No systemic effort towards change has been possible for, taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and religion which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. (1933, pp. xii-xiii)

If the problem of the achievement gap rests in students' fixed ability and motivation, there is no reason for schools to change their approach to teaching—the problem *is* with the children. Inherent in school improvement efforts is the assumption that schools *can* do something to improve student learning, in spite of the structural and familial situations from which students come. The comprehensive, national school improvement efforts of James Comer (1988), Henry Levin (1988), and the Child Development Project (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996) all point to the power that teachers and schools have to improve student learning, thereby changing students' schooling outcomes. In addition to demonstrating the effect that teaching practices can have on improving student learning, these three research programs informed the process of building our hypotheses about what might constitute identity safe teaching practices and might be linked to improvement in students' sense of being identity safe. Our hypothesis was that freeing students from distracting threats to their identity in these ways should foster their higher academic achievement, sense of belonging, and social understanding.

Using Diversity as a Resource for Teaching

WHY USE DIVERSITY AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING?

Our focus on Diversity as a Resource for Teaching is in direct contrast to a colorblind approach to teaching. The concept of diversity as a resource applies to all types of differences (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disabilities). Though our focus has been on those social identities (race, ethnicity, and class) that have been historically associated with negative stereotypes about the academic abilities of students from those groups, when teachers make efforts to create a safe classroom for any of the students, it can become a safer place for *all* the children. That is, the process of thinking about the classroom from the perspective of one group of students can lead to thinking about all the students. Teachers exemplify their attitudes about diversity and difference in everything they say and do in the classroom. When teachers ignore differences that are linked to negative stereotypes in school, it does not make the differences invisible to the members of the class, especially not those students whose social identities are being ignored.

We begin with the assumption that teachers do not intend to stereotype students. Teachers often strive to be colorblind so they will not inadvertently act in a racist manner. We also know that none of us is an expert in *all* the histories, languages, and cultural interpretations that children bring with them to school. And, importantly, this focus is based on the premise that teaching and learning is a complex social-psychological process and that it matters profoundly to who we are and how we relate to one another in the classroom (Markus, Steele, C. M., & Steele, D. M., 2000).

The focus of this resource approach to diversity is to consider carefully every aspect of the classroom from the perspectives of the students in the class. This approach is not about simply avoiding overt racism or stereotyping, but about creating an inclusive, curious, dynamic, academically rigorous environment in the classroom. It is also important to teach students how to work together, to show interest in and respect for one another, and to work toward creating a safe, strong environment for learning. We learned from the SISP study that diversity as a resource is manifested through teachers including all students in complex levels of learning, using student names correctly, validating students' languages by asking them to use words from their home language, and incorporating culturally relevant materials and teaching practices across the day and school year. It is also important to recognize that some students have multiple ethnic identities that teachers may not observe. In fact, we all have multiple social identities, including race, gender, and religion, that form different aspects of who we are. In different situations, different aspects of our identities are salient.

This chapter describes many avenues for approaching diversity as a resource. We give examples for using culture as content in the classroom, both formally and informally, by drawing from the students' backgrounds in natural ways through music, literature, language, and current events. We show that teachers can help create a feeling of unity in the classroom, so students can practice positive, caring relationships with one another and not fear that their group membership is a barrier to school success. We also examine ways to use critical multiculturalism as a tool to help students analyze negative and stereotypical messages in school and in the world. This ability to analyze is crucial when students learn about the history of intergroup relationships in the United States and when stereotypes or conflicts enter the daily life of the classroom. Then we look at ways to reduce prejudice and stereotyping and to equalize status in the classroom.

Finally, we move to looking at some dilemmas that may arise when addressing diversity as a resource in diverse classrooms. Throughout the chapter, we show teachers helping students develop a positive identity leading to a healthy view of self with a sense of purpose, hope in the future, and personal efficacy. The examples we give are simple and do not require extensive lesson planning. We found through our SISP research that these regular, ongoing, validating experiences, taken together with the other factors, lead students to do better on state-mandated standardized tests, to feel identity safe, and to like school more than students in colorblind classrooms.

