Greater Good in Education
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

RESPONDING TO DIFFERENCES

"It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences."

—Audre Lord

OVERVIEW

Students reflect on the ways people respond to human differences as they journal, read a poem, and engage in a sorting activity. They consider the consequences of people's responses and how they want their school community respond to difference.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help cultivate a positive classroom and school community, especially at the beginning of the year

TIME REQUIRED

- 50 minutes

LEVEL

- High School

MATERIALS

- PowerPoint: Responding to Difference
- Reading: What Do We Do With a Difference?
- Handout: What Do We Do With a Variation? Question Sort
- Post-it notes or index cards

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Categorize the many ways in which humans respond when encountering difference and use this information to write creatively in response to the question, "What do we do with a variation?"

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on how you respond when you meet someone or a group of people who are different from you. Why do you think you respond that way?
- How do you set up your classroom so that students respond positively to each other's differences?

INSTRUCTIONS

Note: This lesson from Facing History is part of a larger series of lessons on Standing Up for Democracy. You can access this series for free here.

- Essential Questions:
  - How do our beliefs about difference influence the ways in which we see and choose to interact with each other?
- Guiding Questions:
  - How do we learn which differences between people matter and which do not?
  - How do we respond to differences?

OVERVIEW

- In this lesson, students look more closely at the variety of ways we respond to differences between ourselves and others. This is important for students to consider because our responses to difference can contribute to the creation of "in" and "out" groups that can favor some individuals and groups while marginalizing others.

ACTIVITIES

- **Reflect on how we respond to difference**
  - To introduce students to the themes in this lesson's text, ask them to respond in their journals to the following questions:

        - What are some of the ways that people respond when they encounter an individual or group that seems different from them?
        - What are some of the reasons for the different responses people might have to those who are different from them?
    - Then ask students to Think, Pair, Share their responses before bringing the class together and asking each pair to share one of the ways people respond when they encounter difference and recording their ideas on chart paper.
- **Think about what we do when we encounter difference**
    - Tell students that they will now read a poem by James Berry about the many ways we respond when we encounter a difference. While Berry was born in rural Jamaica in 1924, he moved to Britain in 1948 where he lived until his death in 2017.
    - Pass out and read aloud "What Do We Do With a Difference?" Try reading it a few different ways. Perhaps you read it out loud the first time so that students get a sense of the rhythm of the poem. Then, using popcorn or wraparound, which are explained on the Read Aloud teaching strategy page, have students read the poem out loud sentence by sentence, and then a third time line by line. Finally, ask students to discuss in a Think, Pair, Share activity what they think the poem is about based on their first impressions of the text.
- **Sort and discuss ways we respond to a difference**
    - Next, divide the class into groups and pass out the envelopes with What Do We Do With a Variation? Question Sort sentence strips and some post-it notes or index cards.
    - Tell the students that they should sort the strips into categories of similar kinds of responses. They should create a label for each category and write it on a post-it note or index card (for example, "Fear," "Indifference").
    - They might start by creating piles of responses to differences and then labelling them. Or they might create their own categories first and then organize their strips into them. Regardless of their process, students should work together with their group members to complete this task.
    - After the groups have organized the lines of the poem into categories of responses, ask them to discuss several of the following questions:
        - Which lines of the poem were easiest to categorize and which ones were the most difficult? Why do you think some responses to difference were easier or harder than others to place in a category?
        - Which of your categories had the most and the fewest examples from the poem? What might you attribute to this difference?
        - Can you think of any specific examples (in your school, your local community, or the world) of the different ways that Berry says humans respond to differences? Why do you think people respond in these ways?
        - What are other ways that humans respond to difference that Berry does not acknowledge in his poem?
        - What is the message of Berry's poem? What does he want his reader to understand about humans and human behavior when responding to difference?
    - After groups have finished their discussions, ask them to share one interesting take-away from the activity and their discussion. You might also choose to facilitate a class discussion about one or more of the questions.
- **Create an aspirational stanza for Berry's poem**
    - Ask students to take a moment to envision how they would like their school community to respond to the differences between its members. You might ask them to close their eyes and

visualize the response they would like to see (rather than what they perhaps have seen or experienced).
    - Then tell students that they will end the lesson by writing an additional three-line stanza that describes their vision for how they would like their school community or local community to respond to a difference today. They can follow the pattern of Berry's poem by starting the first line of their stanze with "Do we…," finishing the question in line two, and then adding an additional question in line three. You might choose to have pairs work on this task, or ask students to create their own stanzas.

CLOSURE

- Students can share their stanzas in a wraparound or gallery walk.

EXTENSIONS

- Digging deeper into how we respond to difference
- In the reading Understanding Strangers, Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski and Moroccan scholar Fatema Mernissi reflect on the ways in which we respond to difference, both in ancient times and today.
- Similarly, Chief Rabbi or the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth in the United Kingdom, Jonathan Sacks, considers how we confront the "Other" when he shares his three models for integration in the reading Three Parables of Integration. Both of these readings pair well with each other and James Berry's What Do We Do With a Variation?
- After teaching Berry's poem, you might assign half the class each reading and divide students into groups to read aloud and then discuss the connections questions.
- Then jigsaw the students into groups of four so each group has two students with each reading. Students summarize their readings and then compare and contrast Kapuscinski's three ideas for how we might respond to the "Other" with Sack's three models for integration. Then, in a class discussion, students compare the readings with Berry's poems.
- They might rank all of the responses to difference in the three readings from the most inclusive to least inclusive and discuss where they see evidence of these responses in their own school and local communities.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

How did students respond to this practice? Do you notice a shift in the classroom climate, especially how students are talking to and treating each other, after this practice? If so, how?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In a recent study, researchers divided participants into two groups and gave each a different reading. One reading emphasized the distinctiveness of different groups with sentences like this: "Each group has its own talents, as

well as its own problems, and acknowledging both these strengths and weaknesses, we validate the identity of each group and we recognize its existence and its importance to the social fabric."

The other reading highlighted individual characteristics: "We must look beyond skin color and understand the person within, to see each person as an individual who is part of the larger group."

The group that read the passage that emphasized group differences were more likely to report beliefs in race essentialism--that group membership determines innate qualities--than those who got the individual-oriented message. In other words, focusing on individuals helped the participants see people from different cultures as individuals, rather than as groups with essential characteristics.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Racial stereotyping comes from "essentialism"--the belief that membership in a racial group defines someone based on a range of characteristics, including their behavior. For example, many whites in the Jim Crow South falsely believed that skin color and race determined someone's character, behavior, and intelligence.

In today's society where divisions by race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, and many other identities cause so much heartache, schools have an important role to play in bridging these divisions.

In addition to the long-term benefits of actual societal transformation, in the more immediate term, providing students a voice in how the school responds to differences can help cultivate a classroom and school climate where students feel greater safety and belonging.

SOURCE

Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit international educational and professional development organization. By integrating the study of history, literature, and human behavior with ethical decision-making and innovative teaching strategies, Facing History enables secondary school teachers to promote students' historical understanding, critical thinking, and social-emotional learning. As students explore the complexities of history, and make connections to current events, they reflect on the choices they confront today and consider how they can make a difference. www.facinghistory.org