



Cultivating Respectful Classroom Discourse in Trump's America

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The 2016 presidential election brought debate about wall building, deportation for undocumented families, and the creation of a registry for Muslim Americans. A Trump presidency means that many of our ESOL families are concerned about their security in our communities. Families are talking about this at home, and children are talking at school. Students are repeating insensitive things they have heard at home or on television. For our students who are already fearful that their families will be separated or that they will have to register because of their religion, hearing their peers express those ideas can feel intimidating. How can teachers provide a safe learning environment that respects all learners? Suggestions are presented for maintaining an intimidation-free classroom and encouraging respectful discourse in order to promote optimal learning opportunities.

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“That man wants to send my family back to Mexico.” The shaky voice of this kindergarten student took me by surprise. In past elections, it has been my experience that my students rarely care enough to learn the names of the candidates, much less actual campaign promises. The first time I heard a child talking specifically about the 2016 election, I brushed it off as an interaction with a child who must be from a very political family. I am the itinerant teacher for English learners in two rural elementary schools, and in my 12 years of teaching, this was my first experience with such a young

child who was concerned with politics. However, over the next several days, as Election Day approached, I would see just how concerned my students were. I overheard student conversations becoming more and more passionate as the election drew near. A second grade student shared, “He’s going to build a wall to keep my family out.” A kindergarten student said, “My Daddy will be sent to Mexico.” A fifth grade student said, “My whole family is Muslim, and he doesn’t want us here.” What I soon realized is that this presidential campaign was not like any other that has occurred during my career. The topics brought up during this campaign directly affect my students’ families and our local ESOL community. And it was now clear that my students were worried.

Immigration, deportation, and religious freedom are adult issues. They are not something that children should have to worry about. Yet in these times, when the threat is real and the information is on television, on social media, and in the conversation around the dinner table, children are listening. Children are worrying. Students are physically present in classrooms, but their minds seem to be preoccupied with problems as heavy as keeping their families together and religious freedom. How can educators be aware of and sensitive to these very real fears?

Peer Intimidation

The stress may not be coming entirely from information students are getting at home. In the wake of Trump’s election, minority students are starting to experience racial bullying at school. A Pennsylvania school reported an incident following Trump’s election where students chanted, “White Power” and declared that minority students would be their slaves. Some students were even spat on (Post-Trump Victory Bullying, 2016). Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Post-election bullying is being

reported across the country. Lanktree (2016) reports that students at Dewitt Junior High School in Michigan blocked Latino students from their lockers, saying they were trying to “make America great again.” Thankfully, the schools where I teach have not experienced this level of bullying, but even in my schools, students are certainly talking about race issues and religious rights. In the hallways, at lunch, and waiting in line to board the school bus, I overhear students talking about incredible walls so high no one could climb them and about how we will be making people leave “our” country. I hear them. My Latino students hear them. My Muslim students hear them. Their fear and anxiety is not just being fueled by media anymore.

Creating a Safe Environment

Marshall (2016) states that effective teaching requires establishing a safe, respectful learning environment. However, creating a safe learning environment is a greater challenge now than ever before. Many of our minority students wrestle with the realization that our newly elected president has discussed plans that feel threatening to their family and home. Other students are repeating hurtful phrases they’ve heard during the election and since President Trump took office, often without realizing how insensitive those statements can be. How do we cultivate a peaceful and safe learning environment in the midst of this? It is critical to the learning process that children can feel some relief from anxiety during instructional time. Perry (2000) states that children are free to experience curiosity for learning when they feel safe. However, when children feel fear, they are more likely to be overwhelmed by the learning process. Therefore, creating an emotionally safe classroom for children whose anxiety is heightened will allow them to focus on instruction and maintain academic curiosity.

What specific steps can we take to help students feel emotionally safe at school?

Alber (2011) states that as a part of classroom rules, teachers should set some non-negotiable behaviors, for which there are always consequences. Name calling and bullying are typical non-negotiables in classroom rules. It is important to hold children accountable for bullying and name-calling so that all students begin to understand that there is never a situation when it will be overlooked. Teachers often let students work out small disputes on their own so that they can learn to deal with conflict independently, and we regularly see children whose feelings are hurt by others in the process. In my experience, these issues can be part of a typical school day. However, when a teacher becomes aware that a student is feeling intimidated by other students, that is the point at which teacher intervention is required. The student who was intimidating others needs not only to be disciplined, but also to engage in a conversation with the teacher about what specifically crossed the line from disagreement into intimidation. The student who feels bullied will likely need some comforting words and assurance that bullying will not be tolerated. When students see that non-negotiable behaviors are consistently followed by consequences, they will begin to feel safe in the classroom.