Building on Important Research in Multicultural Education and Intergroup Relations

The research on stereotype threat and identity safety is the foundation of our work, but we also draw from the work of other leaders in education and the field of social psychology whose research has influenced educators seeking to create equitable outcomes in diverse classrooms.

For example, one body of research that influences our thinking on how to use diversity as a resource comes from the work of social psychologists whose research has been dedicated to exploring ways to reduce prejudice in group settings. Much of this recent work is based on the earlier work of Gordon Allport (1954), whose notion of how to reduce prejudice was called the *contact hypothesis*. This important early work showed that prejudice can be reduced only when people have the chance to know one another and learn to see similarities as well as differences between them. The contact hypothesis provides a conceptual tool for teachers to use to create less prejudiced, more inclusive groups of students.

Following on Allport's early work, more recent work by psychologists provides the basis for understanding some of the processes involved in creating successful contact among diverse students. We will show how creating equal status and promoting cooperative interdependence among students, and creating opportunities for students to learn new information about their classmates' cultural and historic backgrounds, will benefit all the students.

James Banks and Cherry Banks (2003) have been leading researchers in multicultural education for the last four decades. They define *content integration* as curriculum that incorporates perspectives from a variety of cultures, including pride in one's own heritage, appreciation of other cultures, knowledge of historical contributions, and understanding of the influence of power and privilege on all ethnicities. They propose that teachers analyze frames of reference, perspectives, and biases that influence ways in which knowledge is constructed and help students delve into the content through questioning, exploration, and critical inquiry.

Banks and Banks use the concept of *equity pedagogy* to describe an approach that addresses the diverse learning styles of students from differing backgrounds. They remind teachers to focus on inclusive practices rather than cultural stereotypes while exposing students to standards of the dominant society to prepare them for success in the world. Banks and Banks highlight the need to go beyond curriculum content alone to cultivate diversity as a resource in all our teaching practices and school structures. (See Allport, 1954; Banks & Banks, 2003; Dovidio & Gaertner,

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

major project, the *ABC's of Me*, where the students write about their relationships, heritage and culture, physical characteristics, personality, interests, hobbies, and favorites. We also display [where their families are from] on a world map.

In addition, by having an "equity lens," Ann was able to take advantage of teachable moments:

Daniel, who did not speak English, is a very social kid, with no trouble communicating even in Mandarin to everyone. One day he made everyone folded paper boxes. That afternoon, I got out scrap paper and he taught all the students how to make boxes, something that was part of his Chinese culture.

Having an equity lens means that teachers are on the alert for situations that might affect learning, such as celebration of a holiday in a manner that is not inclusive of all students. With an eye to equity, teachers pay attention to subtle messages like ensuring that crayons or supplies labeled as "flesh" are the color of students' skins. They explicitly value the use of primary languages and find ways to bring them into daily classroom life. They express genuine interest in where students' families come from, including specific countries in Africa, Asia, or Latin America or even different parts of the United States. They highlight the value of biculturalism as opposed to one-way assimilation and consider the unique challenges faced by biracial and multiethnic students who might not feel totally accepted by either group. These examples show that continually incorporating simple activities into the curriculum is more powerful than major cultural events that highlight differences as "otherness."

An equity lens also allows teachers to notice other kinds of difference that may not be as easy to see, like students with gay parents. Teachers can find ways to acknowledge many realities and differences in positive ways so that students do not feel singled out. Writing activities or opportunities to reflect on and to share from their personal lives give students the chance to connect with their backgrounds in a positive way that lets them be in control of the information that is disclosed. Reading literature that incorporates a wide range of issues and topics can signal support for students who have these differences and can serve as a teaching tool for the others.

Once students feel safe, discussions and activities that invite them to express their own thoughts and perspectives can lead to students thinking about and sharing how their social identities influence their experiences. Simple comments from teachers that show they are unbiased and do not tolerate teasing and prejudice go a long way to model acceptance in the class.

Julia reported,

When I was teaching fourth grade, I found that even in a classroom with all Latino students, differences in social status were present depending on how much English the child spoke or whether the child was born in the United States or Mexico. I found it difficult to alter the natural tendency of students to compare themselves to and compete with their peers, so I designed a game where students lined up based on where they were born in relationship to Oakland, where they attended school. Everyone got excited as they used a globe to discover that New York was actually farther away from Oakland than Tijuana. It was a good way to experience that they all had equal value no matter where they were born. Then the children wrote stories about where they were born.

