



My hair  
reminds  
me of  
waves.



# Teach the Children Well

It's never too early to begin teaching students about  
diversity, differences and assumptions.

BY VICKI NELSON



I have  
strawberry  
red hair.





I have a  
jellybean-  
shaped  
nose.

Three years ago, as my school counseling partner and I were examining programming changes for the upcoming school year, we identified a new need in our community. Our middle school data indicated students were identifying an increase in unkind behavior connected to socioeconomic status and physical appearance. We were also seeing many other places where our increasing socioeconomic diversity was leading to equity issues within our school.

We began to consider ways to increase opportunities for our younger students to learn about diversity, perceptions and assumptions. You might be wondering how a small, rural town in Vermont addresses these issues, as we aren't known for being a diverse state. However, as you read further, you will discover the strategies used in our school can easily be applied to any school setting in which there is a need for greater cultural competency and respect for diversity.

I consulted several wonderful resources including Teaching Tolerance ([tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org)) and the Anti-Defamation League's World of Difference Institute ([adl.org](http://adl.org)). Both of these organizations have incredible teaching tools for addressing cultural competency and diversity-based topics. Drawing on my research and keeping scheduling considerations in mind, I created a series of four, 45-minute workshops to teach in the third and fourth grades.



I'm almost  
as tall  
as five  
bookcases.

The classroom teachers stay during these lessons, adding to the discussion and thinking about how to embed the core ideas back into the regular classroom content. Essentially, I bring the lessons and materials, and they are co-teaching with me. I realize this is not the practice in most schools, but over the course of my school counseling career in Vermont, this has always been my norm. I can't imagine it any other way. The teachers bring the school counseling curriculum lessons to the next level with their expertise, stories and knowledge of their students' learning styles.

The first workshop I taught to third- and fourth-graders to address understanding and acceptance of others focused on the word "diversity." We began by exploring students' prior knowledge and understanding of diversity. We narrowed it down to "Respecting differences in all of the citizens of the world." We also watch the film "Collage: A Short Film on Children & Diversity," <https://vimeo.com/12069404>. I scoured the Internet for an age-appropriate video that would help highlight the meaning of diversity for my students. When I came upon "Collage," I was ecstatic. This Vimeo video, made by a high school student as a part of a senior project, was exactly what I needed. The film has elementary-age children looking at nine photos of children from all over the world. They describe what they see and answer questions such as "Why is diversity important?" I find it effective for our students to hear what other children have to say about diversity to expose them to

opinions beyond their own classroom community.

The second workshop focused on individuality. Students compared small stones or blades of grass to look at subtle differences. The goal was to begin to emphasize our physical differences in a meaningful way. Current research suggests it is highly important to dispel colorblindness and have children celebrate individuality while recognizing differences in others. I had the students describe their own physical traits using descriptive language such as:

- Hair color: strawberry red
- Skin color: jaguar
- Height: four bookcases
- Nose shape: jelly bean
- Hair texture: ocean waves

Students carefully turned in their descriptions without other students seeing their words or drawings. We then read the personalized physical characteristics, and students guessed which classmate had written these statements. The teachers were amazed by their enthusiasm with this activity. One student wrote "like a lion's mane" for hair texture. I remember reading this aloud and watching him smile as he scanned his class and watched them guess who may have written down this distinctive attribute. It was truly a celebration of each child and his or her physical characteristics.

For the third workshop we moved deeper into our work around diversity and accepting differences. The emphasis was on the word "assumptions." I chose to focus on this concept because I believe this is where cultural misunderstandings begin. Misconceptions of individuals or groups can lead to assumptions, which can begin the path of prejudicial thinking, bias or even hate, such as when affluent parents assume their child's academic progress will be hindered by working in a group with a child from a low socioeconomic background. These inequitable messages begin to permeate a school's climate and culture. As our children gain more life experience they begin to build their perceptions of the world and others based on these messages. It is important we become mindful of our assumptions so we recognize

when they become borderline or blatantly prejudicial. The core idea of this lesson is getting to know other people vs. judging or excluding others with differences.

Assumptions can come about in many ways, from assuming your spouse will pick up milk tonight after using the last drop at breakfast to truly extreme assumptions, which lead to misinformation or misunderstandings. To begin uncovering these themes with the third- and fourth-graders, I used photographs of people from different ethnic backgrounds. The students broke into groups to discuss the photos, keeping these three points in mind:

- Use adjectives/describing words.
- Make connections to when we described our own characteristics.
- Everyone's ideas count.

The last bullet point is important to emphasize. You can imagine if you put any photo in front of any age group they would have different ideas of how to describe a person. My goal was to allow for a free flow of ideas and authentic discussion. I find it helpful to circulate around the room to address any comments that might derail the larger group discussion. It's important, however, to be cognizant of not taking over a group discussion or students might shift into sharing adjectives they think you will want to hear.

In one case, a student labeled a person in a photo "dumb." There is a balance with having students share their unfiltered thinking and monitoring for disrespectful comments. At the same time, other students will step in and say things such as "That is unkind." "How do you know that about that person?" or "I'm not writing that down." This is all a part of the process. Students share their genuine thinking, and peers have thoughts and feedback for them.

