CREATING AN ANTI-BIAS LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The commencement of the school year provides an excellent opportunity for educators to assess their classroom and school's multicultural efficacy.

Educational environments that reflect the rich diversity of the community, nation and world assist in opening students' minds and actively engaging them in their learning. Research has shown that prejudice is countered when educational environments foster critical thinking, empathy development and positive self-esteem in students. See the checklist at the end of this article for some criteria for creating positive, anti-bias environments where respect for diversity is taught, modeled, and experienced firsthand.

TALKING WITH STUDENTS ABOUT DIVERSITY AND BIAS

It is important for teachers to think about how they can most effectively raise the complex issues of hate, bias, scapegoating, and exclusion with their students.

Educators should keep in mind that conversations about understanding and respect should not be limited to a commemorative event, or other special programs, holidays or activities but instead, should be a part of everyday business in the classroom. Creating inclusive, respectful classrooms is an ongoing effort, and working for social justice is a life-long endeavor. (See also Dos and Don'ts with Special Diversity Events.)

To prepare for successfully raising issues of diversity and bias in the classroom, teachers should attempt to make the following practices an integral part of their daily practice:

1. Self-Exploration

Examine personal cultural biases and assumptions. Explore personal perceptions and understanding of situations by developing an awareness of personal cultural "filters."

2. Comprehensive Integration

Integrate culturally diverse information/perspectives into all aspects of teaching. Consider moving beyond the constraints of a cultural history month by incorporating multiple perspectives into all aspects of the curriculum.

3. Time and Maturation

Allow time for a process to develop. Introduce less complex topics at first, and create time to establish trust. Begin discussions by developing ground rules that allow for honest discussion within a respectful context. Recognize that the long history of mistrust between people in different groups will influence classroom discussions.

4. Accepting Environment

Establish an environment that allows for mistakes. Since most people have been unconsciously acculturated into prejudicial and stereotypical thinking, individuals may not be aware that certain attitudes are hurtful to others. Acknowledge that intolerant thinking will surface from time to time in others and ourselves. Educators should model non-defensive responses when told that something they said or did was offensive to someone. Assume good will and make that assumption a common practice in the classroom.

5. Intervention

Be prepared to respond to purposely-directed acts of bias. Students will carefully observe how educators intervene when someone is the target of discriminatory or hate-based behavior. Silence in the face of injustice conveys the impression that prejudicial behavior is condoned or not worthy of attention. Make it clear to students and their families that name-calling will not be allowed in the classroom. Appropriate and timely intervention is critical in establishing a safe classroom environment where all students can succeed.

6. Life-long Learning

Keep abreast of current anti-bias education issues and discuss them with students. Clip articles from newspapers and magazines and post them in the classroom. Educators should let students know that they consider themselves learners, and that they see themselves as part of the learning process.

7. Discovery Learning

Avoid "preaching" to students about how they should behave. Research indicates that exhortation is

the least effective methodology for changing prejudiced attitudes; in fact, it often produces a result opposite from the desired effect. Provide opportunities for students to resolve conflicts, solve problems, work in diverse teams and think critically about information.

8. Life Experiences

Provide opportunities for students to share life experiences; choose literature that will help students develop empathy. Make the classroom a place where students' experiences are not marginalized, trivialized or invalidated. Prejudice and discrimination have a unique impact on each individual. Students and their families develop a variety of coping strategies based upon the type and frequency of discrimination they have experienced. It is never fruitful to engage in a debate over who has suffered the most. Oppression is harmful to all people in all of its forms.

9. Resources Review

Review materials so that classroom displays and bulletin boards are inclusive of all people. Insure that supplemental books and videos do not reinforce existing societal stereotypes. When such examples in textbooks are observed, point them out to students and encourage students to think about them critically and to challenge them.

10. Home-School-Community Connection

Involve parents, other family members and other community members in the learning process. Understand that families and others in the community provide the context in which students are motivated to learn. It is important not to view the school and the home or school and the community as isolated from one another; but rather to examine how they interconnect with each other and with the world.