Create an Environment of Acceptance and Equal Status

The complex process of creating an environment of acceptance can even mean changing the routine of the entire class to meet the needs of a particular student. Meera was aware of Andy's need to shift his image of himself to help him build relationships with his classmates:

Andy came to my class with a chip on his shoulder. He is the only African American boy in the entire fifth grade. He had moved to our school in third grade and was never really accepted by the other students. Academically, his performance was low, and he went to the literacy summer [intervention] program in third and fourth grade. By doing my interest inventory and surveys, I discovered he was really smart and where he needed the extra support and confidence.

I worked with him all year, giving him the benefit of the doubt and trusting him. Building that trust with him was the foundation of all learning that happened this year. Not only did I gain his trust, but also by having courageous conversations about race and diversity in the class, I was able to make the other kids see what a neat child Andy was. Andy learned to play and work together with all students. Students in my class stand up for him on the playground. He feels that he belongs.

To create a classroom environment of acceptance, teachers need to help build trust and a sense of mutual caring in the classroom. This effort is particularly important in racially and economically diverse classrooms,

especially when student academic achievement levels are associated with students' group identities. In a class where African American or Latino students are the minority, the risk of stereotype threat about their academic success is greater than in homogeneous classrooms.

For example, Ann drew on a nonacademic success to leverage status and acceptance for Rob:

Rob has learning disabilities that are making him stand out more and more in the class. He is becoming self-conscious as he realizes that he is different and that he can't do everything the other students can do. I found out that his favorite song is "Johnny Be Good" and that he and his brother imitate Chuck Berry and the band performing the song. I asked Rob if he would like to teach the class that song. He had to plan the lesson with his aide and ask another teacher for the words (she wrote them on easel paper). His father made a video of the boys performing. Rob did a good job "teaching," and the students loved the video. The whole class will start singing the refrain at times. Encouraging Rob to do this boosted his confidence and status in the class. Now all the students see him differently.

Rob's acceptance and subsequent elevated social status as a result of his musical performance enhanced his liking of school and eventually his connection with his classmates, which allowed him to feel safe to take risks in the academic arena. In an identity safe classroom, teachers find many pathways to spark interest and increase motivation to learn and achieve social and academic competence.

Encourage Cooperative Interdependence

When the IDS study group (author Beeki Cohn-Vargas's identity safety study group) studied about the common in-group identity theory (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000), they realized that much of what they did in their classrooms to create a sense of identity safety incorporated the notion called *decategorization*. This process shifts the focus on separate identities toward commonalities as individuals get to know one another. Students in their classrooms had lots of personal contact that helped them learn to appreciate each other as individuals without focusing on their differences. Yet, the teachers also recognized that decategorization alone is not enough and can actually be the basis for colorblind teaching practices.

Instead, the teachers learned that the theory described by Dovidio and Gaertner (2000) went further. It included *recategorization* within the

dual identity model that the researchers considered the most promising strategy for reducing prejudice and bringing diverse groups of people together. This dual identity model forms the basis of a noncolorblind, identity safe classroom, in which student subgroup identities are validated in the context of cooperative interdependence. In identity safe classrooms, students work together in cooperative groups for a shared goal, yet their individual and group identities (e.g., African American, Latino, Egyptian, and Israeli) can remain salient and valued. The dual identity model best promotes equal status in the classroom, because students feel they are validated for who they are—they feel more identity safe.

Julia highlighted different students' contributions in a safe and structured way. She used cooperative learning groups to teach her fifth grade students skills for working together, often changing leadership roles and group membership. She took time to point out unique qualities the different students brought to their roles. For example, she said, "Keisha is a good organizer who is able to make a list of the tasks needed to help her group finish the project." She pointed out how Miguel taught the others some sayings he learned from his grandmother in El Salvador that made their newspaper more interesting.

