

Building a Community that Includes All Learners

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“Can I read mine first?” Benji asked, as we gathered at the carpet to celebrate our latest round of independent writing. Benji took his spot in the “comfy chair” and began to read his realistic fiction piece aloud to his fifth grade classmates. This was truly a moment for celebration, because Benji based his tale on his own life experiences with an autistic brother, a topic he had been reticent about. His story showed how a group of friends could come together to support a boy like his brother, appreciate his unique abilities, and learn that he could be a friend. Benji knew that, in our classroom community, diversity would not only be accepted, but also honored.

As fourth and fifth grade teachers, we believe that “building a strong, cohesive classroom community is the foundation of a successful classroom.”¹ We know that for community building to be successful, every learner must feel valued and included. In order for students to be available for learning, they must develop a comfort level in the classroom community. Students need to feel safe before they will take risks that will allow them to embrace new ideas and perspectives. During the first week of school, we begin the important work of empowering students so that they will be eager about the journey of cognitive growth all through the year.

In addition to building community, we seek to ensure that our students develop an appreciation for diversity in their world. We believe that “schools and classrooms should be laboratories for a more just society than the one we now live in.”² Every decision we make about resources and activities is designed to reach all students and create a culture that embraces and promotes social justice education. To that end, we plan lessons that promote global citizenry and a sense of individual empowerment from the very first week of school in September to the last week of school in June.

Every Student Can Shine

One way to engage all students and ensure that they feel valued within a classroom is to provide opportunities for learning that tap into varied intelligences. According to Howard Gardner, “It is of the utmost importance that we recognize and nurture



all of the varied human intelligences, and all of the combinations of intelligences.”³ Because this reflects our thinking, we plan lessons that embrace more than one way of knowing. As a result, we have worked to “expand our repertoire of techniques, tools, and strategies beyond the typical linguistic and logical ones predominantly used in U.S. classrooms.”⁴ We incorporate activities that honor multiple intelligences right from the start of our school year. When we offer possibilities within our lessons in this way, we enable students to experience success, which, in turn, encourages them to reach beyond their comfort level at subsequent points during the year. In this article, we share a set of lessons that we incorporate to achieve the goals that we have set forth above: build community, set the tone for an appreciation of diversity, and tap into various intelligences to foster a sense of competence within our students.

Interpreting Quotes

Early in September, we distributed a list of quotes to students.



Each quote was by a notable person, and each contained a message pertaining to diversity. Students worked with a randomly assigned partner to choose a quote that resonated with them. Examples of the quotes that we offered the students include:

- Diversity is not about how we differ. Diversity is about embracing one another's uniqueness —Ola Joseph
- You don't get harmony when everybody sings the same note. —Doug Floyd
- It is often easier to become outraged by injustice half a world away than oppression and discrimination half a block from home. —Carl T. Rowan
- I didn't belong as a kid, and that always bothered me. If only I'd known that one day my differentness would be an asset, my earlier life would have been much easier. —Bette Midler
- I hate categories. I think they demean people. —Quincy Jones

After selecting a quote, students met with their partners to

discuss the meaning of the quote; they then shared their thinking with the whole class. We encouraged students to ask inferential questions to build deeper understanding and push each other's thinking. We had previously taught this skill in reading, where we explained the difference between literal questions (which require only simple "yes" or "no" answers) and inferential questions (which promote further thinking and generate discussion). For example, Aaron asked, "Why do you think people like to help people in other countries, but sometimes don't take care of people in their own neighborhood?" Lauren wondered, "How do you think being different was hard for Bette Midler when she was young?" Other students offered their thoughts regarding these questions, pushing them to go beyond their initial ideas and leading to deeper thinking.

During our discussion of the quotes, students talked about how the ideas related to themselves. For example, Michael and Kristyn shared Thomas Edison's words, "If we did all the things we are capable of, we would literally astound ourselves." They talked about how good they feel when they accomplish new things. Jorge added, "If we thought about everything we could accomplish, we might be amazed at what we can do, instead of what we can't do!" One pair introduced a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., "Take the first step in faith. You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step." In response to



student wrote, “I am good at reading. It makes me feel relaxed. I’m not so good at spelling. My biggest struggle is Big words. I know I have someone to help me—that someone is my teacher.”

As a follow up to this lesson, we read aloud *My Brother Charlie*,⁶ in which a girl tells the reader about her autistic younger brother and shares the challenges he faces when trying to make friends. However, she also describes the ways in which he is more successful in certain areas than other children his age. For example, ten year-old Charlie knows the names of every United States president, and he is an excellent piano player.

After reading this book, we brainstormed answers that might complete the sentence starters, “I need help with _____” and “I can help with _____.” We then asked each student to complete two index cards finishing the prompts. For example, students might either be able to help or to need help with memorizing multiplication facts, researching on the computer, packing their book bags at the end of the day, finding an activity to occupy them at

that, Sophia said, “Sometimes I’m afraid to try new things that I might not be able to do well. But you don’t have to be perfect; that’s not how it works in this world.”

I Can Help / I Need Help

During our discussions about the quotes, we noticed that many students were particularly intrigued by the idea that every individual possesses both areas of strength and areas of weakness. We decided to seize upon this teachable moment by offering another community building lesson. We felt that by further exploring this thinking, we might empower our students to take greater risks as learners.