Dusenbury (2012) reminds teachers to monitor closely during times of transition, in the hallways, and during lunch. If a conversation seems insensitive and would not be allowed during class, Dusenbury (2012) recommends holding students to those same standards outside of class time. It is important to redirect not only overtly inappropriate conversations, but any conversation that could be perceived as insensitive. Innocent conversations about something insensitive do not warrant punishment, but could still be

redirected to a new topic. This will help students know that the teacher's expectation for a safe environment remains consistent during the entire school day. Over time, this will also help students accept that they should expect to be respected by their peers in any school setting. The effort here is not to limit free speech or to diminish healthy political discussion. Those things are important. However, on this particularly sensitive topic, it is important to have those discussions in a closely monitored atmosphere so that hate speech and intimidation can be curtailed.

Is there a way to create a classroom environment that will proactively support students in avoiding those intimidating situations? Robinson and Kakela (2006) state that making the classroom a place for fun, interaction, and trust can begin to create the kind of nurturing, respectful learning environment where students feel comfortable and free to learn. It not only provides a safe environment, but it also promotes deeper, more personalized learning and contributes to whole person development. In times of high stress, creating an upbeat atmosphere is a task that might need deliberate attention. Quick game breaks or quiz breaks can ease the monotony of long class periods and help students remain engaged. Games and fun surprises also lighten the atmosphere of the classroom, which often helps student interpersonal dynamics. Something as simple as a warm smile and an upbeat attitude from the teacher can help students to feel safe as well. Alber (2011) states that when tensions are high, teachers can set the tone of their classrooms by smiling and laughing. Students who are having a good time are likely to release worry and become more engaged in the lesson. Alber (2011) also lists music as a way of improving the welcoming atmosphere of the classroom. On those days when keeping student conversations directed to academic language seems almost

impossible, music can help. Upbeat, light-hearted music can be played during independent work periods. This time of working with music in the background could give students a break from stressful conversations and ease student anxiety.

Leading Controversial Discussions

Is it possible to have a productive classroom discussion about race and religion when tensions are already high? Cleveland (2009) offers a method of beginning discussions on current events in high school classrooms. She states that teachers can encourage student-led discussions about controversial topics. Students can bring the news that interests them from any source, including magazines, online news, or newspapers and use this to begin respectful discussions. This allows students not only to achieve a deeper understanding of the topics, but also to reflect upon their own beliefs. The important thing to remember is that discussion rules must be set before beginning these conversations. The class can create these guidelines together to ensure that everyone agrees on what kind of language will contribute to non-threatening conversations.

Some teachers may decide that their class is not old enough or mature enough to follow the debate norms for ensuring a safe environment. Those teachers may choose to bring up the topics in a less assertive way through storytelling. Bunting (2012) suggests that introducing controversial issues through stories about people dealing with them can help students achieve a deeper understanding of the issues. This would allow the class to discuss one person's experience rather than the general topic. The teacher can focus discussions on the people in the narrative and their experience, rather than on the broad issue. For example, given a narrative about a Muslim American

who is fearful of a potential travel ban or Muslim registry, student comments would naturally be directed toward the individual in the story rather than Muslims in general. This strategy could also help students relate to people who are affected by the proposed changes in our country. Even in this narrative discussion, it is important to encourage respectful language.

My students' fear of deportation, separated families, and religious persecution following the election of our new president is real. I understand why they are worried. I wish I could promise my students that everything will be okay. I wish I could tell them that their families will not be separated, that their friends will not be deported, and that they will not be asked to register because of their religion. I wish I could do that. However, none of us know what is coming. I cannot make promises. What I can do is provide a few hours in the day that will bring relief from their anxiety. I can infuse my classroom with music, humor, and kindness to help them feel at ease and ready to learn. I can lead them in learning to communicate respectfully. And most importantly, I can make sure that during the hours I have with my students, they are in an emotionally safe environment.

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