Maintaining the value of cooperative interdependence needs constant revisiting in the classroom, including when resolving incidents that take place on the schoolyard. Dorothy gave an example from her son's experience and in a fourth–sixth grade combination classroom:

All the boys wanted to play football during recess, but the older boys tended to be more successful in claiming the use of the football, leaving the fourth grade boys, like my son Benny, out of the game. This exclusion, of course, made Benny angry. He thought the whole setup was unfair. Benny's teacher knew that having such a mix of grade levels in her classroom created an imbalance of power; however, she had her hands full with this blended classroom. So her solution was to make the rule that once the students crossed the threshold of the classroom door after recess, no more discussion of playground events was allowed. Unfortunately for Benny, the consequence of continuing the playground conversation was to be "awarded" minutes, which meant he could not even go to the playground after a certain number of minutes were accumulated.

But these kids needed help. If the teacher had stopped to talk with the students to help them find another way to handle this conflict, they would have learned something about how to cooperate for everyone's benefit,

and the teacher would have to have been less dependent on her discipline tactic of keeping young boys off the playground when they needed to practice playing together and to get some exercise!

Help Students Get to Know One Another

One of the best ways to reduce stereotypes and prejudice is getting to know a person as an individual. One of the simplest strategies for teachers to foster mutual understanding is through grouping students. Becki shared,

I always shifted my groups to assure that all my students got a chance to work with everyone. They got to work with partners, sit in table groups, and engage in cooperative activities with each of the other students. I also took opportunities for my students to meet others outside their classrooms by having buddy classes that paired them with students in a different grade level. This gave them a chance to really get to know students from other backgrounds in a safe and supported way. This is one of the best ways to promote intercultural friendships and understanding.

Holding class meetings is another strategy teachers can use to enhance students' knowledge of one another. When held regularly, class meetings help students really learn about one another and see one another's strengths and interests. Class meetings can be held at the beginning or end of each day to either plan the day or to review how things went. Meetings can be focused on topics of interest linked to the curriculum in which students can see the knowledge and skill held by some students that have not been obvious to the class previously. Teachers may also use these meetings to encourage students to help solve problems in the classroom. For example, if students are having difficulties managing their use of computers, the teacher can engage them in finding a solution that allows all students to have access to the computers. This process will help the students identify with and carry out the new strategy for sharing. Though these meetings take some time, the benefit to students for creating a sense of belonging and community are priceless. This may lead to better helping behavior and cooperation, an enhanced ability to focus on learning, and a stronger sense of belonging for all students.

Expose Students to New Cultural Knowledge

Unfortunately, the tourist curriculum described earlier can actually reinforce stereotypes. The curriculum needs to extend beyond those

stereotypical images and embrace cultures represented in the classroom by weaving images and references from lived experiences into the daily life of the classroom. Simple activities can be done regularly and integrated right into the standards of the grade level.

For example, in the IDS study group we talked about how literature provides an entry point for talking about all kinds of differences and creates possibilities for open-ended discussions about race and culture. A rich array of multicultural literature is available, but it is up to teachers to help students link the literature to their lives. This literature can include folk tales, real-life stories, biographies, and expository texts that highlight contributions made by people from all cultures represented in the classroom. One example is an assignment entitled “a scientist like me” where students research scientists of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

In another example, Ken (Grade 4) described “cultural boxes” as an activity he does yearly to expose his students to new cultures and practices:

We do cultural boxes in the beginning of the year. Students each make an “apartment” using a 12-inch by 12-inch three-dimensional box. They do drawings and bring things from home to put in their apartments. They can share any special family celebration. We see all of these people in the boxes are celebrating family traditions. When we put the boxes up on the wall, each one is like an apartment in a building. The project also includes a piece of writing to describe the cultural box.

Another simple, yet powerful, way to promote knowledge of language and cultural practices is to ask students to share what they know with other students. During an English grammar lesson, a Chinese student lit up when Ken asked her to show the class how Mandarin is based on intonations. She smiled and shared a tongue twister in Mandarin. Learning about the Mandarin language helped give students a new appreciation for the differences in how languages work to the English speakers in his classroom.

