Building A Sense Of Community

Chapter Five

I. Establishing A Respectful Tone
II. Establishing A Bond With And Among Your Students
III. Creating A Community That Values All Students
IV. Helping Students Resolve Conflicts

Introduction

Javier feels like his teacher treats his limited English proficiency as an inconvenience. When Kenisha does not turn in her homework, the teacher hardly bats an eye. Josh has a learning disability, and his assignments are so mismatched with his strengths and current performance level that he feels at a complete loss. In her article “Invitations to Learn,” Carol Tomlinson profiles these three students and summarizes their problem in school with one word: affirmation.

Josh needs to know that he is “accepted and acceptable” for who he is, Tomlinson argues. Javier needs to be listened to, a challenging feat for the teacher when there are dozens of children to listen to, but important nonetheless. Kenisha needs to feel like someone cares, even when she appears to shun this attention. They all want to know they are successful and capable. As the leader of your classroom, you are responsible for building an environment that meets your students’ needs for acceptance, belonging, and safety. Certainly, the first four chapters of this text outlined strategies that help students feel “comfortable” in the classroom. Rules, consequences, positive reinforcement, procedures and consistent response to student misbehavior all contribute to a structured, predictable environment.

However, building a classroom community in which every student feels secure reading their latest piece of writing, or respected and valued regardless of their gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, learning differences or any other personal characteristic, requires more than just the consistent implementation of your classroom management structures. With this chapter, we address the fact that students not only need physical safety and security, but they also need social belonging and acceptance.

Your classroom can be a place where Tracy seeks to verbally resolve the conflict with Kevin rather than smacking him on the back of the head; a community where Teela and Kimberly (the two “popular girls” who at the beginning of the year snubbed everyone) reach out and welcome a new student to class; an environment where Monroe spontaneously compliments Lester for his self-discipline rather than labeling him “teacher’s pet.”

Teachers who create such a sense of community do so through proactive team building and through consistent, thoughtful reactions to incidents that make any student feel ostracized. In addition, these teachers actively work to uncover and confront their own biases and prejudices.

This chapter aims to help you think systematically about how best to build a sense of community and discusses what it will take to do this, through:

- Establishing a respectful tone;
- Helping students bond with you and their classmates;

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- Promoting an environment of respect and tolerance in which each individual feels valued; and
- Helping students to resolve conflicts effectively.

The result of all of this hard work is a classroom of students who – because their need to be a part of an inclusive, supportive environment is realized – will feel motivated to learn and work with you to reach ambitious academic goals.

I. Establishing A Respectful Tone

No matter what outward behaviors might suggest, your students care deeply that you think highly of them and can be profoundly affected by language that implies you do not. As the authority figure in the classroom, it is your responsibility to remain “above the fray” and to maintain a tone of respect regardless of the behavior you might see in your students – whether it is directed toward other students or yourself.

Remember that your own behavior should model appropriate speech and actions to your students. If you expect them to use “please” and “thank you,” to refrain from eye rolling and teeth sucking, and to use a respectful tone when speaking to others, you must exhibit that same behavior. That means thanking students for passing in their papers, refraining from sighing and rolling your eyes if there are multiple announcements during 3rd period, and always maintaining a professional, respectful demeanor with your colleagues.

When interacting with your students, it is usually safer to err on the side of being “overly” sensitive to their feelings. For example, teachers should exercise caution in using sarcasm, even in a joking manner, especially with younger children, English language learners or those with language disabilities. Sarcasm may hurt students’ feelings, damage self-esteem, or humiliate students in front of others. Because sarcasm is a large part of adult discourse, teachers of older students should explicitly point out any use of sarcasm while ensuring that they are not using it in a way that students may find hurtful. Of course, your respect for students is displayed not just in overt ways, but also in subtle body language, speech, and tone. For example, by speaking in your own natural voice, rather than yelling or using a condescending tone, you send the message that you respect your students as people.

