

High School Lesson

Diversity: Our Strength, Our Challenge

Rationale

This highly interactive three-part lesson creates a supportive forum for students to explore both the dynamics of hateful behavior and the strength of unified action to counter it. Sharing personal backgrounds and experiences with name-calling and prejudice, students will develop an appreciation of their similarities and differences and build a sense of group unity. Through examining the roles that they each play in either interrupting or perpetuating bias in their schools and communities, students will develop a sense of personal responsibility for combating prejudice and will learn ways to create inclusive and respectful campus environments.

[NOTE: Please see "[Talking with Students about Diversity and Bias](#)" for more information about responding to expressions of prejudice in the classroom.]

Objectives

- Students will depict and share important influences that have shaped their own cultural, religious, gender and social beliefs.
- Students will share their own and learn of others' personal experiences with prejudice.
- Students will examine the roles that each person plays in either perpetuating or interrupting prejudice and bias.
- Students will learn effective strategies to confront bias.

Age Range

Grades 9–12

Time

2–3 class periods with optional extension activities

Requirements

Handouts and Resources:

- [Roles People Play](#) (one for each student)
- [Strategies to Confront Bias](#) (one for each student)
- [The Importance of Individual Participation and Action](#) (one for each student)

Other Material:

- One blank write on transparency film for each student
- Pens/markers that will write on the transparencies, several colors for each student, if possible
- Overhead projector/Screen

Advanced Preparation

- Reproduce handouts as directed above.
- Before teaching this lesson, review "[Talking with Students about Diversity and Bias](#)" to assist in creating a safe environment for students to explore issues of identity, prejudice and bias.

Key Words

Bias
Gender
Ethnicity
Identity
Lens
Race
Religion
School climate

Procedures

Part I

1. After setting up guidelines for a safe, respectful and inclusive classroom environment, distribute one transparency and different colored pens/markers to each student.
2. Instruct students that you will share with them four categories that define personal identity and they will then be asked to draw symbols that represent each aspect of identity in their own lives. Students may draw anything that has meaning for them. They do not have to draw a symbol for each category; however encourage them to do so. Explain that the symbols/drawings will be seen later in the activity by the rest of the class.
3. Tell students they will have about three minutes for each drawing. Emphasize that this is not an art lesson, but symbolic “shorthand.” Instruct students to work alone, and not to comment on anyone else’s work. Tell students that there will be a time to share and discuss the drawings later in the lesson.
4. Read aloud and/or list on the chalkboard the following identity categories, one by one. If written on the chalkboard, also use the questions as verbal prompts to assist the students in their drawings.
 - **Gender:** How does it feel to you to be male/female; what have you learned about being female/male in our society? Who taught you those things? How were you taught?
 - **Race:** How do you identify yourself racially? What have you been taught about your race? Who or what has taught you about your race?
 - **Ethnicity/Culture:** How would you represent your ethnic or cultural identity? Show how it feels to be a part of your culture. How did you learn about your culture? Who or what were your teachers?
 - **Religion:** How do you identify yourself in terms of faith or religion? If you follow a formal religion, where have you learned about your traditions and beliefs? If you have spiritual beliefs, how have they developed? If you have no religious or spiritual beliefs draw anything that represents your own beliefs. Who have been your teachers? How have you been taught?

NOTE: It is important not to make assumptions about anyone’s religious affiliation or belief. Agnostic, Atheist, Pagan, Wiccan, or other beliefs may be expressed by students, as with all other categories. Allow no negative comments.

5. After all students have completed their drawings, ask students to find a partner to share their transparencies with one another. Allow five minutes for this sharing. [If the maturity and trust level of the group is high, teachers may ask students to find a person they do not know well for this sharing.]
6. Ask for 3–5 volunteers, depending on time constraints, to share their illustrations with the whole class. Use an overhead projector to allow all students to see their classmates’ work.
7. Have all students hold their transparencies up to their faces and look through their transparency at their classmates.
8. Conduct a discussion about what they see. Ask the students the following questions:
 - How do other people look through the transparency?
 - Do you see each other clearly?
 - What effect might this “lens” have on how you view other people and events?
9. To conclude, have students write down, and submit anonymously, two things they learned from this exercise. Close by inviting volunteers to share some of the things they learned from this exercise.

Part II

1. Reinforce the previous learning and connect it to the following lesson by reading a few of the anonymous comments received from the students at the conclusion of the previous lesson.
2. List on chart paper the four identity areas (gender, race, ethnicity/culture, religion) used in the previous lesson.

3. Invite students to add to this list other types of groups in the school with which they or others identify. This might include: grade level, athletic and civic associations, interests, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc.

NOTE: Use your judgment in deciding if the following portion of the activity should be conducted in stand-ups or in small group discussions. If conducting stand-ups, you may want to consider choosing categories that may be perceived as less risky to start the activity.

4. Tell students that you are going to conduct an exercise to illustrate concepts about similarities and differences. Using the list, invite students as they feel comfortable to stand up when a category is called that is important in their lives. Not one should be pressured to stand. Instruct students to look around and see who is standing/sitting with them. Tell students that there should be no talking during the exercise. The phrasing for each call is "If _____ is important in the way you identify yourself, please stand up." Pause 5–10 seconds after students are standing and then say, "Thank you, please be seated." Call the next category.

NOTE: If there are students with physical limitations that prohibit their ability to stand, conduct the activity as a hand-raising exercise.