These types of activities take minimal preparation time and yield many positive returns. Students love to share coins, games, food items, family celebrations, and toys that reflect their cultural backgrounds. Bringing parents into the classroom to read to students in their primary language, to read to the class and have their child translate into English, to share photos and stories from their families, or to describe the work they do introduces all the students to the parents’ knowledge and know-how and can create a strong sense of pride for the child of these visiting parents. Visits from family members and other role models are extremely

helpful, especially when the students do not have teachers from their own ethnic groups. Ann tried to invite every parent who was willing to come to her second grade classroom. This invitation served as a source of pride to both the child and the parent.

Karen wanted her fifth grade students to meet successful people from their racial/ethnic backgrounds. She invited one of her professors to speak to her class:

The professor brought toys she played with as a little girl, and she told about all of her experiences from Mexico. As soon as the professor came in, Elena [a student in the class] looked at me and was glowing; she was front and center. And she recognized a lot of the toys. Now I realize that I need to go out into the community and find more people who are willing to come in.

Ken had a stream of college students come to his fourth grade classroom, because, as young people, their stories of how they got to college could motivate his students. The IDS study group members agreed that seeing a person who represented their ethnic background helps to build confidence in the students of color. But something else important happens. Having successful visitors from different backgrounds confirms for white students, too, that people from many backgrounds make important contributions to our society.

Address the Hard Conversations About Race and Culture in Curriculum

At home, students are exposed to television that depicts stereotypical views of different racial groups and often profiles people of color as criminals. To give students tools to deconstruct the myths and counteract negative images, Karen and Meera brought news items, magazines, and movies to class as alternative sources of information on race and culture. They were cognizant that in spite of progress, history books still tell the story of the past from a dominant, or mainstream, perspective. To broaden their students’ perspectives, they taught the students to critically analyze cultural examples found in the media and texts that reinforce negative stereotypes. This analysis, known as *critical multiculturalism*, is an approach that teaches students to understand racial situations. Students are taught to take a critical look at situations and current events through an equity lens in the context of historical inequities (Nieto, 1998).

Even very young children are able to participate in a critical analysis. Dorothy described her amazement when her second grade son was “required” to watch Saturday morning cartoons by his teacher.

The students' job was to look for gender and racial stereotyping in the cartoons. And her son, who was previously not supposed to watch TV on Saturday morning, was one happy analyst!

Starting in kindergarten, students are aware of race and stereotypes (Ambady, Shih, Kim, & Pitinsky, 2001). Determined to raise awareness of equity for her first grade students, Becki taught about the Montgomery bus boycott by having the students do a very simple play. They set up rows of chairs and took the parts of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, the bus driver, and community members, simply reenacting the story of how the right to sit anywhere on the bus was won. At the age of six, students easily understood how unfair it was to force African American people to sit in the back of the bus. These young students could appreciate how unjust these laws were because of their own very age-appropriate concern for fairness.

Karen used current news items to involve her fifth grade students in real conversations about race and discrimination:

Armando never talked about his background. He had a quiet connection with his family's origins. He's very empathetic and tolerant of all cultures, very caring, and paid attention to detail with other kids. He needed more confidence with his self-image and the image of his culture. He didn't want to talk about it at first. He didn't want it to come up. At times we had multicultural activities with sharing and listening, and we had several difficult conversations based on student questions. Armando listened intently, although he didn't participate.

Only after Elena, his classmate, repeatedly talked about her culture, did he bring in a current event item about immigration. This, in turn, motivated Elena to share a distressing news article about a noncommercial video game highlighting immigration. The person playing the game gets points for shooting Mexicans as they try to cross the border.

This distressing article, shared by a student, gave all the students in the class an opportunity to think about and discuss how such games affect others' sense of belonging and safety. Clearly, Elena felt safe enough to share something that could have made her feel vulnerable. Elena's teacher, Karen, described another conversation prompted by another article brought to class by Elena.

Well, Elena brought a *Newsweek* article (with a picture captioned "Web of Hate, Scene From the Anti-Immigration Border Patrol")

[Reno, 2006]) and said "Look, Mrs. B.," and she wanted to share it with the class. She said, "This is the kind of video games they're coming up with, shooting the Mexicans when they come over the border."

