Creating Space for Making Sense of the World

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As teachers, we recognize that we don’t have all the answers, especially when it comes to our students’ questions about race, politics, and religion. We constantly ask ourselves, Did I get too political? Did I shy away from a teachable moment? Is this topic even age appropriate? Is what I’m saying true, or am I projecting my own bias on my students? We are fifth-grade teachers in a diverse elementary school located in the inner suburbs of St. Louis. We noticed that our students needed a safe place to raise questions, share feelings, and search for truth regarding difficult topics. Do we avoid uncomfortable conversations that might lead us to an unfamiliar place? Or, do we charge ahead, being responsive, empathetic educators, openly showing our vulnerability and admitting that for many of us as adults, talking about these issues can be scary? To answer this question, we did what we always do as teachers: read journals, researched unfamiliar concepts, attended lectures, collected articles, and immersed ourselves in new territory.

Getting Started

How do we help kids process the feelings that political turmoil in our country brings into our classrooms? To begin, we slowed down, listened, and were responsive. We noticed that our students were concerned with headlines about restricting travel from and to countries of predominantly Muslim faith. We intentionally worked within the structures in place in our classrooms such as read-alouds, literature circles, class meetings, and project-based learning. We started with a shared reading of a local news article about Syrian refugees adapting to the poor living conditions and systemic oppression in St. Louis. We helped students navigate their concerns. This sometimes left us with an uneasy feeling, as investigating and discussing a topic is not always predictable.

1. Safe Spaces: We build and nurture a culture of acceptance through shared literature and community-building experiences.
2. Ongoing Inquiry: Throughout the year, students apply inquiry skills to examine issues of power in history and today.
3. Valuing the Arts: We have learned from Daniel H. Pink’s book, A Whole New Mind (2006), that artistry and design can take on many forms. Our school values the arts and students as artists.

In addition, our school is designed around the metaphor of “School as Museum.” Twice each year, students work by grade level to create exhibits from their most important learning to share with the community. In recent years, students have created an entire town to display the relevance of fractions in our daily lives, designed an outdoor market to celebrate different cultures and perspectives, and created a backyard aquaponics system to demonstrate ways to combat food deserts in St. Louis.

Emerging Themes

To build background knowledge, we studied the history of immigration and refugee policy in the United States. We wanted students to use information and historical context to form or revise their own opinions about current headlines. Through our study, students noticed a common theme: language seemed to be at the core of gaining power or losing it. Sarah (all student names are pseudonyms) noted that without fluently speaking the language of power, “you have a hard time getting a job, a home, and getting food.”

Acknowledging the importance of cultural preservation for refugees, she added, “I’m wondering if the people who make you change who you are need to see what it feels like to be in the others’ shoes.” Students’ sense of empathy, compassion, and social responsibility grew as they explored critical issues related to language and power. Students compared the treatment of marginalized groups in America’s past,
such as Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and women, to the treatment of marginalized groups today. Looking at the past guided students to find patterns that helped them make sense of their uncertain world.

Simultaneously, we were approaching a three-week grammar unit in writing workshop. We decided to study grammar through the lens of power, giving deeper meaning to the more traditional lessons around the mechanics of writing. We explored a variety of dialects through documentaries and audio clips, discussing how the various ways of speaking may affect others’ perceptions of the speaker. Students were particularly fascinated with our study of African American Vernacular, Appalachian dialect, and the fight to preserve the Native American language, Wukchumni. Through a series of “empowerment lessons,” students learned how to strengthen their writing by learning and following rules of Standard English. We were intentional about referring to the rules we were studying as those of “Standard” English rather than “correct” English. Students continued to uncover patterns of oppression connected to language. As a group, we decided to use our exhibit space to give voice to those who had been silenced.

Organizing

There are many moving pieces to consider when synthesizing the ideas of over 100 fifth graders into one cohesive exhibit. We began by brainstorming and then prioritizing topics by considering: What is our message? What story do we want to tell? What does our community need to hear? When considering the purpose of the exhibit, Jamal wrote: “I want this exhibit to change the way people think. I also want it to help grow a sacredness for others, which will help the community. I want it to affect visitors as it did me. I now understand people and why they make the choices they do, and I want everyone to be able to do that.”