To begin, we read *Eddie: Harold’s Little Brother*,⁵ in which former New York City Mayor Ed Koch describes how he eventually became interested in politics because of his penchant for public speaking. However, this natural talent did not become evident to him until after he had failed to achieve success as a member of his older brother’s pick-up baseball team. After reading this book, we asked students to write about something that they can do well and something that they would like to do better. One student wrote, “I am good at soccer. When I play, it makes me feel good. I am not so good at math. When I might be stuck on a problem someone explains it to me again, and I feel cared for because someone wants to help me improve.” Another

recess, or choosing a just right book to read. The completed cards were displayed on a classroom bulletin board, and students were encouraged to refer to them throughout the year either to seek help from or offer help to their classmates. A few of our students offered to help one another “learn how to play Sudoku” and “reorganize their cubbies.” They asked for help with “studying for vocabulary quizzes” and “making friends at lunch.”

Bringing It Together

As a culminating activity, partners created a colorful poster depicting their original quote. Students enjoyed the opportunity to incorporate the visual arts as they worked together to produce pieces that mirrored their thinking after the class conversations about the quotes. All of the posters were then displayed on the walls of the classroom, instantly providing students with a sense of ownership over their learning space.

This series of lessons was an excellent way to begin the school year because, not only did the lessons allow students to interact with a new classmate, but they also enabled every student to feel successful. Additionally, they tapped into multiple intelligences, including intrapersonal (choosing a quote that speaks to me, thinking about my strengths and weaknesses), interpersonal (working in a partnership), linguistic (discussing the meaning of

the quote and explaining it to the class, talking about the books), and spatial and kinesthetic (designing and creating a poster).

The efficacy of the quote activities did not end once the posters were on the wall. Students often referred back to the quotes, connecting them to other ideas that we explored during the year. For example, during a class discussion concerning the ways peers can support each other by banding together against bullies, one student pointed to a poster on the wall and exclaimed, “It’s like Gandhi said: you have to be the change you want to see in the world.” The students talked more about how they are often afraid to take a stand and instead go along with the crowd. Amy finally suggested, “Think about what happens when everyone sings the same note. It’s like following other people, so I have to be a leader.”

Framing the Rest of the Year

Throughout the year, we continued to incorporate activities and lessons that reflected our opening goals of celebrating diversity within both the classroom and greater communities. Rather than mark holidays in traditional ways, we used these moments as opportunities for delivering lessons about the value of diversity. For example, when Halloween rolled around, we read *The Graves Family*,⁷ a book that, judged solely by its cover, seems to be a spooky ode to that favorite day of the year. However, upon closer examination, this story offers an important message: we need not fear one another’s differences; instead we should celebrate what makes us unique.

In geography, after discussing the politics of map-making, we asked students to think about why certain continents are traditionally placed “on top” or “in the center” of the world in flat maps. We recited our mantra: “Who benefits from the status quo? Who might suffer as a result?” Next, we displayed an “upside-down” map of the world on the wall (with south at the top of the poster) with this question beneath the map: “Why is it important to have an upside-down map in our classroom?”⁸ Students enjoyed sharing their knowledge with visitors, who invariably repeated that query. “This map,” students would answer, “reminds us that people around the world have different perspectives, which we need to respect and appreciate.”

Measuring Success

During the last week of school we typically take time to reflect and ask our students to do the same. In June, we had students look back at the quotes that had graced the walls of our room since early September. After a year of penning poems that spoke to the injustice of slavery, writing essays that decried the unfairness of “ableism,” and reading books that embodied themes of conquering bullying through bystander action, our students had some new ideas to offer. Jessica explained that she had been inspired by Anne Frank’s words, “How wonderful it is that no one need wait a single moment before starting to change the world.” She was proud to have written a letter to the assistant principal asking him to change the basketball

intramural rules to make it fair for everyone. Jeffrey, a student with many friends, added, “I realized this year that I can make a change. It can start with me.”

Jeffrey had made a point to invite students who sat alone at lunch to join him at his table. This seemingly simple gesture inspired other students to be more inclusive during recess activities as well. Other students described ways that they had tried to change the world through their social action writing projects. For example, Philip, who had struggled with his parents’ recent divorce, wrote a book review about *Families*, by Susan Kuklin.⁹ In that book, children from 14 very different families talk about how and why they identify the group they live with as “a family.” In his book review, Philip made connections between his life and the experiences of a girl with divorced parents. Philip gave copies of his review to other fourth and fifth grade teachers, suggesting that they purchase the book and make it available to their students.

Back in September, Philip and his classmates had read and studied a set of quotes (by famous people) about diversity. As the end of the school year approached, Philip made a comment worthy of inclusion with that collection, “Now I look at the world differently. I think we can be individuals.”

Building a community that includes all learners takes more than one afternoon. In our classroom, the theme of diversity was revisited on numerous occasions and in different ways—as students studied history, geography, literature, and poetry; improved their own writing abilities; and stretched their social skills. When we finally said goodbye to our students in June, we hoped they would continue on their way, aware of their strengths, prepared to embrace diversity, confident that they could overcome future obstacles, and just a bit more empowered to create a better world for themselves and their classmates. 🌍

Notes

1. Mara Sapon-Shevin, *Because We Can Change the World* (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), xi.
2. Bill Bigelow, Linda Christensen, Stan Karp, Barbara Miner, and Bob Peterson, *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, Ltd., 2000), 4.
3. Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2000), 1.
4. Armstrong, 38.
5. Pat Koch Thaler and Edward T. Koch, *Eddie: Harold’s Little Brother* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2004).
6. Holly Robinson Peete and Ryan Elizabeth Peete with Denene Miller, *My Brother Charlie* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010).
7. Patricia Polacco, *The Graves Family* (New York: Philomel Books, 2003).
8. ODTmaps.com, “Many ways to see the world.”
9. Susan Kuklin, *Families* (New York: Hyperion Books, 2006).

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