Well, you know what Elena said after this? "California's one of the strongest states with the most money, and that is on the backs of my cousins. They work down in Modesto. And they work really hard, and they sometimes can't even go home to Mexico." She was heated about it.

Karen had a teachable moment that led to a critical look at history and current racial discrimination. She provided a way for the children to understand the news items and to deal with the feelings of Elena and Armando and the other students as they learned about the harsh realities of racism.

News coverage about devastating hurricanes and floods brought up issues of race in Meera's fifth grade class. She asked her students to look critically and weigh the evidence:

Take something like New Orleans. Previously, we had a discussion about race, and just today when we saw there was flooding in New Hampshire; I asked, "Do you think the government is going to act the same way it acted in New Orleans?" One of my kids raised her hand and said, "No I don't think it is going to happen that way, the reason being in New Orleans there are a lot of African Americans and in New Hampshire, there are a lot of white people, so the government is going to act differently." Another student said, "They probably learned something from the New Orleans flood, and they are more prepared." And somebody else said, "New Orleans people must feel pretty unhappy because they didn't fix those levees."

Research on racial identity formation posits that as children grow up, they accumulate experiences that lead them to develop positive or negative racial and ethnic identities (Nieto, 1999; Tatum, 1997). A critical multicultural approach used in an age-appropriate way helps students from both nondominant and dominant groups to develop positive identities for themselves and genuine acceptance and appreciation of others. Students of color learn to combat stereotype threat and find their voice. All students, whether from dominant or other backgrounds, learn to deconstruct stereotypes and critique their own behavior and what they see around them. This empowerment has an equalizing effect on status for all the students.

Address and Intervene in Incidents of Stereotyping, Stereotype Threat, and Racism

It was good to have several grade levels represented in the IDS study group because the teachers came to realize that incidents involving stereotyping happen at every grade level. It is incumbent on us as teachers to use age-appropriate ways to respond to bias and stereotypes. Meera shared a turning point for her son at the age of four:

I have to tell you about my son; his name is Siddhartha and it is a long name. All his young life, he had heard only the name Siddhartha. When he was in preschool, his teacher thought that name was too long. So, she called him Sid, and he didn't respond. So, his teacher said, "Might I call you Sid?" And he answered, "No, my name is Siddhartha; my name is not Sid." He was only four years old, and he wanted to be called Siddhartha. Since then all his friends have learned his name, and all his teachers have called him Siddhartha.

Another way to address stereotype threat is to approach it proactively, without singling out any of the students. Yesenia, one of Meera's students, experienced stereotype threat because she had been held back a grade:

She's a year older than a typical fifth grader. She's 11, but what happened is she never wanted to tell her age. Her mom came to me at the beginning of the year saying that to whomever she met, she'd say that she was 10 years old. Her mom said, "I don't want her to feel like she's one of the older kids." I decided to do an activity in class that would get all the students to tell their ages without Yesenia feeling singled out. So, I asked them about their birthdays and asked how many were 11. She looked around and found that there were five kids older than she was.

In addition to unspoken stereotype threat, Meera heard overt racist comments and stereotypical attitudes expressed in her classroom. Meera taught her students about speaking up:

When Andy came to our school, people immediately assumed that he was being bused like most of our other African American students. His dad is a neurosurgeon at the local university medical school, and he lives near our school. It was an assumption, and so we have had a lot of discussion about racism, and I think the kids do notice when it happens.

Actually, Andy brings it up very nicely. "My brother Will was on this tee ball team; it was a local team, and another boy says to his mother, 'Is that brown boy on our team?' My mom felt really bad, but she didn't say anything. I told my mom, you should speak up; that is what Mrs. O. said to do."

Intervening also requires teachers to address uncomfortable subjects that do not have simple answers. Meera (Grade 5) talked about one boy, Avi, an Israeli, who spoke of how he was worried about the missiles falling on his relatives. Another boy, Ahmed, was Egyptian, and he told Meera he had cousins in Lebanon, saying, "We haven't been able to talk to them." Meera says of these exchanges,

It's really hard to bring those issues up in the classroom, but I understand that they're here. I told them, "Your parents are from there, but you're American; we're all Americans." I even said, "I come from India, but I'm an American, and yes, things that happen in our [ancestral] countries bother us."