Remaining aware of your language and tone – including all the subtle nuances of what you say and how you say it – will be vital to creating and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship with your students. (A helpful exercise in monitoring your own tone is to audiotape your teaching sessions or to have a peer observe you.) Another way to show students that you respect their thoughts and ideas is to ask them for feedback on the classroom culture and your instructional practices. You might consider having a special box in your room in which students can place notes to you. Be sure to respond and thank them for their comments. You might also benefit from gathering students’ feedback in a more formal way. For an example of a tool you might use, look at the Sample Survey for Collecting Student Feedback and the Student Assessment of Classroom Culture in the Toolkit (pp. 41-44).
II. Establishing A Bond With And Among Your Students

One of the most important things you can do to create a classroom community is to develop a strong bond with and among your students. Remember that, according to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, belonging and self-esteem precede the need to achieve lofty goals. For some students, a teacher’s care and concern is the number one factor that influences their learning.20

Building Strong Teacher-Student Relationships
It will be important to take the initiative to learn about your students’ personal lives, interests, and goals. Seeking this information will show students that you value, respect, and care about them. Additionally, this information will also allow you to be more purposeful in your instruction; recall that “students’ interests” is one of the factors to consider when designing your lessons. Beyond relying on informal conversations and formal surveys (such as the Student Survey or Parent/Guardian Survey in the Teaching As Leadership Toolkit), it can be invaluable to plan systematic ways to get to know your students outside of the classroom environment. Your strategies will differ depending on how many students you teach and how old they are. The following section provides a starter menu of strategies you might pursue to build strong relationships with your students.

Attend student activities
- Attending student award ceremonies, sporting events, performances or other activities beyond the school walls demonstrates a genuine interest in students’ lives while providing you with a chance to see students’ strengths, personalities, and abilities that may not manifest themselves in the classroom.
- Attending these events provides the added benefit of creating opportunities to speak with parents and community members, who will greatly appreciate your presence and demonstration of interest.

Lead student activities
- Becoming a coach or club sponsor can allow you to contribute to the school community in a new and important way and give you a different perspective on your students. With the principal’s permission and some outside funding, you could create your own after-school activity that matches your own talents and your students’ interests.

Eat lunch with students
- You probably want to avoid eating lunch with students in their own environment, as sitting down with students at a cafeteria table conveys the feeling that you are their “friend” and may hinder your ability to build a positive yet authoritative relationship with students.

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- However, inviting students to eat lunch with you in your classroom as part of a club or special “lunch time jam session” allows you to really connect with students one-on-one. These interactions will often reveal student characteristics that cannot be revealed in a classroom of thirty students.
- You might develop a process where you meet with students on a regular basis and post a sign up list to schedule each student.

Send personal notes to students
- At the beginning of the school year, this can take the shape of a classroom welcoming letter and an expression of your vision for the upcoming year.
- Post-it notes allow you to easily write notes on a more daily basis. By writing the student’s name on the top and the message on the reverse (the adhesive side) you can put notes on student desks without compromising confidentiality. In classrooms with the same students all day, individual mailboxes provide the perfect space to deposit personal notes.
- Throughout the year student notes can reinforce classroom successes, support students through personal struggles, or send best wishes through a birthday card or a welcome back card for a student that has been absent.
- Additionally, many new teachers find it personally beneficial to recognize the positive aspects of each student in personal letters or notes.

Allow students to contact you outside of school with school-related questions
- Many teachers have strong feelings about not allowing students and parents to contact them outside of school. However, most teachers who decide to provide their home or cell phone number (and ask that they not be called later than a certain time) report that this privilege is rarely abused and facilitates teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships.
- Even if you don’t want to give students the opportunity to call you outside of school, you should call home periodically to speak to parents and ask to speak quickly to the student as well. That way you can encourage them to do their homework, address any questions, and tell them that you’re looking forward to seeing them in school the next day.
- Several corps members report that they print out their contact information on card stock and then attach magnetic strips to the back. They give a magnet to each of their students’ parents to put on their refrigerator.

