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Diversity Vs. Social Justice

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Diversity vs. Social Justice: A Reflection

by Liza Katz

At September's NJCTE Conference, we discussed the difference between conversations around diversity and conversations around social justice. We all understood that students need to be exposed to literature featuring a diverse range of characters. They need to see themselves reflected in the curriculum, as well as to empathize with others whose experiences are less familiar to them. But that's not quite enough, not if we want them to apply these lessons to the world around them, including how they treat the person sitting next to them in class. This was all too clear to me from the time I was a student-teacher, working with English Language Learners in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Students need to have the difficult conversations that arise when their book--or their classmate--calls into question their values and norms. For instance, why are some groups marginalized and misunderstood more than others? Why do some have more access to resources (jobs, education, health care) while others have less? How can we acknowledge and then overcome our own prejudices? The delicate, sometimes disturbing talks about forces that already have massive influence over our students' lives have to take place, and it's up to us as teachers to provide a safe environment in which to do this--where students can listen and be heard, where they can make mistakes and learn from them. For some, it might be their only opportunity to discuss difference with people who are actually different from themselves.

During my student-teaching from 2011 to 2012, reading James McBride's *The Color of Water* with ESL students opened conversations about diversity *and* about social justice. We enjoyed reading together about the black, white, Jewish, and mixed-race characters, pausing from our reading to reflect on how their experiences were connected to our own. When James's brother is arrested for no reason other than driving while black: "This is why I miss Haiti," one student said. "This would never happen in Haiti. Because we're all black." When James enters a new school: "I would be friendly if we had a new girl in school," said another student. "But only if she were also Ethiopian. Otherwise I'd be too shy."

Social justice conversations were more emotionally fraught. Some students were reluctant to bring up issues from the text that affected them or the people sitting next to them--others, far less hesitant or careful. When Ruth (James McBride's mother) describes growing up with her strict Orthodox Jewish father, one (non-Muslim) student chimed in, "Muslim parents are strict too." He explained that he had a Muslim friend whose parents didn't let her go to parties or date. A Muslim girl in the class responded, upset: "That's not true! My parents aren't strict!" Unsure of what to do, I called on the next person and let the discussion run its course. I didn't want to shame or censor the first student; at the same time, it felt only fair to let the second student respond, though of course she should not have been obligated to defend her culture or family.

As teachers, we often assume we know how we're going to handle such an issue if it arises. But when it actually does arise, when emotions are running high, we don't always react the way we could or should -- especially the first time it happens. Though neither the other teacher nor I addressed the conflict about religious beliefs in the moment it happened, we discussed it that night and decided

what we would say the following class. Our message: you may know an individual who holds a certain belief, but we can't generalize about the beliefs of a whole group based on just that one individual. We felt this clearly explained why the first student's comment was not valid for the entire culture without shutting him down completely. It also asserted the second student's right--and thereby, that of everyone in the room--not to be pigeon-holed or marginalized, as an individual *or* as part of a group.

This type of conversation is clearly valuable. In fact, according to the Common Core State Standards, students who are college and career ready are sensitive to cultures and perspectives other than theirs:

Students appreciate that the twenty-first-century classroom and workplace are settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together. Students actively seek to understand other perspectives and cultures through reading and listening, and they are able to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. They evaluate other points of view critically and constructively. Through reading great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews, students can vicariously inhabit worlds and have experiences much different than their own.

How do we guide our students to this point? As a starting point, it's necessary that we allow them to speak, even when their ideas are less than fully realized, while continuing to challenge them on problematic comments. This way, we'll have the possibility of creating a safe place for thoughts and feelings, truths and misconceptions.

If we're going to have conversations about issues of justice and injustice that affect us every day, someone is going to hurt someone's feelings. Someone is going to make a mistake. It's important that teachers respond in a productive way and then move on, thus allowing the offender and offended to move on as well. Cody Charles puts it best in his article, "Ten Counterproductive Behaviors of Social Justice Educators," in the *Student Affairs Feature*:

Be careful how we hold others accountable. At times, we fall into this righteous place where we live for the moment to be right, but more so to impose the wrath of our rightness. We lose track of educating and become "Social Justice avengers." We thrash anyone that makes mistakes or does not acknowledge their privilege, often out of ignorance. When we act this way, we instill fear and frustration in our allies, immobilizing them. Before you respond, ask yourself what do you want the result to be? Proving that you are "right" or developing a stronger, more capable ally?

It's unrealistic to read a novel as centered on diversity and mutual understanding as *The Color of Water* and expect no one to make a mistake, especially in a group with such varying cultural perceptions and preconceptions. The students in this particular group were from Haiti, Ethiopia, the Dominican Republic, India, Pakistan, and Turkey. Most had not formed friendships with people whose first language, religion or culture differed from theirs before coming to the United States.

Fast-forward to the September conference, when another teacher spoke about reading the novel *The Misfits* in her 8th grade English class. In it, a boy's mother dies; the teacher had not made the connection that a boy in her class had recently lost his mother. During a scene read aloud in class, this student was visibly shaken and others in the class comforted him. The teacher could have chosen to forgo this book or to have students read it exclusively at home. As it worked out, though it was upsetting, *The Misfits* provided an opportunity for the student to work through his grief and trauma. Opening this conversation allowed the other students to be compassionate, and allowed the boy to receive that compassion.

In a sense, this was exactly what had happened in that ESL classroom all those years earlier. Through *The Color of Water* and the ensuing conversations around diversity and social justice, students were able to give and receive forgiveness for their preconceived notions. When the first student realized how his words had affected another and had to apologize, it brought the two closer together, and by the end of that winter they had actually become close friends. Though my cooperating teacher criticized me for not immediately shutting down the conversation, if this had happened, the student wouldn't have realized why he was wrong – only that what he had said was taboo. He wouldn't have understood *why* it was taboo and would be destined to repeat the mistake. At the same time, he did not have the last word because the teachers intervened the next day. This cleared an entry for the second student to say why the comment had been hurtful to her, without bearing the burden of bringing it up. She would not have to hold a grudge, nor would she go through the year feeling unsafe in class because another student held her culture against her.

Students of all stripes learn something when we acknowledge that diverse groups collide and sometimes come into conflict. When we open the difficult but necessary conversations diverse books often spark, it has a positive impact on the way students relate to each other in our classrooms. This is where diversity gives way to the possibility of social justice.

Liza Katz is a writer and English/ESL teacher. She graduated from Boston University in 2012 with a Masters in ESL education. Her poems and essays have appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Omniverse*, *the Critical Flame*, *the Quarterly Conversation*, *Open Letters Monthly*, and elsewhere. She teaches ESL at Perth Amboy High School.