Building Cultural Perspectives

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Introduction

This curriculum seeks to provide middle school teachers with a way into discussing and discouraging prejudices that may exist in the classroom. I was inspired by my own middle school experiences, as the faculty and administration neglected to address the outright discrimination and verbal bullying that was occurring among my classmates. I believe that it is crucial for students of this age group to learn to accept and value differences, and I will provide concrete activities to assist in reaching this goal. However, this does not mean that elementary and high school teachers should create a neutral space and avoid engaging students in issues relating to diversity. I created the activities with a middle school age group in mind, but they can certainly be adjusted for use in an elementary or high school setting. I outlined a curriculum in the hopes that it would be incorporated as a pervasive aspect of school life, rather than as a supplement to academics. Lawrence Blum addresses this as one of his goals in teaching a class on race and racism: “Third, I want all the students to come to recognize that racial issues are a matter of serious academic study, not only of something personally or emotionally important” (Blum, 88). I encourage teachers to connect the activities that I provide to other academic subjects and assignments. Educators are advised to make adjustments based off the needs and interests of a specific group of students, in the hopes that this will lead to more stimulating discussions.

*I believe this curriculum will serve three purposes: 1) Provide teachers with concrete ways to create solidarity in the classroom 2) Teach students to respect differences and to empathize with others 3) Prevent violence and bullying among students.*

In their book *Creating Solidarity Across Diverse Communities*, Sleeter and Soriano have compiled a series of articles that illustrate the importance of establishing solidarity within the classroom. They state that solidarity allows individuals to work through and communicate their differences in order to create “a dynamic sense of ‘we’” (Sleeter & Soriano, 8). They proceed to identify dialogue and empathy as key ingredients for solidarity to be reached. Dialogue can serve to promote understanding and respect among students of different cultural backgrounds (Ramos, 45). By engaging in conversations about differences, students are given the opportunity to consider and value the backgrounds of their fellow classmates, without necessarily reaching agreement on all opinions and beliefs. I agree that there is considerable value in establishing a classroom environment that promotes dialogue. However, I believe teachers need to be given concrete examples of ways to foster a sense of solidarity among their students. Simply telling educators to “promote dialogue” does not provide for much guidance on what this will look like and how to best approach it. For this reason, I aim to give explicit examples for middle school teachers through this curriculum. I have outlined activities that directly address differences, similarities, perceptions, and biases, among other topics. The activities are structured so that students communicate with each other about their family histories, the histories of various groups, and conflicts between groups.

The same issue exists for teaching students empathy, the ability to place oneself in the perspective of another person. Incorporating the development of empathy into the classroom is crucial, as it is possible to teach this skill both directly and indirectly. Empathetic students are more cooperative and less violent, since aggression is less of an immediate response to those who are able to see the world through the lens of another person (Aronson, 113). Since empathy and solidarity go hand in hand, I have incorporated empathy building as a component within a few of the activities.

Finally, we cannot address prejudices or biases within the classroom without directly discussing bullying and aggression against peers. It has been found that schools with low levels of peer aggression allow students to partake in the prevention of school violence, as well as play a role in decisions relating to acts of aggression and the maintenance of a positive environment. These schools rarely resort to isolating, expelling, or suspending aggressors, but rather, promote an intervention based on inclusive principles (Lopez, et al. 28-30). On the other hand, schools with high levels of peer aggression inform students of expectations, but do not provide them with the opportunity to discuss or play a role in this. Intervening against aggressors consists of the punishment and exclusion of the student, thereby detracting from the sense of community (Lopez, et al. 28-30). Based off the former group of schools, I have proposed an activity that works to prevent bullying by allowing students to become active members on this issue within their school.

The structure of the activities within this curriculum draws influence from *Valuing Diversity: Towards Mutual Respect and Understanding* and *Diversity Training for Classroom Teaching: A Manual for Students and Educators.* These two works also provide various activities aimed at increasing respect and understanding of differences. As I have stated earlier, this curriculum strives to meet three goals: to illustrate concrete ways to create solidarity in the classroom, to teach students empathy and respect for differences, and to prevent bullying among students.