Use a suggestion box
- As mentioned above, students feel respected and valued when they have input in classroom policies, curriculum, and culture; providing a suggestion box creates a space for student contribution. This strategy is most powerful when suggestions are discussed, perhaps in a classroom meeting, and changes that would produce a more effective classroom setting are made. For example, some teachers hold weekly class meetings to address suggestions and concerns.
- Note that there is a fine line between encouraging student feedback and undermining your authority by appearing uncertain about how your classroom should run. Discuss classroom improvements in a controlled, confident manner.

Celebrate birthdays
- Students of any age know that you are thinking about them beyond the classroom when you acknowledge or celebrate their birthdays – with songs, cards, or special privileges for the day.
- However, be sensitive to the fact that some cultures and religions do not celebrate birthdays.
Join in physical activities
- Students enjoy teacher participation in physical activities, such as playing basketball with students after school. Not only is it enjoyable for students to see their teacher in another context, but if you enjoy sports, it could be an opportunity for you to relax.
- If possible, work with other colleagues to develop friendly student–teacher athletic events, such as a teacher-student soccer game.

Join in school and community events
- Your school will hopefully have (or perhaps you will initiate) numerous events that will invite teacher participation and foster teacher-parent interaction, from back-to-school nights and PTA meetings to school service projects and fundraisers. These events give you the opportunity to further deepen your relationships with parents. Being able to share compliments about Angela’s recent story project with her aunt at a bake sale or city hall meeting, and later mentioning that to Angela, will foster your relationship with both Angela and her family.
- In addition, you can find out about non-school events – sometimes connected to places of worship, community centers, or neighborhood associations – that draw a lot of your students; participating in these gatherings shows that you’re making an active effort to get to know them outside of the school context.

Take short field trips on Saturday, Sunday, or school holidays
- Many corps members report success with taking small groups of students on short field trips on weekend days or school holidays. This might include taking four students to the zoo, a movie, or an athletic event as a reward for excellent behavior, impressive effort, or exemplary achievement. Often, parents are interested in coming along too. Of course, be sure to check with your school administration and obtain written permission from parents before even inviting students.

Reach out, especially when it’s difficult
- There are some children who go through school all day without having heard a positive thing said to or about them. It is your job to go out of your way to find encouraging things to say to everyone – especially to those students who do not tend to receive any positivity from others, or who rub you the wrong way. Even if you are simply complimenting the student’s haircut, find a way to establish positive channels between the two of you and to show the child that you find him or her unique and special.

Building Strong Student-Student Relationships
When members of the class know each other well, they are far more likely to value and respect each other and to feel valued and respected. However, don’t assume this will happen naturally just because students come from the same middle school or live in the same neighborhood. The following list provides strategies you might pursue to build strong relationships among your students.

Employ getting-to-know-you strategies
- On the secondary level, you can have students interview each other using set questions that you develop as a class. Then, have students present their partners to the rest of the group. The questions can serve
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a curricular function, as well: “share one way in which you use science in your everyday life,” for example.

- These strategies are probably most effective at the beginning of the year, but it is also important to employ some of these strategies when a new student enters the classroom. While you certainly can’t repeat the entire getting-to-know-you process utilized at the beginning of the year, consider assigning the new student a mature and welcoming “buddy” who will help introduce him or her to other students.

Utilize team-building activities

- The best team building activities that contribute to a culture of achievement are those that require students to work toward an academic goal of some sort. Rather than simply having students work together to untie their “human knot,” you might have students work in small groups to build a clay boat that holds the greatest number of pennies with out sinking (as part of a unit on buoyancy and other forces). The Toolkit contains a list of Team Building (and Other Beginning-of-Year) Activities (pp. 45-46).