Recently Avi and Ahmed had a play date. It turned out both their moms spoke Arabic, and they realized they had much in common and traded recipes. So, lots of issues come up with all the different kids that we have. We talk about globalization and have people from around the globe, right in our classroom.

Karen helped her students deal with the emotions that result from examining racism and other of the world's many harsh realities. She explained to them "It's okay to be angry. But let's take a look at that anger and why it's happening. It's hard to do, but it's well worth the time." In identity safe classrooms, teachers need to be self-reflective about their own stereotypes and, through that understanding, allow for differing student opinions. Reflection is an ongoing process of examining one's own assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes. This practice, combined with the willingness to have often difficult, but usually powerful, conversations with students, will help them learn to question assumptions. These choices are not easy and require constant negotiation, judgment calls, and vigilance to avoid overreacting or making errors of omission.

Support Students With Two Same-Gender Parents

Many teachers feel anxious about discussing issues pertaining to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. While "don't ask, don't tell" policies have been eliminated from the army, and laws protect against

homophobic slurs and harassment, most schools, particularly elementary schools, still do not address these issues. In 2010, five gay teen suicides in a three-week period in the United States put a spotlight on homophobic bullying and harassment, which often starts in grade school. Schools continue to be very unsafe places for LGBT teachers and students as well as for children of LGBT parents. Bullying also impacts learning and achievement. LGBT teachers are often silenced by fear, and students do not even get the benefit of the many LGBT role models who are working in schools. Becki reported,

Individual teachers claim they are unsure of how to address these topics and worry that they will be perceived as promoting a gay lifestyle. In other cases, teachers and administrators have said that elementary school students are too young to discuss sex. I always answer that while the discussion of sex is included in specific parts of the curriculum, the discussion of safety is needed at all times for all students. I tell them that it is crucial that students know that homophobic comments are not acceptable, and that when teachers address this issue, students need to hear that there are different types of couples in the world, including two men and two women. All have a right to feel safe.

For the same reason that we believe colorblind practices are a barrier to students thriving in school, we believe that teachers cannot create identity safe classrooms without specifically including all students, including those who may be invisibly experiencing homophobia, whether they personally don't fit standard gender roles or whether they have LGBT family members. Becki described,

In my primarily Latino school, I had a first grade student, Isaac, with two moms. They were happy to help out, and that was a natural way to show Isaac and the whole class that having two moms was one of the many family constellations. We also had students living with grandparents, with single moms or dads, and in foster homes.

Teachers can get support for having such discussions from the films about different kinds of families, curriculum materials, and library books that are available.

Becki added,

As a curriculum director, I made this part of new teacher training. We brought in speakers, often LGBT high school or college

students with similar ethnicities to our students, who shared how they were harassed on a daily basis, often beginning in elementary school. On one occasion, I brought a panel of high school students back to their own elementary school. One of the presenters said that she remembered her fifth grade teacher made a very simple general comment about the many types of couples and families in the world that included two men or two women and that was what made our world such a great place. That comment stuck with her, as she already began questioning her sexual orientation beginning in elementary school. The teacher, who was present in the session, never expected such a passing comment to make such an impact.

CHALLENGES AND DILEMMAS

Taking on the challenges and dilemmas of using diversity as a resource in a meaningful and powerful way involves

1. reframing the way we think about classroom diversity in the first place,
2. accepting the fact that it may seem like an overwhelming topic,
3. addressing race in the classroom, and
4. recognizing that whether we are teaching about race or not, we are actually always teaching about race and diversity.

Reframing the Way We Think About Classroom Diversity

The dilemma with reframing how we think about diversity is that it requires teachers to have the capacity to “know what they don’t know.” It means recognizing the ways that we might have approached student difference as a problem and shifting to think of it as a rich teaching resource. It means not being colorblind, but thinking about diversity as a positive element in the classroom—not one to be ignored. Further, the primary role of the teacher is not simply to prevent discrimination or name calling; it is to facilitate a process in which students get to know, respect, and depend on one another and to understand the various perspectives held by each other.