Activity 1: Let’s Make a Change

Rationale and Learning Objectives

This activity will allow students to brainstorm ways in which aggression and bullying exist within their school. They will be asked to create a lesson for an elementary school audience (in groups of four), with the goal of teaching younger students how to resolve conflicts without violence. Once the teacher has reviewed all the lesson plans, students will be given the opportunity to put their ideas into practice. Each group of middle school students will teach about five third graders how to best resolve conflicts and avoid bullying.

This exercise is based on the findings that schools with low levels of peer aggression allow their students to be actively involved in preventing school violence (Lopez, et al. Chapter 1). By giving the students a say in how the school prevents bullying, these middle school students will have more incentive to follow school rules for themselves. This project not only provides students with agency, but also works to foster a sense of community, as students are interacting with and teaching others across grade levels.

Steps to Implementation

1. Class Discussion

* As a whole class, come up with a list of school norms and behavioral expectations. The teacher can ask questions such as “How do I expect you to behave?” and “How does the principal expect you to treat one another?”
* Record ideas on the board and ask students to consider bullying, aggression, and violence in the school. The following can serve as some guiding questions: 1) Do you think bullying is a serious problem at this school? 2) Name some people who would be concerned or involved if a case of bullying were to occur. 3) What would each of these individuals (aggressor, victim, parents, teacher, and principal) have to say about this act of aggression?
* As a whole class, briefly consider and list alternatives to violence. What are other ways in which conflicts can be resolved?

1. Divide students up into groups of four.

* Ask them to come up with ways in which a conflict between two students can be resolved. They can feel free to create a specific scenario and role play if their group chooses to.
* Explain to the students that they will be creating a 20 minute lesson, teaching a group of third graders about alternatives to violence.
* Students should keep the group of third graders at their school in mind because they will have the chance to utilize their ideas and teach this group once the project is complete.
* Provide students with a sample lesson plan, teaching them how to time various parts of a lesson.

1. Set up a date for the students to go into the third grade classroom and teach small groups of elementary school kids for 20 minutes.

Student Reflection

* How did you feel about preparing a lesson to discourage bullying? What was challenging about this? What was rewarding?
* Were the third graders receptive to this information? What were the challenges and rewards of teaching them?
* How do you think your lesson will influence the third graders in their interactions with each other?

Activity 2: Exploring the Neighborhood

Rationale and Learning Objectives

The inspiration for this assignment comes from Fine and Anand’s description of the curriculum at Renaissance Middle School in Montclair, NJ. Students worked on a Civil Rights oral history project in order to explore the rich history of desegregation within their neighborhood. Students were given the chance to conduct interviews with people in the neighborhood, in order to receive an array of perspectives and experiences from the Civil Rights time period. This provided various interesting challenges to the students’ assumptions, such as the commonly held belief that everyone saw integration as a “good” thing, without considering the pain and negative consequences that it brought for some African Americans (Fine & Anand, Chapter 7).

This chapter influenced me to come up with a research project that seeks to expose students to an ethnic group within their neighborhood that they are not a member of. The teacher will assign each student to research the history of a specific group (which he/she does not belong to). By allowing students to interact with differences through an academic assignment, they will be encouraged to remove their biases and treat this as they would treat any other research project. After the research stage of the assignment is completed, students will be asked to write a paper describing one aspect of the group’s history or traditions through the first person narrative. This means that students will be expected to imagine that they are a member of the group and to write from this perspective. By placing themselves in the shoes of someone they do not share a cultural identity with, students will receive the opportunity to develop their empathy skills.

Steps to Implementation

1. Prepare a lesson that provides a brief introduction to each ethnic group that exists within the school’s neighborhood. Ask students to share experiences or stories from the group(s) they identify with. This will allow for relevant anecdotes and a more interesting lesson.
2. Facilitate a class discussion on the differences between ethnicity and culture. It is important for students to understand that an individual can belong to an ethnic group without necessarily identifying with the culture of this group. (For example, a student who is half Greek and half German may identify with one culture more than the other).
3. Assign each student to research the history and/or traditions of one group he/she does not identify with. Providing students with a choice between history and traditions will give them more freedom with the assignment.
4. Provide 2-3 weeks for the research stage. During this time, try to bring some guest speakers into the classroom. It would be an invaluable experience for students to learn about their assigned group from a first-hand source. The stories of these individuals will allow students to connect their research to real experiences.
5. Once research is completed, students will write a narrative from the first person perspective, describing one aspect of the group’s ethnic history or cultural traditions. This will require students to build their empathy skills in order to write from the perspective of another person.
6. Give students 10 minutes each day to discuss with a partner any challenges or advice they may have for writing from another person’s point of view.

