

A New Teacher "Makes Room" in Her Class

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Kelley is an apprentice teacher at Central East Middle School in Philadelphia. This is her first full year with her own classroom and she has been working hard to build a sense of community in her fifth grade class. As part of their community building this culturally diverse group of ten year-olds has begun to tackle issues of gender, race and class. Last Friday, Kelley decided to hold a class meeting that would use the poem "Making Room" (below) as its starting point.

Kelley, by her own admission, was very nervous. She had been unsuccessful in her efforts to combat anti-gay remarks the previous year and didn't want to make the same mistakes again. This time she was determined to handle things differently, starting with the foundation of trust she's been building steadily since September, and relying on the structures for conversation that the class has adopted as their norm. She began by telling her class they were going to have a meeting and that they were going to share some "pretty heavy stuff." She appealed to the bunch as young adults and laid out the agenda. She told the students she wanted them to listen carefully while she read them



a poem and that after the reading they were going to do a *Chalk Talk* before they had any discussion.

Because she was nervous about her students' reaction, Kelley read the verse about the gay student last,

and there were a few nervous snickers while she read. However, much to her surprise, after she gave the offenders her best stony stare, other students told their peers to stop and get serious.

The initial remarks on the *Chalk Talk* with "Making Room" at the center ran the gamut from, "It was stupid" to "It was very good" to "I'm not gay!" However, after the first few comments, the kids started to write about friends and relatives who were gay. They also said "everyone deserved a place at the table" and that "people shouldn't be judged by their skin color or if they are gay."

Making Room

Written by Bridging the Gap members, an ELK Grove (CA) HS SEED Group, Dianna Shoop, Teacher/ SEED Facilitator, In response to the film "A Place at the Table" from Teaching Tolerance and the poem, "I, Too" by Langston Hughes

Just because I do well in school
Doesn't make me feel less stupid
when I am wrong.
It doesn't mean that when I do
my homework
My home works.
When I pass a test
It doesn't mean that I'm not
failing in life.
Just because I do well in school
Doesn't mean I don't face challenges.
But it does mean that I am willing to
sacrifice in order to secure my future.
Is there a place at the table for me?

Just because I am Black
Doesn't mean I am athletic - I hate to run.
It doesn't mean I am uneducated -
I happen to be a straight A student.
Just because you see me coming, doesn't mean
you should rush to the other side of the street
I am not dangerous - I am kind, and loving.
Just because I'm Black, doesn't mean that
all of my ancestors are from Africa
I am part Native American, and part Irish.
Being Black doesn't mean I use my race
as an excuse for my mistakes.
But it does give me hope, courage, and strength.
Is there a place at the table for me?

Just because I'm Gay
Doesn't mean I can't play "manly" sports
like football and wrestling.
It doesn't mean that I am feminine
or "girlie."
I lift weights and have a "buffed out" body.
It doesn't mean that I want to be
a hairdresser, or perform in
Broadway musicals.
I plan on becoming a college graduate, a
doctor, and someday maybe even a dad.
It doesn't mean that purple is my
favorite color.
I don't like rainbows or triangles.
I think our symbol should be
a spike-studded helmet or
a Harley-Davidson motorcycle.
But it does mean that
I like men and that
my sexuality alone does not define me.
Is there a place at the table for me?

They went on to say “ the poem was sad” and one child volunteered that he/she “didn’t think there would ever be room for them at the table...”

The follow-up conversation was equally honest and students picked up right where the *Chalk Talk* ended. They talked about their sadness when gay friends of their family, or relatives, were mistreated. They told their less comfortable classmates “it wasn’t nasty to be gay, it’s just what people are.”

The bell rang for dismissal and Kelley promised they’d finish their discussion on Monday. After the weekend, when the students arrived, she decided to conduct a follow-up *Chalk Talk* with the prompt, “We Are.” This time the students shared the many ways they are different. One child shared that her parents were deaf, while others wrote about being



“Spanish” or “Black.” Quite a few students wrote that this class was a family, and one child said they were happy to have Kelley as their teacher.

Finally, a parent of a recently transferred student, who volunteers in the class, approached Kelley to say, “ You really work with them on how to act. It’s great! I see a difference in my son just since he’s been in your room.” When Kelley asked how he was different, the parent replied, “He used to hit his sister every time she walked by, but now he doesn’t do it so much. Now he even says he’s sorry, if he hits her by accident. My husband and I couldn’t believe it the first time it happened! Now I see where it comes from.”

We hope that this is just the first of many stories about the ways we’re translating our belief in equity into practice in our classrooms. ■

*You can e-mail Kelley at kellwcoll@aol.com,
Debbie at dbambino@earthlink.net
or share your stories with Connections at
nsrf@harmonyschool.org*

Just because I’m White
Doesn’t mean that
I’ve had everything handed to me
on a silver platter.
I have had certain privileges
But I have also worked hard to create
my own opportunities.
It doesn’t mean
I’m a racist or a White supremacist.
But, I do have pride in my origins-
I think everyone should.
Just because I’m White doesn’t mean that
I believe in White Power
I believe in Black Power, Mexican Power,
and Asian Power...People Power.
Is there a place at the table for me?

Just because I am Mexican
Doesn’t mean that I can’t understand
every part of a conversation.
It doesn’t mean that I will be
a high school drop out.
I have always done well in school.
Just because I have an accent
Doesn’t make what I have to say
less important.
I have a rich heritage and a song to share.
Embracing my Mexican culture, traditions
and language,
Doesn’t stop me from striving for the
American Dream.
Is there a place at the table for me?

Just because I’m Jewish
Doesn’t mean I’m rich with wealth.
But it does mean I am rich with culture.
Just because I believe in Adonai
Doesn’t mean I speak a foreign tongue.
But it does mean I embrace my ancestors’ language.
Just because I don’t believe Jesus was the messiah
Doesn’t mean I put Him on the crucifix.
But it does mean that I celebrate meaningful
holidays with a strong Jewish community.
Is there a place at the table for me?

We are teenagers,
Who are Smart, Black, Gay,
White, Jewish and Mexican
We are each unique individuals
who share common ground
Is there a place at the table for us?