5. Following the stand-ups, ask students some or all of the following questions:
 - How did it feel if you were standing or sitting alone or with only a few other people?
 - How did it feel if you were standing or sitting with the majority of the group?
 - Have you ever been targeted or picked on because of your association with one of these categories? What happened? How did that feel?
 - Discuss how it feels to be considered either "alone" or of the "majority" on campus. How do teachers, administrators and other students treat those students? How does this dynamic affect the school environment?
6. Assign students the task of observing their school climate to notice the ways in which students may be targeted, excluded or included in various ways throughout the school day. Have them record their observations in writing.

Part III

1. Ask students to report on any incidents of bias, name-calling they recorded since the last class meeting. Have students comment on what they did when they witnessed these acts? Ask if they acted differently from how they have acted in the past?
2. Distribute the [Roles People Play](#) handout to each student. Have students count off to form groups of four students each. Ask students to spend time privately writing their responses to each of the four questions.
3. Once completed, ask students to share their responses with the others in their small group. Once they have had the chance to discuss their responses, invite the student to discuss and be prepared to share their responses to two additional two questions:
 - When you interrupted an act of bias or prejudice, what motivated you to do so?
 - When you witnessed an act of bias and did not intervene, what motivated you to "stand by?"
4. Ask the small groups to discuss their responses to the last two questions. Chart common themes or ideas about the reasons why they intervened and why they did not. Ask students which is easier to do—interrupt or stand by and why? What are the consequences of either action?
5. Explain to students that learning to interrupt acts of hate and bias is difficult. There are no easy answers, but it is important to understand that each person plays a role in combating bias. Ignoring bias allows the act to go unchecked, allowing it to escalate to possibly more harmful and dangerous levels. Ask for examples in history or from their personal experiences when they have seen this occur.
6. Distribute the [Strategies to Confront Bias](#) handout and project the transparency on the overhead projector. Read the opening paragraph aloud. Have student volunteers read each of the strategies listed. Elicit other strategies and add to the list.

7. When the list is completed and has been read aloud, ask if anyone has a question about any of the suggested strategies. Ask students if they think that it is always appropriate to respond to a bigoted remark or action. Be sure that the point is made that it is not always wise or safe to respond in the moment; notifying an appropriate authority, or approaching the person later may be a safer and more effective strategy.
8. Share with students the quotes from *The Importance of Individual Participation and Action* handout. Conclude by inviting students to react to the quotes and discuss the relationship of the quote to the lesson they have just completed.

Assessment Recommendations:

Students' understanding should be assessed through:

- contribution to class discussions
- active participation in a small group assignments
- ability to provide examples or evidence to support ideas
- willingness to listen and consider the ideas of others

Extended Activities:

- Have students research origins of the motto *E Pluribus Unum* and write an essay about its meaning, historically and today.
- Have students conduct research about a situation or event in the news about an incident of bias or prejudice and write a short summary of what happened, why it happened and what they think should be done about the situation.
- Ask the class to generate "real life" campus examples to role play some of the actions students can take to make their school a more inclusive and respectful place for all people.

Roles People Play

BOX A: TARGET

Describe a time when someone said something prejudiced or biased to you.

BOX B: AGGRESSOR

Describe a time when you said something prejudiced or biased to someone.

BOX C: BYSTANDER

Describe a time when you saw an act of prejudice or bias taking place and you didn't do anything. Why do you think you didn't do anything?

BOX D: ALLY

Describe a time when you saw an act of prejudice or bias and you took action as an ally. Why did you choose the actions you did?

Strategies to Confront Bias

When confronting acts of bias or prejudice, it is important to incorporate a process that helps people to take control of a situation. The following process has proved helpful for many people, from elementary school children to adults.

- Begin the process by clarifying for yourself what you want to get out of the interaction. If venting your anger is your primary goal, you may be unlikely to have a successful interaction with the other person. Similarly, making an equally offensive remark or publicly embarrassing the person who made the comment or told the joke is not a productive response.
- Try to assume good will. Many people who make offensive remarks do so out of ignorance. Because they do not intend harm, they often assume no harm is done.
- Talk to the person privately. By speaking to the person who offended you one-on-one, you remove his or her necessity to “save face” publicly or to defend his or her actions in front of a group.
- Start the conversation by “vesting your relationship.” People listen better when they know they matter to the other person. For example, start the conversation by saying something like, “I want to talk with you, Mary, because your friendship is very important to me.”
- Use “I” statements, not “you” statements. The point of this conversation is to let the person who offended you know how you feel about what was said. The conversation will be less successful if it focuses on what the other person did “wrong.” Choosing words accordingly will help eliminate the person’s need to defend his or her actions.
- Remember your “rights.” You do not have the right to dictate someone else’s sense of humor. You do, however, have the right to request that this type of humor not be used in your presence.

The Importance of Individual Participation and Action

“The world is too dangerous to live in – not because of the people who do evil, but because of the people who sit and let it happen.” —Albert Einstein

“There was no particular day on which I said, from henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation on my people; instead I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise.” —Nelson Mandela

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against an injustice, he send forth a tiny ripple of hope.” —Robert F. Kennedy

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committee citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” —Margaret Mead

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.” —James Baldwin

“Let us not forget, after all, that there is always a moment when a moral choice is made.” —Elie Wiesel