Create a safe, respectful place for ongoing conversation and communication

- Some teachers set one or more weekly or even daily meeting times to share news, recognize individuals who have exemplified the expectations of the learning community, and check in on how members of the classroom are feeling. This strategy may be more of a regular occurrence in an elementary classroom since these students spend the whole day with one another.
- It is very important to set rules for class meetings to ensure the environment is, in fact, safe and respectful (e.g., only one person talks at a time, everyone else listens, confidentiality is expected, no put-downs of self or others are allowed). For specific strategies to utilize in these “class” or “community” meetings, check out Implementing Community Meetings in the Toolkit (p. 47-52).

III. Creating A Community That Values All Students

Fostering a sense of community among students depends on creating a space in which all students feel valued and no students feel marginalized because of their personal identity. As we all know from personal experience, social acceptance is a basic human need, and during childhood and adolescence, the need for peer approval is particularly strong. Students can be marginalized for a variety of reasons, perhaps because their race or ethnicity is different from others, because of weak social or academic skills, because of physical appearance, because of perceived or real sexual orientation, or because of family background. It will be important for you to take proactive steps to build a classroom environment based on tolerance and respect. Accomplishing this end requires that you:

- Deconstruct your own personal biases;
- Engage and involve all students;

On the first day of school I began sending home “community bags” with two students each night. They could fill the bag with two or three things that were important to them, bring them back to school, and share them with the class. The community bags did a lot to teach us about each other. Dymond brought in pictures from her parent’s wedding that summer, Marcus brought in a toy truck that is special because his dad gave it to him, and Octavia (having very little to bring) brought in some autumn leaves that had fallen and talked about how she likes to play with her brothers and sisters in the leaves.

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• Teach tolerance; and
• Respond effectively to insensitivity.

Deconstructing Your Personal Biases
Perhaps the first step in building a community that values diversity is to recognize and challenge your own prejudices. Regardless of your cultural, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual orientation or racial identity, you cannot walk into a classroom free of stereotypes and assumptions. Many corps members have been shocked to discover racism, classism, sexism, and other prejudices they thought they had deconstructed before, but which flared up in the heat and challenge of teaching. Working through a prejudice as a university student is different from confronting it as a teacher. Left un-checked, these stereotypes can impact the expectations you hold for your students and the way you communicate with them. It will be essential for you to constantly reflect on your assumptions about your students and their families, recognize when your perceptions may be based on prejudice, and challenge these prejudices in order to break them down.

Also, reflect on your biases about certain “kinds” of students. When you were in school, did “the thug” make you angry and perhaps a little scared? Did “the know-it-all” annoy you? Did “the star athlete” make you green with envy? You may feel your own teenage reactions bubble up within you when you see these qualities in your own students. As the adult, the personal demeanors of your students must not influence the way you treat them; remember that you are caring for fragile children and adolescents.

Here is one practical strategy for reflecting on your feelings toward each student: read through each name in your roll book and consider what first comes to mind and how you act toward him or her. Do you think of Devin as the “disruptive one”? Do you treat her that way? Do you groan in annoyance when you think of Juanita? Do you ignore insensitive comments made to her? Do you think of David as the “LD” student who requires all the accommodations? Do you send him that message when you dismiss him to the resource room? Acknowledge your thoughts honestly, admit any inappropriate behavior, and work to establish a mental fresh slate with that student. Verbalizing and working through your biases with a fellow corps member or someone on your regional staff is helpful.

Elizabeth Cohen, a former Stanford University Professor of Education and Sociology, argues that all students have a kind of status in their class that is a reflection of the combined teacher and student expectations for that student. She argues and illustrates through her research that even the best-intentioned teachers can thwart the low-status students with their biases. The following anecdote serves as an example.

As a women’s studies major, I thought I would be acutely aware of the needs of all my female students. However, during a post-observation with my program director, I began to realize that I was giving the boys in my class much more attention—their rowdiness made me more apt to discipline and pay attention to them. Once my PD pointed out this trend, I immediately took steps to change. I began walking around with a spreadsheet of all of my students’ names and noting each time I called on them or gave them attention. This really helped me spread my awareness and focus on all of my students, regardless if they were rambunctious or shy. I noticed a major change in my female students as well, as now I was chatting with them more and giving them the attention they deserved.

