

I-5: Create a welcoming environment

Leverage Student Insensitivity as a Teachable Moment

Respond to insensitive comments; do not allow them to go unnoticed, and recognize the "teachable" moments that they create.

<p>Do not allow insensitive comments to go unnoticed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you hear an insensitive comment, make a strong, positive statement to the full class about the importance of respecting others (“We don’t speak about people’s bodies that way. It’s insensitive, hurtful and just plain mean. We do not treat each other that way in this classroom.”) • Denounce insensitivity whether the speaker is joking or serious so that students learn that such speech or action is always unacceptable. For example, if you hear unacceptable language, you might say, “That word is never acceptable in this classroom. That is on our list of off-limit words and anyone who uses it must research the history of the word and explain to the class why it should never be uttered in this classroom community.” • Your response to insensitive comments will depend on the setting in which it occurs and the time you have available to respond. For example, you will have less time to respond to an insensitive comment made by a student in the hallway as you walked by on your way to class (“That was a putdown and such language is not used at Riverside Middle School”) than if you heard the same comment while tutoring a few students after school (“That was a putdown...you may not have meant to be hurtful, but here’s how your comment hurt...Why did you say that?”). However, in either situation you should respond.
<p>Recognize the teachable moment in moments of student insensitivity</p>	<p>Do not tolerate discouraging comments (either directed towards oneself or others). Use such comments as teachable moments to model for students what they might say when they hear these types of messages (“I know it may make you feel ‘dumb’ because you don’t know how to do this yet, but it certainly doesn’t mean you are ‘dumb!’ It just means you’re still learning a new skill.”)</p> <p>When a student uses pejorative words or hate speech, you’ll want to determine whether the entire class would benefit from a discussion of the words’ offensiveness. If a particular type of disrespectful language occurs frequently, it makes sense to address this with the entire class. If you do address the entire class, work to create a situation that is more educational than confrontational.</p> <p><i>For one teacher’s testimonial about this, see below.</i></p>
<p>Mobilize student support for eliminating insensitive remarks in the classroom</p>	<p>Group or individual discussions about the effects of insensitive comments – how words can indeed lead to violence – can motivate students to discourage such behavior and provide support for victimized students. Your response to insensitivity will model a proper response among the students. Students can often recognize instances of injustice and may even develop a sense of genuine outrage that carries far beyond the lesson you present.</p>

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<p>Implement consequences for the offending student according to the classroom or school policies</p>	<p>When a student participates in an insensitive or hateful action, there must be a consequence. Depending on the severity of the situation, you can utilize a wide range of non-disciplinary corrective actions to respond to such incidents, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ counseling ▪ parent conferences ▪ suggested community service ▪ awareness training ▪ completion of a research paper on an issue related to intolerance, ▪ disciplinary actions
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Example: Gaby Grekin, an Elementary French teacher in Louisiana):

One of the most disturbing racial comments I heard while teaching came from a third grader named Jason, whose grandfather, I had been told, was in the KKK. There were two African-American students in this particular class, Genee and Randall (a typical distribution in my town of mostly white Cajuns).

Randall was a sweet, gentle boy with a smile that could light up the room, but he sometimes had trouble focusing. We had been practicing French numbers all week and he was really starting to fall behind. As we went over #5-10 orally, I kept noticing that he wasn't doing them with us. I explained to him that if he didn't join in, the only way I would be able to know if he knew them was to have him recite them alone. Still, no lip movement from Randall. I decided to go row by row to give him a chance to count with a small group. Still no movement.

"Okay, Randall, I need to hear you do it alone, because you're still not showing me if you know them or not," I said, hating myself but not knowing what else to do. He failed miserably.

"Randall," I said, "do you understand why you're having trouble? Before class started today, nobody else knew their numbers from 5-10 either, but they've been practicing all during class while you have just been sitting there. It's not that they're smarter than you, the only difference between you and them is that they have been paying attention and you haven't."

At this point, Jason shouted, "No Mademoiselle! That's not the only difference between him and the rest of us! His skin color is different and that could be why he's having so much trouble."

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My jaw dropped. I couldn't believe what he had said. In a voice full of shock I was unable to hide, I said, "Jason that is a really silly thing to say. What makes you think that a person's skin color has anything to do with how well they can speak French? Or how well they can do anything for that matter? I want to show you something..." at which time I marched to the front of the classroom and pulled down a map of the world.

"Does anybody know what continent this is?"

"Yes, it's Africa," said a few, following random guesses of Canada and Australia.

"Well, on this continent there are millions and millions of black people who speak French as their own language, and don't you think that they can speak it better than anybody in this room, me included, since they grew up speaking it and it's their language? The color of your skin has nothing to do with how your brain works or has nothing to do with who you are inside..." and on and on and on until they answered my rhetorical questions of, "Can somebody with green eyes do social studies better than somebody with blue eyes?" with choruses of, "No, Mademoiselle! Of course not!"

"Can somebody with long hair do math better than somebody with short hair?"

"No, Mademoiselle! No! No!"

After a moment, I noticed Jason's discomfort and concluded with, "So, Jason, I don't ever want to hear you say something like that again, because it just doesn't make sense."

After taking a breath, I turned to look at Randall to see how he was holding up, something I probably should have done much sooner. He sat, rather stoically, looking entirely unemotional (marvelously, if that had been his intention).

At the end of the class I reiterated, "I just want to say one more thing about the comment that was made earlier. There is nothing that makes me more upset than when people think that the way somebody looks on the outside affects who they are on the inside, because who you are on the inside is all that really matters."

Someone shouted, "That's your soul, Miss Mademoiselle, like they talk about in church!"

"Yes," I said. "That's your soul."

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