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EXPLORING EQUITY ISSUES:
Teaching Kids about Identity and Bias

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PART I: IDENTITY MATTERS

Identity is a complex concept. Although it is the force that most affects our everyday lives, people rarely consider the day-to-day impact that identity has, both on our perception and understanding of the world, and others' perceptions of each of us. Yet it shapes every aspect of our lives, including the development of our own biases, our interpersonal interactions, and the manner in which institutions and their policies affect our lives.

The importance of understanding identity is even more acute in educational settings, where fostering an understanding of this concept – and of the differences between identity groups – is critical in establishing a school climate that is safe and inclusive of all students. While schools may focus on combating bullying in general terms, it is important to consider the manner in which students are targeted as a result of their identities. The term "identity-based bullying" refers to instances where a student is targeted based on aspects of a student's identity, which may include appearance, race, culture, gender identity, language, religion, socioeconomic status, disability, and sexual orientation. According to GLSEN's 2012 report, Playground and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States, two-thirds of elementary students attribute the bullying that they witness to students' appearance or body size, and 23% is attributed to students not adhering to

typical gender norms (Harris Interactive, Inc., 2012).

Now, in the current political climate of the United States, the negative impacts of identity-based bullying and hate incidents on school climate appear to be increasing. Each year, the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) compiles an audit of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States. In 2017, ADL tracked a disturbing surge in the rate of incidents occurring, as compared with the same data from 2016. ADL found that anti-Semitic incidents in schools – including assault, vandalism, and harassment – had increased 107% over the same period in 2016, with 269 reported incidents throughout the United States (Anti-Defamation League, 2017). However, this trend affected many groups beyond the Jewish community. A survey of over 10,000 K-12 educators by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance project found that "eight in 10 [educators] report heightened anxiety on the part of marginalized students, including immigrants, Muslims, African Americans and LGBT students," and "four in 10 have heard derogatory language directed at students of color, Muslims, immigrants and people based on gender or sexual orientation" (Bell, 2016).

According to the authors of Hate Hurts: How Children Learn and Unlearn Prejudice, "noticing differences is biological. Forming attitudes about differences is social. The good news is that we can shape how children value the differences they perceive" (Stern-LaRosa; Hofheimer Bettmann, 2000, 14). Therefore, educators must ask themselves, "how can we ensure that students understand the ways that identity affects us and our standing in society, and what can we do to cultivate positive attitudes toward different identity groups?"

PART II: WHAT CAN WE DO?
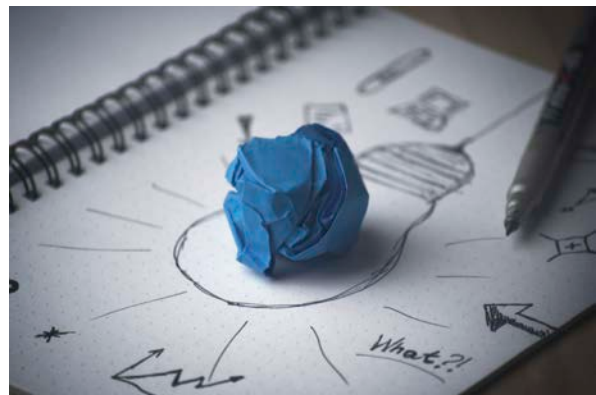
Due to the challenging and charged political climate of 2017, educators may feel that engaging students in conversations about race, culture, and other differences can only enflame tensions, rather than calm them. This is especially true in environments with young children, as we are inclined to

think that approaching these topics will cause, rather than solve, problems for the educators themselves. However, it is important that schools be proactive in teaching young children to appreciate differences and diversity. Beginning at an early age, children can distinguish the physical features that define our societal construction of race, such as skin color, hair textures, and facial features. Therefore, we must nurture positive attitudes toward these differences to ensure that children will develop an appreciation of these differences, rather than a fear of them.

USE BOTH MIRROR BOOKS AND WINDOW BOOKS IN THE EARLY YEARS

Books can be a valuable tool in helping students to understand different identity groups at a young age and develop positive, inclusive understandings of difference. By using children's books that tell stories about characters from diverse backgrounds, educators can provide both "windows" and "mirrors" to the children in their classrooms. By being exposed to "mirror books," children, particularly from marginalized identity groups, will build confidence and self-esteem by seeing characters that look or act like they do. Meanwhile, "window books," or books that show the experiences of people who are different from them, allow children to develop

empathy and an appreciation of diversity. Similarly, curriculum that is inclusive of diverse identities can contribute to a student's feeling of safety within a school. For example, according to GLSEN's [2013 National School Climate Survey,](#) schools that utilize LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum create more welcoming and safe environments for LGBTQ students. At these schools, students hear fewer homophobic remarks, feel safer, register fewer absences, and have more comfortable and positive interactions with school staff (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014).

ENCOURAGE INTROSPECTION AND REFLECTION AS STUDENTS MATURE

As students grow up, conversations about identity become even more critical in understanding the dynamics of bias and prejudice. Identity and culture can be understood as the lenses through which we see the world, and through which the world sees us. Educators should encourage students to consider the multiple facets of their own identities and the manner in which they influence their everyday lives. This means considering identity beyond simply racial terms, instead viewing identity as an amalgam of other group memberships, including gender identity, religion, national origin,

ability/disability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, age, family composition, ethnicity, language, and more, and considering the moments from their lives when these group memberships have been a source of pride and when they have been used to cause them pain. These conversations allow students to see identity not only as a force that creates a sense of belonging, but one that can leave a person vulnerable to the biases of others. In this way, identity can be used as an entry point for some of the challenging conversations that are desperately needed in our schools about how to create a climate that affords students of all backgrounds and identities a learning environment that is safe and inclusive.

Engaging students in a conversation about identity and bias is challenging. Societal norms have programmed each of us to feel that we should avoid those uncomfortable conversations in the interest of being polite and non-judgmental. Yet we each develop attitudes about difference beginning at a very early age. When that reality is ignored, and curiosity around understanding the dynamics of identity goes ignored, it leads to a lack of

understanding rather than a lack of prejudice. To approach these topics, we, as educators, must establish learning environments where students feel that these conversations are not something to be ashamed of or had in hushed tones. Rather, we should be facilitating that dialogue with our students directly.

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