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Maria was the forgotten student in my class. Quiet and well-behaved, she was a consummate survivor who slipped though all the cracks. It took me three months to discover she could not read, and another two to have her tested and sent to special
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education classes for reading. When asked to identify low-status students in my class, I had little difficulty coming up with Maria – once I remembered she was there.

I remember that year well. A Stanford doctoral student was filming my students in order to help me recognize and treat status problems. I was committed to this course of action. An idealistic bilingual teacher, working in a class characterized by linguistic and academic diversity, I wanted all my students to learn.

My class was completing a series of cooperative science activities centered around the theme of light. Maria’s group was constructing a color wheel, a device made with a circle of heavy paper or cardboard and a rubber band. Students paint different color wedges on the circular paper, insert a rubber band through a small hole in the center of their ‘wheel’ and tightly twist the rubber band. Theoretically, when they pull on opposite ends of the rubber band, the color wheel spins. The purpose of the activity, of course, is for students to observe what happens to the different colors as the wheel spins.

I remember feeling harassed that day. The camera’s eye followed me relentlessly as I moved about the class. Two of my seven groups were struggling, one with a cooperation problem, the other clearly confused by the directions for their task. Maria’s group looked like the least of my problems. Most of the students had made their color wheels and were trying them out. With a sigh of relief I took a moment to ask the group what new colors they had expected to create. While the other students eagerly called out their predictions, Maria was silent. She was the only student still working on her color wheel. I suggested that the group test their predictions, observed a few more moments, and moved to the next group.

That afternoon I watched the tape of Maria’s group. At first I didn’t see it. Then it became too obvious. No one in the group could make their color wheel spin. The paper I had given them for the project was too thin and light. Rather than spinning, the color wheels flopped uselessly side to side. I watched myself on the tape, oblivious to the problem, asking questions and reminding students to test their predictions with their color wheels. Only when prompted to look more closely did I notice Maria, directly in front of me, carefully pasting circles of paper, one on top of another, to her color wheel. When she was satisfied with the thickness of the wheel, she twisted her rubber band tightly and sent her color wheel spinning. I watched myself look through her and walk away.  

Cohen attributes this tendency to look “through” certain students to a common bias that intelligence is a one-dimensional trait, rather than a multifaceted phenomenon that reveals itself in different ways and at different times in different students. Remember, with all of your students, your expectations play a large role in their actual achievement, and it is important that you both hold high expectations for, and watch for examples of, academic mastery from all students.

Beyond engaging in personal reflection, teachers often find it valuable to participate in workshops and seminars aimed at helping them become more sensitive to issues of diversity. Moreover, perhaps the most helpful strategy is to get to know your students and their families, which will help ensure that you are treating your students as the individuals they are rather than on the basis of any group perceptions. There are several tools in the Teaching As Leadership Toolkit that will help you establish contact with your students’ families.

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Engaging, Involving, and Valuing All Students

As obvious as this may sound, it is difficult in practice to ensure that all of your students, regardless of individual differences, feel equally valued as members of the community. Part of the challenge will lie in engaging those students who routinely appear to be left out in the cafeteria, on the playground, or in other social settings. Another part of the challenge, as already mentioned, will be submitting yourself to the difficult self-reflection that might uncover your own prejudices and preferences so that you can work to mitigate those (sometimes subconscious) biases.

One practical way to actually measure your engagement of all students during class time is to track the students who participate. Some teachers carry a clipboard with students’ names on it and put a check by the student’s name as he or she shares a response or gets to participate in a demonstration. A quick scan of the list lets you see who should participate next or to whom you might direct your next question. There are several Classroom Observation Tools in the Teaching As Leadership Toolkit that will help you uncover hidden patterns of preference that might be playing out in your classroom (in particular, look at the form entitled “Ratio of Positive to Negative Comments”).

