

## FEATURE STORY



# *It's Only a* **'Teachable Moment'** *If We Learn from It*

How to turn potentially dicey classroom moments into progress.

By Alejandro Prince

In my work in Virginia schools, I see two things happening at once: One, our schools are increasingly emphasizing the need for students and educators to feel a sense of belonging to have a thriving learning community. And two, those students and educators are surrounded by biases, historically entrenched conflicts, and experiences with, and reports of, acts of hate. The tension between the two is very real. This is made even more visible when, for example, a discriminatory comment shifts the attention from lesson plans or curricular units to stereotypes, history lessons, and debates. Instances like these are referred to as “teachable moments,” or as one Virginia educator calls them, “unplanned opportunities to grow.”

Such moments can provide meaningful chances for relevant

education. However, many educators avoid getting involved due to feelings of awkwardness, frustration, or lack of support. We know that when they do get involved, it can help students find the sense of belonging that helps them flourish. If schools are to increase their capacity to create belonging, educators must have the tools needed to address the moment.

I'd like to describe some of those skills, and, in addition, offer a longer-term approach to school climate that reduces or eliminates these kinds of teachable moments in the first place. Healthy learning communities and meaningful inclusion are maintained by building on existing structures while staying flexible to meet needs. Here's the approach: 1) Affirm Your Mission; 2) Examine Your Lens; 3) Ask and

Encourage Tough Questions; and 4) Address Institutional Biases.

### **Affirm Your Mission**

In school, we share classrooms, hallways, buses, and meals; this means we also share an inherent accountability for one another's well-being. Begin your response to a teachable moment with a reminder of that. Reminding a group of students, for example, that “Near Coast High School uplifts every person's dignity” can reel in animosity and serve as a starting point for a longer lesson on what “every person's dignity” means in that classroom/school. Examine your school's common language in mission and value statements for implicit and explicit ties to prejudice reduction, inclusion, and belonging. >>>

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### Examine Your Lens

Addressing behavior as a community is important, yet the ability to do so effectively depends on how prepared we are as individuals. This is why it is critically important to examine our lenses.

*Know your hesitations.* “What if I say the wrong thing and make the problem worse?” “What if addressing a moment of discrimination leads to months of strained workplace dynamics?” “Am I even the right person to speak on this issue?” Without adequate preparation, our concerns may end our allyship before it begins. Being familiar with ourselves adds clarity during challenging events. We need to regularly ask ourselves: What power dynamics should be considered in this situation? How do I tend to respond during stressors or triggers? What could go wrong, and what could go right as a result of me addressing this situation? The more we can confront what stops us from speaking up, the greater our capacity to help others do the same.

*Consider your social identities.* How do the ways we show up in society impact how we interact with the world and vice versa? The “Big 8” social identities are some of the most common considerations: physical and mental ability status, gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status. Some opt for the “Big 9” and include language skills. Though these categories don’t fully encompass our personal and social experiences, they are a useful starting point for understanding what aspects of life we’ve navigated and others where we may need to bridge an empathy gap in order to deepen interpersonal understanding. For example, if my experience in school

as a native English speaker is drastically different than a bi/multilingual student, what assumptions do I bring to the table that may impact my classroom practices?

### *Approach unconscious biases/ stereotypes with a growth mindset.*

Our lives don’t happen in a vacuum. As the popular saying goes, “if you have a brain, you have a bias.” Sources of conditioning (e.g., peers, public discourse, family, belief systems, media, digital life) unconsciously inform the ways we view one another. Stereotypes develop based on popular messages we receive at early ages, and they often go unaddressed for decades. A growth mindset acknowledges that we all can develop new ways of thinking. Facing challenges can increase our desire to learn. In teachable moments, a growth mindset encourages us to:

- **Model for students that making mistakes is okay, but refusing to respect each other is not.** When adults demonstrate that mistakes are normal learning opportunities, we help students to be transparent with us and each other when they recognize their own growth opportunities.
- **Achieve our stated learning objectives.** Responding thoughtfully to a teachable moment may lead to follow-up activities to deepen awareness.
- **Embrace long-term growth.** Shifting our personal or communal norms around how incidents of bias are addressed can encourage other peers and colleagues to act and create innovative approaches to increase belonging and inclusion. The more people we have ad-

ressing bias in our communities, the smaller the burden on one individual or small group to do so.

