

Identity Safe Classrooms Part Two: Child-Centered Teaching

Categories: Classroom Community

Child-centered teaching prioritizes the students' perspectives in all classroom activities and interactions. We met one teacher who used a literal change of perspective to get in a child-centered frame of mind: Each morning before the kids came in, she would sit in the chair of a different student and look around the classroom, imagining what would it feel like to be that student.

In child-centered classrooms, teachers pay attention to their students to ensure that students can make their own meaning from the lessons and from their interactions with others. In addition, teachers foster both autonomy and cooperation among students. To better understand this process, let's take these identity safety components apart and then put them back together.

- **Listening for Student Voices:** Ensure that each student can contribute to and shape classroom life. This means helping students learn to express themselves and find their unique voices. Students get to present and support their ideas and listen to others. This also means that you should pay attention to your students beyond what they are actually saying. Who seems sad today? Who is acting out and might need more time from the teacher? One teacher keeps track of her students' feelings by taking the "status of the class." In response to the question "What's your status?" students raise fingers from 1 (very sad) to 10 (very happy). She also gives one or two students a chance to explain. They might say "I am happy because my grandmother is coming to visit" or "I am sad because my turtle died." In seconds, the teacher can gauge the general mood and find out if anyone needs special attention.
- **Teaching for Understanding:** Ensure that students will acquire new knowledge and incorporate it into what they already know. By using strategies that involve questioning, analyzing, and drawing conclusions, students make their own meaning and learn to think for themselves. By incorporating activities that draw on their creativity and imagination, students can take a concept and make it their own. When teachers pay attention to whether students understand what they are learning, they can adjust their teaching to clarify and extend the lesson so all students will succeed.
- **Classroom Autonomy:** Promote responsibility and belonging in each student. By giving students opportunities to choose, they learn to make their own decisions, and don't depend solely on the teacher for answers to their questions, or to get the materials or information needed to complete an activity. One teacher had all students set goals for themselves at the beginning of the year. They wrote one academic goal ("I want to be a better writer") and one social goal ("I want to be helpful"). During the year, students assessed how they were progressing toward their goals. At the end of the school year, they looked at how they had attained their goals. By reflecting along the way, the students all saw progress, and by the end of the year they realized how, by setting a goal, they could really achieve it.
- **Focus on Cooperation:** De-emphasize competition, so students learn from and help others. This happens not only during a specific lesson, but throughout the day. Learning to cooperate is one of the most important life skills we can foster in our students. They need opportunities to cooperate in solving problems outside the classroom, as well as during instructional time. One teacher always had the class identify both a social and an academic goal for each lesson. After the lesson, groups shared how well they felt they met their goal. For example, in one class, groups were working on a math word problem that involved

averaging. Their academic goal was to use their knowledge of averaging to solve the problem. The students discussed their social goal and decided they needed to work on how to give each person a chance to contribute to a cooperative activity. After the lesson, each group shared their experiences by answering two questions: (1) How did we solve the math problem? and (2) How did we work together to ensure each of us had a chance to participate?

The challenge of creating identity safe, child-centered classrooms is in bringing all of these elements together. Listening for student voices, teaching for understanding, giving students autonomy, and promoting cooperation can all come together in literacy instruction. In one example, as part of their reading program, students worked with a partner to read and write a review of a book and make their own "Goodreads" website. In that one activity, they were working on comprehension and higher-level thinking as they considered their own ideas and interests. This process gave them the chance to learn to work together and agree and disagree respectfully, as they had to bring their ideas together in one review. The Making Meaning program has an array of similar activities that bring together these elements of a child-centered classroom.

In an identity safe classroom, teachers realize that academic learning is dependent on students having an authentic sense of belonging and well-being. Child-centered teaching strategies are not difficult, but the art is to weave them together across the school day. And the payoff is interested, engaged kids who are learning and feeling connected to each other all day long.

This is the second blog in a series on Identity Safe Classrooms. To learn more read the first and third blogs in the series.

This blog was co-authored by Becki Cohn-Vargas, EdD. Becki is co-author of the new book *Identity Safe Classrooms: Places to Belong and Learn*, and director of Not In Our School, designing curriculum, coaching schools and producing films and digital media on models for creating safe and inclusive schools, free of bullying and intolerance at a national non-profit the Working Group. She also is teaching online courses on bullying prevention for the University of San Diego. Becki worked in educational settings for over 35 years as a teacher and administrator.

This blog was a collaboration with Not In Our Town (NIOT), a movement to stop hate, address bullying, and build safe communities. Not In Our School, a part of NIOT creates films, lesson plans, and tools to help educators create accepting, inclusive, and identity safe schools.