Tiana expressed a similar goal of a mindset shift:

I hope that this exhibit will change people’s mindset because it really did change mine. At first, I really didn’t pay much mind to other languages, other than maybe a question here and there and we started reading about refugees and how things are when they first come here; I started to want to know more and to try and find a way that I could make things somewhat easier for everyone.
Through writing and discussion, we developed four essential questions to guide our inquiry: (1) What is language? (2) How can language be a barrier? (3) How can language bring opportunities? (4) What is the role of language throughout history?

**Completing the Work**

Within each classroom, students were separated into small groups by their interests. In one group, students conducted an interview with our ESOL teacher. They took notes and used these to create follow-up interviews with her. Another group of students recorded these interviews so that visitors could read excerpts of the interviews and scan a QR code to watch full interviews. On several occasions, groups went into the display space to create mock-ups of their ideas. This process allowed students to test their ideas and served as a mode of communication with the other fifth-grade classes.

**Figure 3:** Before the exhibit opens to the public, a student curator quietly explores on her own, stopping at the Power of Language timeline.

**Figure 4:** On opening night, visitors take time to reflect on and share their personal stories about the power of language.

**Figure 5:** Student curators reflect on the lessons they learned about the connections between language, grammar, and power in the Language as Opportunity section of the exhibit.
Planning Visitor Reflection

Students realized how good it felt to tell their stories and be heard, which led them to create opportunities for visitors to reflect and share. Students created a wall of mirrors in different shapes and sizes. Next to these were questions encouraging visitors to pause and reflect on their own experiences with language and how it has shaped their identity: Who taught you the language or languages you speak? Do you speak differently than you do at home when you are at school or work? Inspired by NPR’s and the Smithsonian’s StoryCorps project, students collected language stories. They took interview questions home to their parents and recorded interviews on their tablets and smartphones. Visitors could scan a QR code to hear authentic stories about overcoming language barriers from their own community. Signs encouraged guests to use our Twitter Hashtag, #MRHbeheard as a way to share their thoughts, feedback, and stories.

The final space in the exhibit invited visitors to share their own language stories by posting them on the wall. These stories—some hopeful and some painful—were all very personal. One visitor left the message, Learning another language wasn’t always fun, but I knew the outcome would help me connect cultures and worlds. Some made fun of me and I cried . . . A lot. I didn’t quit, I tried harder, now I have love of many. A very young visitor, with the help of his parent, painstakingly scrawled, Words hurt.

Going Public

Typically, opening night is a flurry of activity and a joyous, social celebration, as families move through the exhibit with younger siblings playing at their feet. Our fifth graders wanted this opening night to look and feel different. Students wanted the visitors to have an experience that allowed them to truly hear the voices of the marginalized and reflect on their own language experiences, identity, and biases. Students dimmed the overhead lights and used spotlights to accent powerful quotes and photos. They posted an announcement at the entrance asking visitors to keep voices low or remain silent throughout their journey. Adults were amazed by the depth to which fifth graders could read, think, and communicate. One student later reflected on his mother’s reaction: “I know we were successful because my Mom who has a degree in language was astonished at what the exhibit was like and how much she agreed with what the exhibit’s meaning was.” The night was over all too soon, leaving us with memories and photos of a time children brought their community together to reflect on the beauty of differences amidst national social, political, and racial division.

Spreading the Message

Word of the exhibit spread, resulting in two school groups requesting scheduled tours. Sixth graders from an affluent neighborhood nearby visited in preparation for their trip to the National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis. After the tours, respectful and insightful conversations erupted immediately as students met in mixed age groups to discuss their learning and reactions. One fifth grader reflected after the discussion: “This group had so much to say and it was very powerful! Also, I can’t believe I got rid of my fear of being a tour guide in front of lots of people!” The second group to visit was a large group of multilingual kindergartners from a local language immersion school. Teachers observed as our fifth graders tenderly shared powerful information with wide-eyed, inquisitive kindergartners. At the end of the tour, fifth graders helped the young visitors add their language stories to the exhibit. They brought a global discussion of language to the forefront with our fifth graders.

The more students explored the Power of Language, the more questions they had about race, culture, identity, and society. Becoming more vulnerable, informed, and socially responsible alongside our students, we shifted from feeling uncertain and stressed about how to help students handle political and racial turmoil into confident creators of safe and healing places of inquiry. The experience left us with a sense of hope about the future of our world.

Reference