You will also want to ensure that your classroom does not perpetuate gender stereotypes. Do your students think that only girls should use the measuring cups at the kitchen station? Do your students think only boys should help carry your 150 textbooks up from the storage room? Look for opportunities to challenge their views, perhaps, for example, by inviting a male nurse and a female police officer to come and speak to the class if you’re doing a thematic unit on careers.

Beyond ensuring that you are treating your students consistently and engaging them at the same levels, you will want to choose your language consciously to ensure that you are not inadvertently alienating some of your students. For example, you probably want to use the term “family” rather than “parents,” as some students will live with extended family or other caretakers rather than their biological parents. You will also want to use language that does not exclude gay and lesbian relationships (for example, “spouse” or “partner” rather than “wife” or “husband,” “parent” rather than “mother” or “father”).

It is likely, too, that some of your students themselves are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, or at least attempting to understand their sexual identity. Homosexual students are more likely than heterosexual students to report missing school due to fear, being threatened by other students, and having their property damaged at school.\(^22\) Because of their fear of being harassed or hurt, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered students are less likely to ask for help of teachers or peers. An article in the 2001 Journal of Public Health states that adolescents in gay and lesbian relationships or those with same-sex attractions are twice as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to commit suicide.\(^23\) Studies of gay teens have shown that the overwhelming rejection and isolation they feel put them at higher risk for academic failure. It is your responsibility to create a safe environment for all students, including those who identify as homosexual. Resources on GLBTQ Issues in Education are in the Toolkit (p. 53).

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Teaching Tolerance

Even in ethnically homogenous classrooms, all classrooms will be heterogeneous in terms of students’ skills and abilities. Each of your students will be at a different point in the continuum of learning, and you will need to set a tone of acceptance for those differences. Also, whether or not you teach in a community where most students are the same race or ethnicity, it is common for students to have misconceptions about people different from them. Successful teachers proactively teach the social and interpersonal skills that allow students to appreciate diversity – whether that diversity exists in the greater community or in the classroom itself. To accomplish this, you’ll need to help children recognize instances of prejudice, discrimination, and stereotyping and determine appropriate responses to such attitudes and behaviors – and make sure you’re modeling appropriate behaviors yourself. To help your students explore appropriate behaviors and responses to differences, consider using some of the Take a Stand Role Plays included in the Toolkit [p. 54].

You also might organize a pen-pal exchange with children of a different background – and raise the funds for a trip to meet them.

Review your curricular material for opportunities to teach tolerance. For example, reading and discussing books can be an excellent way to prompt classroom discussions about the diversity of cultures, traditions, and lifestyles in our society. Books also help children to develop empathy by helping them to understand the points of view of other people. The toolkit in your Literacy text contains a list of Multicultural Books that students might read to expand their understanding of diversity.

The book Starting Small: Teaching Tolerance in Preschool and the Early Grades relates how one early elementary teacher developed a unit on black-and-white art to help students break down negative associations with these colors. “Whether they grasp the particular meanings or not, children hear the negative messages in terms like black eye, blackmail and black hole, in contrast with the positive associations of white knight, white collar and snow white.”

After decorating her classroom with black-and-white drawings and paintings from different cultures, the teacher had the students create their own black-and-white designs. “In the process, they learn that those contrasting colors are equally expressive and especially vibrant when used side by side.”

History lessons also provide rich opportunities to help students learn to recognize the impact of a lack of tolerance in contemporary society. By studying the various manifestations of hate throughout our nation’s history, regardless of the specific identity or characteristics of the victims or perpetrators, you will be able to help your students understand elements common to all forms of intolerance and persecution. For example, you might have students research historical incidents of bigotry against particular groups and present their reports to the class. Students can discuss what these reports show about why some people do not accept individuals who are different than themselves, and what individuals, groups, and countries have done to respond to acts of intolerance. You also might have students study legal cases dealing with discrimination to help students see that a person can disagree with something or feel that it violates your religion, and still respect it as a choice and advocate for the rights of those who are different.