### Ask and Encourage Tough Questions

After a communal approach and individual experiences, we next need to examine how we do this work interpersonally. In another job a few years ago, I was teaching a Family Life Education lesson to a group of high school boys about sexual harassment and the types of comments, gestures, and social norms that make the issue so prevalent. The students split up into small groups to discuss how they would respond to certain scenarios, then share what they discussed. While many students gave thoughtful, empathetic replies, one group spent a lot of their discussion time laughing, even though they were given one of the more egregious scenarios. I approached the group, casually reminding them of the importance of the content and why their maturity matters. When it was time for them to share highlights of their discussion, they unsurprisingly yet shockingly went to great lengths to defend the harmful behavior in the scenario, explaining why “nothing wrong” happened, even to the point that the one being harassed was blamed for the harm done.

What would be a constructive response to the small group? A lecture? Publicly expressing disappointment? Asking them to stay after class to redo the activity? Since I had encountered similar challenges before, I’d already reflected on some pros and cons of different approaches. The learning objective involved them developing their own critical thinking skills and sense of respon-

sible decision-making. So, I asked the tough questions with the class: What did it feel like to respond to this scenario? What does it mean that laughter was involved? What do we learn from the different responses to this material? Whereas a lecture on every detail they should have learned from the scenario may have allowed me to fit every grain of knowledge into the space before the bell rang, embracing the difficult questions allowed for numerous response. Ultimately, asking and encouraging tough questions aims to shape interpersonal and communal involvement when faced with harmful biases. Here are other considerations for this outcome:

- *Sequence questions with the ORID method (adapted from the book *Practical Facilitation: A Toolkit of Technique*).*
  - **Objective** – What observations do you have? What just happened in this moment?
  - **Reflective** – What thoughts and feelings come up for you personally?
  - **Interpretive** – What does this experience mean for me? For our group?
  - **Decisional** – What should we do with the information?

*Address power dynamics.* Are there socio-historical realities that make certain subjects more difficult to talk about for some social groups than others? Is there a dynamic with authority that prevents or supports dialogue around prejudice reduction? What are effective ways to work together amidst these concerns? What is our re-

sponsibility to address this situation?

- **Give the benefit of the doubt.** Hurtful behaviors and comments are often made due to lack of exposure rather than malintent. Teachable moments involving stereotypes and biases invite us to consider what information will be helpful rather than simply what form of discipline will achieve the desired behavioral outcome. When malice is involved, however, it is important to be able to measure accountability; establishing and referring to group norms, or affirming your mission may be a great starting point.

#### **Address Institutional Biases**

Responding to a million teachable moments will not ultimately improve school climates for belonging and inclusion without acknowledging ways that institutional policies, practices, and traditions can reinforce biases among and between individuals. Here are some examples of ways to address institutional biases:

*Holidays.* Schools with multicultural populations have the opportunity to recognize the various holidays, traditions, and religious practices of a variety of ethnic groups. Reviewing the calendar for which cultural holidays are paired with days off may be an indicator of institutional biases that deserve addressing. Not only could this prevent students who celebrate those holidays from missing important lessons, but it also encourages the entire learning community to respect one another's differences.

*Discipline.* Examine the root causes of disproportionate discipline referrals. Pre-pandemic data from the *Legal Aid Justice Center's*

*Suspended Progress (2018)*, indicates that in Virginia, Black students were suspended at 5 times the rate of White and Hispanic students; and that students with disabilities were suspended at 3 times the rate of non-disabled students. Addressing institutional biases in discipline asks schools and districts to consider what policies and conduct codes may be influencing the individual biases of educators in disproportionate discipline referrals.

*Curriculum.* Well-rounded, age-appropriate curricula that reflect the diversity of experiences across social identities within our society are integral in creating understanding across lines of difference. Regular curriculum audits are a useful strategy to help schools to determine who is included and who is left out of classroom education. An inclusive curriculum might spark more opportunities for teachable moments; better yet, it may prevent harmful incidents from occurring.

As it turns out, our responses to teachable moments begin long before the moments arise and continue long after they end. Staying committed to the process comes with perseverance, intentionality, and, I hope, the company of a thriving learning community made better because of it. ●

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