After we gathered back as a full group, each small group shared their list of adjectives. As we went through the lists, I would attempt to sort the public list into two categories. The students tried to figure out how I was sorting the words and/or what the categories were going to be. Some compiled examples from a few different photos were:

We link the word "assumptions" to "Things we think to be true." I explain to the students that when we think something about someone else is true, but it is not, we are making an assumption about that person.

Dark hair	Worn out
Dark eyes	Looks Chinese
Sandals on	Unwealthy
Oval-shaped head	Very poor
Pointy eyebrows	Unhappy
Kid	Determined but sad
Tan skin	Homeschooled
Sitting on a bench	Brave
Wearing a sombrero	Strong
Has a sword	Looks like a farmer
Flat mouth	Homeless
Bushy eyebrows	Nice clothes
Mustaches	Lives in a temple
Young	Ugly
Part bald	Gender - female/male?
Tannish skin	

We had rich discussions about the two categories. The students began to see the left column as concrete traits or characteristics. However, the right column is more abstract, so we add clarity by labeling the columns for the students as “Things we know to be true” and “Things we think to be true.” We link the word “assumptions” to “Things we think to be true.” I explain to the students that when we think something about someone else that may or may not be true we are making an assumption about that person.

To foster a mindset that allows for growth in understanding the impact of assumptions, we also brainstormed what happens when we assume something about someone that isn’t true. Some examples were assuming someone’s ethnic heritage “He looks Chinese,” assuming someone’s gender or blatantly asking “Are you a girl or a boy?” or making comments about a person’s socioeconomic status, “They look poor.” We explored how these assumptions could make a person feel. Students emphatically shared ideas such as excluded, different, mad, sad, lonely, mean and dangerous.

The fourth lesson focuses on diversity and acceptance within groups. We also tie this to assumptions by considering what we think we know about groups of people. The core idea for this lesson is for the students to reveal some things about themselves that other students might not

already know and possibly uncover some misperceptions or assumptions students have of one another.

The students write down an interest or group they are connected to that others might not know about them. The attribute is also connected to an action. Some student examples are:

- Say “hola” if you speak Spanish.
- Pretend like you’re kicking a soccer ball if you play on a team.
- Take one step forward if you’ve ever been bullied.
- Say “shalom” if you are Jewish.
- Bark like a dog if you love animals.

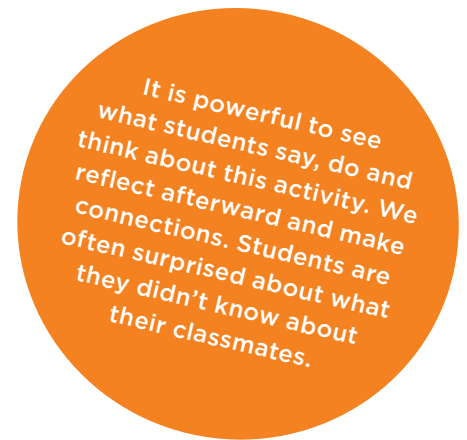
It is powerful to see what students say, do and think about this activity. We reflect afterward and make connections. Students are often surprised about what they didn’t know about their classmates.

I wish I would have had this awareness in elementary school when I was growing up in a multicultural neighborhood on the east side of Cleveland, Ohio. I was taught kindness as a child; however, I also knew a multitude of derogatory terms for different ethnic groups by the time I was in fourth grade. Not from my family but from my exposure to peers who used these terms freely in social conversation. We saw the differences in one another but didn’t really understand them. This led to division and tension in my neighborhood, school and city.

With the spotlight on racial and religious tensions in the United States and the world, it seems imperative to talk to our students from a young age about things they think to be true. I believe we have an obligation to teach our children the notion of assumptions and adopting mindsets and behaviors that support equity and well-being for all.

As you move forward with your work, consider your own assumptions you make of others and implications they have around student equity. Here are some common examples I have seen throughout my career as a school counselor:

- Assuming a parent doesn’t support his or her child with homework.
- Assuming a child has enough books at home to read.
- Assuming we know the preferred gender



pronoun for a child who may be questioning or exploring gender identity.

- Assuming a child with food sensitivities is okay eating a different birthday treat from everyone else.
- Assuming particular parents aren’t trying their best to take care of their child.
- Assuming all students want to discuss what they did over spring break.
- Assuming a family wants/needs financial support for field trips.
- Assuming a child will not be successful in the future or go to college.

Accepting others for who they are isn’t always easy. Making an effort to understand other people’s points of view, backgrounds, wants/needs and intentions can lead to more equitable school cultures, which can affect our communities and the world in greater ways. Talking about the need to include everyone is not enough anymore. Considering the impact of our actions (or non-actions) is crucial to give voice and considerations to people from historically and currently marginalized communities/identities and underserved populations. We can lay the groundwork for our students and staff and be the catalysts of change.

As school counselors we can model this approach, help others reflect on their own assumptions and practices and pave the way for safe and authentic conversations. The impact will be more equity for all. ☒

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