Student Reflection

* Are there any ways in which you were able to identify with the group you were assigned? Describe any similarities you share.

Activity 3: Family History Project

Rationale and Learning Objectives

It is crucial to provide students with the opportunity to incorporate their lived experiences into their academic work. Educators should create an environment in which students will feel welcomed to share the knowledge they bring with them into the classroom. In their work, “Oral Histories in the Classroom,” Carmona and Bernal state that disconnecting education from students’ histories only serves to marginalize these students and discredit their experiences (115). In addition, teachers can learn a great deal about students from hearing their stories, and this can guide educators in establishing an environment of solidarity (Carmona & Bernal, 119).

I was influenced by these authors to create an activity in which students can share their family history by creating a symbol of their choosing. Students will be asked to create a symbol which represents their family’s culture and/or history, and they should prepare a 5 minute presentation for the class, explaining their symbol. In addition to exposing students to the diversity of experiences within the classroom, this activity is intended to illustrate the similarities we all share amidst our differences. Even though everyone will have a unique history to contribute, students will find that the presentations will include shared emotions, goals, struggles, and dreams.

Steps to Implementation

1. Prepare a presentation in which you (the instructor) describe your family’s history. Provide anecdotes and focus on any family traditions that are of great value to you. This will provide students with an understanding of what is expected in the assignment, and it allows them to form a more personal relationship with their teacher.
2. Explain the assignment: Students are expected to create a symbol which represents their family’s history or traditions. Once the symbols are handed in, each student will present for five minutes, explaining his/her project and why he/she chose the specific representation.
3. Give examples of the potential forms that this project may take: a collage of photographs, a book of family recipes, food, a PowerPoint presentation, etc. Students have a great deal of freedom in the creation process.
4. Suggest that students interview their family members for ideas and assistance. This is a good way to increase parent and family presence in the classroom.
5. Provide assistance before or after school for students who wish to use this resource.

Student Reflection

* Elaborate on something new you learned about a friend or classmate through this assignment.
* Did you relate to any of your classmates’ stories or experiences? How so?
* What are ways in which this project could have been more enjoyable for you?

Activity 4: The Media and Conflict

Rationale and Learning Objectives

This activity is intended to be a classroom exercise, and it is a modification of an activity presented in *Valuing Diversity: Towards Mutual Respect and Understanding.* Students will be challenged to explore how our perceptions and attitudes are influenced by the information we receive from the media. They will receive two newspaper articles describing a conflict in current events, and these articles will present opposing views. By the end of this in-class assignment, students will be able to see how the media sometimes skews information in support of one side in the conflict. This is intended to make students aware of the conclusions they come to based off the information that is presented to them. They can consider questions such as: Does this source have a bias, and what idea is it trying to promote? The activity will also provide students with an opportunity to work in groups while assessing these newspaper sources.

Steps to Implementation

1. Pass out copies of two newspaper articles describing a conflict that is currently occurring in the world. Make sure to include articles with opposing perspectives and opinions.
2. Divide the class up into two groups. One group will be asked to identify and highlight all the statements of facts in both articles. The second group will identify all the statements of opinion.
3. Once the students have finished reading both articles, as a class, discuss how frequently the authors provide opinionated statements. Explore the implications of this. Are people accepting opinions as facts when they read the newspaper?
4. Ask students to pair up with someone from the other group (so that each pair consists of a person who highlighted facts and a person who highlighted opinions). They should discuss the questions listed below in their pairs.
5. Following the discussion in pairs, address the issues with the whole class. Ask pairs to share the answers they came up with.

Points of Discussion

* Name any opposing facts you found in the two articles.
* How much did the views differ between the two articles?
* Did the different representations of information interfere with your understanding of the conflict? How so?
* Were the same facts used to reach different conclusions?
* To what extent are our attitudes based off what we see in the media?
* Has this exercise influenced the way you interpret a source’s information? Explain.

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