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25 Ibid.
Beyond seeking curricular opportunities to reinforce the importance of tolerance, you can use current events to bring these lessons to your class. Newspaper and magazine articles, movies, and television shows can all provide opportunities for classroom discussion. If, sadly, a hate crime were to occur in your community, you should look for ways to denounce the crime and discuss the event with your students. Similarly, hate incidents that are widely reported in regional or national media call for a response at school. Discussions give students a chance to get the facts and consider ways they can respond. To see how one corps member addressed September 11th and the ensuing stereotypes in his classroom, read Building Peace in the Toolkit (pp. 55-56).

Responding Effectively to Insensitivity

Your students may mock each other’s appearance, manners or style, or they may make negative comments that relate to an aspect of a student’s actual or perceived identity. It can be difficult to know how to handle your students’ insensitive comments. On the one hand, it is important to denounce insensitivity immediately, each time you hear it, so that students learn that such hurtful behavior is unacceptable and so that they know the classroom environment is safe for them. Yet at the same time, it is important to address insensitivity without alienating the offending student; students will be more likely to learn to be sensitive if they themselves are treated sensitively. This is a difficult balance to achieve and will require a great deal of critical thought before even entering the classroom. With that in mind, here are some general guidelines:

Do not allow insensitive comments to go unnoticed. When you hear an insensitive comment, make a strong, positive statement to the full class about the importance of respecting others. It is important to denounce insensitivity whether the speaker is joking or serious so that students learn that such speech or action is always unacceptable. For example, if you hear unacceptable language, you might say, “That word is never acceptable in this classroom. That is on our list of off-limit words and anyone who uses it must research the history of the word and explain to the class why it should never be uttered in this classroom community.” Your response to insensitive comments will depend on the setting in which it occurs and the time you have available to respond. For example, you will have less time to respond to an insensitive comment made by a student in the hallway as you walked by on your way to class (“That was a putdown and such language is not used at Riverside Middle School”) than if you heard the same comment while tutoring a few students after school (“That was a putdown...you may not have meant to be hurtful, but here’s how your comment hurt...Why did you say that?”). However, in either situation you should respond.

Recognize the teachable moment in moments of insensitivity. When a student uses pejorative words or hate speech, you’ll want to determine whether the entire class would benefit from a discussion of the words’ offensiveness. If a particular type of disrespectful language occurs frequently, it makes sense to address this with the entire class. If you do address the entire class, work to create a situation that is more educational than confrontational.

Mobilize student support for eliminating insensitive remarks in the classroom. Group or individual discussions about the effects of insensitive comments – how words can indeed lead to violence – can motivate students to discourage such behavior and provide support for victimized students. Your response
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to insensitivity will model a proper response among the students. Students can often recognize instances of injustice and may even develop a sense of genuine outrage that carries far beyond the lesson you present.

Implement consequences for the offending student according to the classroom or school policies. When a student participates in an insensitive or hateful action, there must be a consequence. Depending on the severity of the situation, you can utilize a wide range of non-disciplinary corrective actions to respond to such incidents, including counseling, parent conferences, suggested community service, awareness training, or completion of a research paper on an issue related to intolerance, as well as disciplinary actions.

IV. Helping Students Resolve Conflicts

While you are working to develop a culture based on respect for others and in which students feel a sense of community and inter-dependence, it is important to realize that some conflict is inevitable. Conflict happens in even the most collaborative environments and should be treated as an opportunity to learn about each other and deepen relationships. It will be critical to teach students how to manage conflict so that they can realize these positive effects while at the same time ensuring that the conflicts don’t escalate into negative situations.

Some schools and communities have adopted formal conflict resolution education programs that encourage students to express their points of view, voice their interests, and find mutually acceptable solutions. These programs might involve peer mediation, in which students are trained to serve as mediators; or a process curriculum, in which whole lessons or courses are devoted to problem-solving skills.

