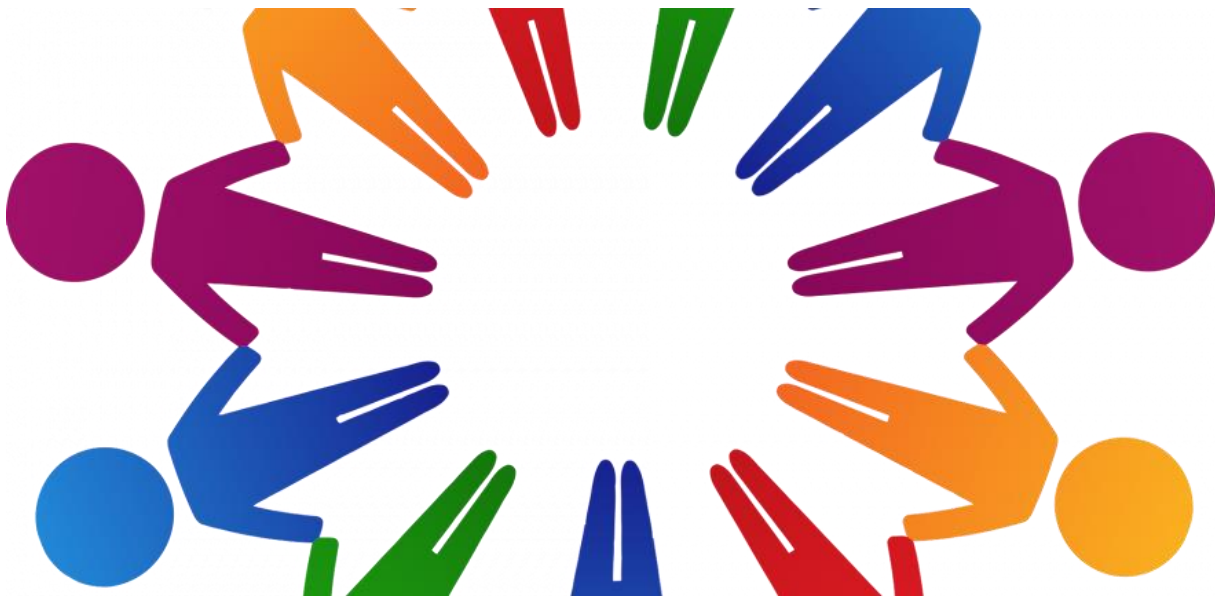


Finding common ground



“I don’t see color!” I unfortunately have heard that statement from many of my colleagues throughout the years. Having taught in both rural and urban schools, I have seen firsthand the need to see color. I encourage and coach educators to not only see but embrace color and cultural differences.

More and more classrooms across America are filled with kids from different countries, backgrounds, and experiences. It is a beautiful opportunity for real time lessons on cultures, diversity, and acceptance of varying perspectives. Many years, my classes were filled with kids from up to 10 different nations and any number of religions. With that diversity came a tremendous amount of prejudice and stereotyping, but it also presented me with the opportunity—and obligation—to break down those preconceived ideas and bridge the gap by helping my students find common ground.

Through intentional actions, kids began seeing their peers through different eyes and were surprised to realize how many similarities they actually shared. From birthdays, hobbies and interests to younger siblings driving them crazy, it really didn’t matter that they were from opposite sides of the world. As they found common ground, emotional safety grew as well as a willingness to listen and learn more from the diverse backgrounds in the classroom community.

Setting the tone

Actions teachers take on the first day set the tone for the entire school year. Both verbal and nonverbal communication send signals to kids about the teacher, the class and the year ahead. Embracing the approach of “Firm, Fair, Friendly” can create a welcoming approach that also relays the teacher is in charge and lays the foundation for better connections than those created under the old “don’t smile ‘til Christmas” belief.

Realize that you as the teacher are the CEO: Chief Emotional Officer. You set the emotional tone and create the climate, and it has a huge impact on those you are leading. Smiling and greeting students as they enter the room is a powerful component of student engagement and won’t take away from your ability to set boundaries and gain control from the beginning. Embracing your role as the CEO is a huge first step in creating a family community, which will do wonders for getting students of all ages to feel comfortable opening up, sharing and getting to know each other.

In order to help students begin to find common ground, team-building exercises are also powerful. The goal is to get students talking, laughing and sharing, which will release dopamine. Dopamine creates a feeling of well-being and the brain signals a desire to have more of the activity causing the feeling, whether it be healthy peer interactions, engaging in the class community or laughing and sharing with the teacher.

Continuing common ground throughout the year

Once you've set the tone at the beginning of the year, your class will begin to understand your expectation that they engage in the process of finding common ground and understanding one another's cultures. Here are some ways you can ensure this process continues throughout the year.

Student profiles. [Student Profiles](#) are a powerful tool that can be referenced throughout the year. Profiles that ask open-ended questions, including non-academic questions, can help speed up the "getting to know your students" phase. These can also provide keys to engaging the child that is quieter, more reserved and resistant to peer or teacher interaction. Referring back to the profile can help provide an opening for noncontingent conversations that can help increase a child's willingness to engage.

Daily check-ins. It can be a tremendous help in priming the brain for learning to have a few minutes of check-in time at the beginning of class. This allows for kids to "catch their breath," lower cortisol levels and learn more about their classmates. My strategy evolved into what we called "Big World-Little World." One day in an attempt to get teens to share, I asked, "What's going on in the big world?" and was met with stares and crickets chirping. After several seconds of silence, I added, "Or your little world." All of a sudden a hand shot up and a student shared that he was going to his first job interview the next day and was kind of nervous. This led to several students sharing comments, suggestions and questions regarding the interview. It was a beautiful thing! And the start of our daily ritual at the beginning of every class. They indeed found common ground and began to feel like a family, wanting to share things going on in their little world throughout the year.

Remain vigilant and allow for sharing. When dealing with a multi-cultural classroom, it's important that teachers remain vigilant and listen for students expressing inaccurate beliefs, stereotypes and judgment about another nationality or race, and addressing it as a class. One powerful moment happened when one of my American students was commenting on the living conditions in Iraq. I could tell immediately that one of my Iraqi students was becoming visibly agitated. I asked if he would be willing to share what he was thinking and feeling. Thankfully he was, and it was an amazing opportunity for other students to learn from him regarding how inaccurate some of their perceptions had been. It also created an opportunity for his country, heritage and customs to be highlighted and celebrated.

Bouncing back when you get discouraged

Regardless of how prepared we think we are as teachers, most of us end up feeling as lost as Easter eggs and discouraged at times during the first year or two of focusing on culturally responsive practices. Remembering a couple of tips can help us reduce stress, keep the tank full and quickly bounce back from frustration.

The first thing to remember? It's a marathon, not a sprint. Make sure that you are finding balance in your life and stepping away from school demands. Dragging the briefcase home every night is a sure way to experience burnout sooner than later. Engaging in activities that decrease stress is an absolute must. Exercise, meditation, nature or

spending time with friends that make you laugh. If you have to schedule FUN or exercise, do it and don't feel guilty!

We must also keep in mind that there are a lot of things in education that don't seem to make good sense and that we can't control. Getting single-minded and focusing on those things that you *can* control will help your sanity day to day. Your mood, preparation, enthusiasm, mindset and focus on "slinging dopamine" and consistently connecting with your students are all within your control. Commit daily to put kids before content and help your students find common ground through building a family community so that all kids feel seen, heard and validated.

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