



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

## JUST BECAUSE (BROADEN YOUR SENSE OF WHAT'S COMFORTABLE AND FAMILIAR)

*"The problem with assumptions is that we believe they are the truth."*

— Don Miguel Ruiz

### OVERVIEW

Students discuss what it means to make assumptions, read two poems written to dismantle assumptions, and write and share their own version of the poem.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- At the beginning of the school year to help foster positive peer relationships
- When an incident within the school community or in society occurs that demonstrates how assumptions that we make about each other can be harmful
- To foster a sense of inclusion and belonging in the classroom

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

#### LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School

#### MATERIALS

- Just Because poems [Handout 1](#)—one per student (can be reused for multiple classes)
- Brainstorm [Handout 2](#) (page 1)—one per student
- Optional: Modification handout (second page of [Handout 2](#))
- Pen/pencils

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Think about the assumptions made about them based on gender, age, culture, religion, etc.
- Voice aspects of themselves that foster pride and respect

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)
- [Facilitating Bridging Discussions: Preparing Your Classroom](#)

## CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Empathy
- Understanding
- Curiosity
- Respect

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Social Awareness
- Relationship Skills
- [TSEL Competencies](#): Identity, Agency, and Curiosity

## MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Non-judgment
- Open Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on assumptions people might make about you based on an identity you hold. How do you feel when this happens?
- What is one thing you would like to tell people about who you are that helps them know the real you?
- Are there assumptions that you could be making about your students and/or colleagues that might shift if you were to get to know them better? How would this change your relationship with them?
- What challenges might arise from doing this activity with your students? How can you ensure a safe classroom environment for sharing and discussing what students learn about themselves and each other?

In case it's helpful, here is a [video](#) of Palo Alto High School students performing their Just Because poems.

- Consider writing your own version of a Just Because poem and sharing it with students prior to beginning the practice.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This practice is based on a poem called "Just Because" by Esther Kamkar, a poet born in Tehran, Iran in 1947. Esther grew up in a country where women and girls do not have the same protection under the law as men. She also faced discrimination because she is Jewish, a religious minority in that country. Esther eventually moved to Jerusalem, a city significant to Israel and Palestine, and then to the U.S., where she now lives in Northern California. She began writing poems in 1989.

In a July 2022 [podcast interview](#) (1:38), Ms. Kamkar told the origin story of this poem:

*"...This poem came about when I was working at JLS [Middle School] helping a teacher who took some students to an Anne Frank exhibit in Menlo Park Library. When they came back, they were given a prompt to write a poem against stereotyping. It was a formula poem and the title is 'Just Because'--'just because I am this, I am not this, this, and that.' And after two days, it was the end of the school year, this teacher took me out for a fancy high tea at a fancy hotel. They served the tea in beautiful tea pots and with trays of sandwiches and sweets. After she drank her tea, she pushed her cup toward me and she said, 'Can you read my fortune?' I'm not a fortune teller. She gave that assignment but she had not internalized the meaning of the assignment herself. I thought I'm going to take that prompt and write a poem about this experience with her. And this is the poem..."*

In our society, people often face unfair and unequal treatment based on gender, religion, culture, etc. Esther says her poems "demonstrate a larger sense of the world. They look outward, directly at injustices and sorrows, and also inward, at my private world and the world of my heart."

Prior to engaging in this activity, read through these [instructions](#) on how to facilitate bridging conversations with students, ensuring a safe and welcoming classroom environment in which negative stereotypes and other kinds of inappropriate language are discouraged.

### INTRODUCTION (10 MINUTES)

- Engage students in a quick-write and/or discussion with some or all of these questions:
  - *What is an assumption?*
  - *Why do you think people are judged based on assumptions?*
  - *What is the difference between making assumptions and getting to know a person?*
  - *Describe a time that someone made an assumption about you based on a part of your identity. What happened? How did you feel? How did you respond?*
  - **Modification:** You may want to define "assumption" for students as it pertains to this lesson: Something believed to be true, without proof; from the verb "assume": believing something is

true without proof or having all the facts. You may want to provide examples from your own experience, from literature, etc.