Whether or not your school has a formal program, you can bring the principles of conflict resolution into your classroom. It may be a good idea to gain formal training in conflict resolution before trying to implement conflict resolution in your classroom. Still, even if you do not have this opportunity, you can help your students manage conflict constructively by keeping in mind the following principles:

Students who explain their actions to each other are more likely to create solutions. Whenever possible, you should encourage students who experience conflict to step back and describe what happened and how it makes them feel using “I” statements. Most teachers find it effective to have students first record their thoughts in writing. After having time to calm down and reflect, students can then interact and work towards a solution. The Toolkit contains a Sample Lesson for Teaching Students to Use “I” Statements (pp. 57-58). ☞

When conflicts arise in class, I ask the whole class, “How are we going to solve this?” Sometimes the whole class has to be involved, and we’ll sit in a circle and discuss the problem. Other times the students involved in the conflict go to the back carpet and talk it out. My students have become so good at this that I usually just have to go check in with them to see how they’ve resolved it. The key is getting the kids to buy into the shared vision of what they want our class to be, and then to really think about what it takes to make that vision a reality. We have talked so much about wanting a classroom in which they have friends, people are kind to them, classmates help each other, etc., that they really want it. Having this shared vision helps us to want to work out conflicts instead of getting stuck on them.

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Program Design
For conflict resolution to work, students will need to listen actively. Students on each side of the conflict need to feel that they are heard and understood. Again, this type of active listening is something that should be taught and modeled.

Encourage students to develop a set of options for resolving the conflict, and to choose the solution that is mutually beneficial. If you encourage creative problem-solving, students will begin to see that there are mutually beneficial ways to solve problems that will allow them to work towards the classroom community they desire. For a list of general Teaching Peace and Teaching Tolerance Resources see the Toolkit (p. 59).

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**Building a Culture of Achievement**

**Zero Tolerance for Intolerance**

Katherine Smith (Delta ’02) knew that all students in her classroom needed to support one another before they could strive toward academic success together. In an incident she relates below, Katherine made sure she didn’t just reprimand her students’ unkind remarks; she took simple but important steps to ensure it wouldn’t happen again.

*After the beginning of the year I was told that I would have an autistic student in my room for certain subjects. As much as I tried to create a culture of respect in my classroom, my students did make fun of this student by mimicking his behavior and laughing at times. I first began to counteract this activity by addressing it with my class when he was out of the room, and then by bringing in professionals who knew more about autism and could educate my students on his disability. Once my students knew more about why he acted a certain way, they no longer resorted to taunting him because their prejudices were broken down. It also showed them that I was intent that they be respectful to a diverse group of people besides each other.*

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**Conclusion and Key Concepts**

- Building a sense of community in your classroom is a key strategy for reaching your academic goals for your students. Your students will not attempt to master challenging academic content, share their work in front of their peers, or resolve conflicts in order to remain focused on learning if your students do not feel safe, respected, and valued by you and their peers. As the leader of your classroom, it is your responsibility to create an environment where students’ needs for safety and acceptance are met.

- Teachers who achieve this level of community in their classroom utilize a number of techniques, especially preserving the dignity of students by asserting their authority with a respectful tone.

- It is also fundamentally important to actively build relationships between you and your students and among your students. To do so, you might consider attending students’ activities outside of class, having students eat lunch with you, allowing students to contact you outside of school with school-related questions, sending personal notes, joining in physical activities, joining in school and community events, utilizing a suggestion box, taking short field trips on the weekend or school holidays, and celebrating birthdays.

- It takes careful planning (and self-reflection that sometimes leads to uncomfortable revelations) to create a community that values all students. Teachers must deconstruct their own personal biases, as well as respond thoughtfully to incidents of insensitivity or prejudice in the classroom. Many teachers choose to explicitly teach the notion of tolerance and the skills of conflict resolution.