11. Examine the Classroom Environment

What is present and absent in the school classroom provides children with important information about who and what is important. Every effort should be made to create a setting that is rich in possibilities for exploring cultural diversity. Such an environment assists children in developing their ideas about themselves and others, creates the conditions under which children initiate conversations about differences and provides teachers with a setting for introducing activities about diversity. It also fosters children's positive self-concept and attitudes.

ASSESSING YOURSELF & YOUR SCHOOL CHECKLIST

Provided by: ADL's Education Division, A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE® Institute

Part I. Assessing Yourself

How effective are you in promoting a bias-free educational environment?	I haven't thought about this.	I need to do this better.	I do this well.
1. Have you recently read any books or articles, or watched any documentaries to increase your understanding of the particular hopes, needs and concerns of students and families from the different cultures that make up your school community and beyond?	[　]	[　]	[　]
2. Have you participated in professional development opportunities to enhance your understanding of the complex characteristics of racial, ethnic and cultural groups in the U.S.?	[　]	[　]	[　]
3. Do you try to listen with an open mind to all students and colleagues, even when you don't understand their perspectives or agree with what they're saying?	[　]	[　]	[　]
4. Have you taken specific actions to dispel misconceptions, stereotypes or prejudices that members of one group have about members of another group at your school?	[　]	[　]	[　]
5. Do you strive to avoid actions that might be offensive to members of other groups?	[　]	[　]	[　]
6. Do you discourage patterns of informal discrimination, segregation or exclusion of members of particular groups from school clubs, committees and other school activities?	[　]	[　]	[　]
7. Do the curricular content and wall displays in your classroom reflect the experiences and perspectives of the cultural groups that make up the school and its surrounding community?	[　]	[　]	[　]
8. Have you evaluated classroom materials and textbooks to ensure they do not reinforce stereotypes and that they provide fair and appropriate treatment of all groups?	[　]	[　]	[　]
9. Do you use classroom methods, such as cooperative learning, role-playing and small group discussions to meet the needs of students' different learning styles?	[　]	[　]	[　]
10. Do students have opportunities to engage in problem-solving groups that address real issues with immediate relevance to their lives?	[　]	[　]	[　]
11. Do you use a range of strategies, in addition to traditional testing methods, to assess student learning?	[　]	[　]	[　]

Part II. Assessing Your School

How effective is your school in promoting a bias-free educational environment?	We haven't thought about this.	We need to do this better.	We do this well.
1. Does the school's mission statement communicate values of respect, equity and inclusion?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
2. Do students typically interact with one another in positive, respectful ways?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
3. Do the school's symbols, signs, mascots and insignias reflect respect for diversity?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
4. Do celebrations, festivals and special events reflect a variety of cultural groups and holidays?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
5. Is the school staff (administrative, instructional, counseling and supportive) representative of the racial, ethnic and cultural groups that comprise the surrounding community?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
6. Are staff or volunteers available who are fluent in the languages of families in the school community?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
7. Do students, families and staff share in the decision-making process for the school?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
8. Has the school community collaboratively developed written policies and procedures to address harassment and bullying?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
9. Are consequences associated with harassment and bullying policy violations enforced equitably and consistently?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
10. Do the instructional materials used in the classroom and available in the school library, including text books, supplementary books and multimedia resources, reflect the experiences and perspectives of people of diverse backgrounds?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
11. Are equitable opportunities for participation in extra- and co-curricular activities made available to students of all gender, ability, and socioeconomic groups?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
12. Do faculty and staff have opportunities for systematic, comprehensive and continuing professional development designed to increase cultural understanding and promote student safety?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]
13. Does the school conduct ongoing evaluations of the goals, methods and instructional materials used in teaching to ensure they reflect the histories, contributions and perspectives of diverse groups?	[ ]	[ ]	[ ]

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