- Tell students:
  - *In today's lesson, we are going to think about assumptions that are made about us, but also focus on looking beyond these assumptions to help people get to know us as real people.*

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### SHARE BACKGROUND AND POEMS (5 MINUTES)

- Note: You can either provide a [handout](#) of the poems for each student, or just read the poems aloud.
- Tell the class that they are going to read a poem by Esther Kamkar that centers on assumptions.
- Before reading the poem, share Esther Kamkar's background and the topic with students (see "Before You Begin" above).
- Read Esther's poem "Just Because."
- Next, read the poem by a teen girl from Santa Cruz, California, who engaged in this activity.

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### BRAINSTORM (5 MINUTES)

- Using the BRAINSTORM space on their [handout](#), ask students to write some identities they hold, such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, age, hobbies, politics, religion, etc. Next, ask students to make a list of assumptions that people make about them based on their gender, age, race, religion, culture, etc.
- Ask students to make a second list of strong, positive characteristics they recognize in themselves. These characteristics don't need to be tied to their identities. Instead, you might ask students, "If your best friend was describing you, what are three characteristics they might say?"

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### POETRY WRITING (15-20 MINUTES)

- Explain that they now have all the elements necessary to create a personal poem in the style of Esther Kamkar.
- **Modifications:**
  - Fill in some of the words of the poem with students using page 2 of the [handout](#). For example, "Just because I am \_\_\_\_\_", "I am not \_\_\_\_\_", "I don't \_\_\_\_\_", or "doesn't mean I \_\_\_\_\_".
  - Give students the opportunity to include more "I am \_\_\_\_\_" statements.
  - Consider having students responsible for creating only 1 or 2 stanzas.
  - Pairs or groups could combine stanzas to form poems.
  - Give students the option to draw representations of themselves.
- Encourage students who finish early to recopy their poem on a blank sheet of paper and decorate, or to create a digital copy with pictures, etc.

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### CLOSURE/EXTENSIONS

- Create a classroom or school-wide display with the poems (consider whether students prefer to be anonymous or publish with their name).
- Create an opportunity for students to share their poems with classmates in some way. For example:
  - Assign partners to share and discuss.
  - Share in small groups.

- Have an “inner circle/outer circle” activity where students rotate through and share with multiple partners. To do this, have students form two circles with pairs of students, one from each circle, facing each other. Give each pair enough time to share their poem with each other, then have the outer circle of students walk clockwise while the inner circle of students stays where they are. The outer circle should count three people, then stop in front of their new partner. Students then share their poems and repeat.
- Hold an “open mic” celebration where students can choose to share their poem with the class.
- Do a gallery walk where poems are posted around the room and students can circulate, reading the poems and writing positive feedback on Post-its for the poems.
- Engage the class in a deeper discussion around assumptions and stereotypes, using the following questions:
  - *What is something new about someone that you learned from this activity?*
  - *How does this activity help break down assumptions/stereotypes?*
  - *Tell about a time that you made an assumption about someone based on a part of their identity.*
  - *Do you notice whether assumptions/stereotypes are a problem at our school? In what way?*
  - *How can we take steps towards addressing assumptions/stereotypes at our school?*
  - *Are assumptions/stereotypes ever a good thing?*

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to this activity? What did they learn about themselves and/or their peers?
- Do you notice whether the climate of the classroom or peer relationships changed after doing this activity? If so, in what way?
- What might you change about this activity next time?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Studies with children and adolescents show that programs intended to prevent or reduce prejudice can have [significant positive effects](#), especially when they involve contact between different groups and/or efforts to promote empathy and perspective-taking.

For example, numerous studies have found that when we [re-categorize people](#) who are not part of our identity group based on things that we have in common, we increase our acceptance of others and see them as part of “us.”

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Human beings “categorize” each other into identity groups based on many different features, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status; however, this process can easily lead to stereotyping and other forms of discrimination.

In fact, stereotyping and prejudice [emerge early](#) in life. Children as young as four are influenced by stereotypes about social categories like [race and gender](#), and these biases can [affect their interests](#) and behaviors.

According to [research](#), one of the most effective ways to break down barriers of prejudice, racism, and “othering” is the [cultivation of cross-group friendships](#). By teaching students to look beyond their peers’ outward-facing identities and to get to know each other on a more personal, human level, teachers can make great strides in combating bias and creating a world where everyone is valued.

## SOURCE

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