Consider When It Is Appropriate to Address Race in the Classroom

The first step is to become an observer of one’s practice while being actively engaged. This is not an easy task, but it is needed to make a safe environment for all students. Student identity is continually shaped not



PUTTING DIVERSITY AS A RESOURCE FOR TEACHING INTO PRACTICE

1. Using diversity as a resource for teaching requires teachers to continually reflect on their own attitudes, behaviors, and identities.

- Think about what makes you feel identity safe as a teacher in your building.

- What experiences in school shaped your own identity as a student?

2. Students need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, drawing both from their own personal lives, music, tradition, languages, and community role models and from the formal content of history and literature. Select two students and identify some natural ways to infuse their lives into the classroom.

Student	Cultural/Language Background	Activity

(Continued)

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only by the media and the family but also on the playground by fellow students or through subtle messages experienced vis-à-vis power dynamics in the classroom (Lewis, 2003). Teachers should not be reticent to address stereotyping issues “too early” because, just like other important concepts such as fairness and honesty, when students have experiences with racism or sexism they need help in understanding and learning what to do in a developmentally appropriate manner. Although it is hard to know exactly when and how to bring up issues of racism or sexism, groundwork needs to be laid to be ready to address it when a teachable moment occurs for students at any age.

Accept the Fact That It Seems Like an Overwhelming Topic

We have discussed many elements included in using diversity as a resource for teaching, and it may seem like an impossibly complex issue to tackle. It is true that our understandings and practices of social identities are in constant flux. But, as teachers develop in their own understanding, they will become more skilled at including these elements, such as working to create an equal, accepting, cooperative classroom where students get to know one another and learn to appreciate each other’s various perspectives and histories. Teachers and students will become more confident in addressing overt racism or sexism when their efforts are seen as learning steps and not mistakes to be punished.

We Are Teaching About Race and Diversity, Whether We Intend to or Not

Finally, teachers are teaching about race, gender, and status whether they intend to or not. If we ignore difference or make it a problem, we are teaching that to the students. When students’ life experiences are disregarded, it says to students that who you are and what you know do not matter here. When we group children for learning in color-coded ways, it says some students are smart and some are not. It gives the whole class the image that capacity is fixed and not enhanced by experience and practice. So, teachers, take courage and take charge of the messages you give your students, so they can learn, along with you, how to become more inclusive.

(Continued)

3. What are some ways to foster a process in which students of different racial, ethnic, and gender groups get to know one another and work as a team toward greater learning goals while still validating their differences?

Objective	Activity
Build a sense of team in your class	
Celebrate classroom diversity in the context of the whole group	

4. What are some age-appropriate ways you can help students to learn the value of multiple perspectives and to critically analyze content from a range of sources?

Objective of the Lesson	Activity
Respect differing opinions of their classmates	
Critically analyze history	
Critically analyze current events	
Learn about multiple global perspectives	

High Expectations 8 and Academic Rigor

WHY HIGH EXPECTATIONS AND ACADEMIC RIGOR?

Combining high expectations with true academic rigor allows students to develop skills while building confidence and a stronger sense of competence. How many times have we been proven wrong by a child who surpassed our expectations? Are we communicating to our students that they are capable and that as their teachers we have high expectations for their success? Importantly, positive presuppositions—the assurance that we are confident in their capacity to learn—goes beyond isolated comments. Our assumptions are conveyed in every verbal and nonverbal message we give to our students, both individually and as a group.

Meera told the IDS study group that she worried that about Carlota, a shy and extremely perceptive girl who watched the other fifth grade students like a hawk and always compared herself to them. So Meera tried a new technique to communicate her expectations:

I purposely walked by many times so I would actually catch a glimpse of something, and I'd point out, "Oh, that is really good, what you're doing." And Carlota looked at me like, "Oh! You mean I don't have to hide my work?"

Sometimes in the beginning, she was fudging, and that was really hard. I had to tell her, "It's okay, and we don't have to know everything. If you're going to know everything in fifth grade when you come, what am I going to teach you? It would be so boring, because I won't have anything to teach you."

Karen (Grade 5) had a similar feeling about Armando. He was very thoughtful, but it took time for him to express himself, so often other students overshadowed him. She let him know that better ideas often emerge