
We Want to Work With Our Friends

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

In her sixth-grade classroom, Coccari notices several disturbing patterns. Students begin to sort themselves academically and socially, and classroom discussions and activities become dominated by a faction of the boys in the room. Wary of these tendencies, Coccari embarks on an action research project to create a more equitable classroom for all students—many of whom are English language learners (ELLs). Through analyses of videotapes, student work, and her teacher research journal, Coccari provides an engaging account of her attempts to create an educational learning environment that capitalizes on the strengths of all members of the class and requires students to move beyond the comfort of working solely with their friends.

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BACKGROUND

I am a sixth-grade regular education teacher at Black Hawk Middle School on Madison's northwest side. This is my third year of public school teaching, the result of a midlife shift from an academic career in South

Asian studies. I lived, studied, and did fieldwork in Banaras, India, for 3 years and spent 13 years as a student, teacher, and researcher in this field. When my children started school, I began many years as a volunteer in the public schools, becoming increasingly focused on culturally appropriate teaching and on children who appeared to be slipping through the cracks. I was struck by the difficulty and importance of teaching as a profession and wanted to be part of the effort to help respond to the increasing diversity of the student population in the Madison public schools and the dramatic increase in the number of children with special needs. Fortunately, I was able to obtain teaching certification relatively quickly through University of Wisconsin–Madison Teach for Diversity Masters and Certification Program.

Black Hawk Middle School receives students from six feeder elementary schools. The student body is diverse—yes, that word—socioeconomically, racially, and ethnically. The school's immediate neighborhood is largely middle class, but the attendance area includes six separate neighborhoods that contain low-income housing. These neighborhoods are located in several directions and are some distance from the school, and the children living in these areas ride the bus.

During the school year in which this study took place, the total population of Black Hawk Middle School was 565 students. The school population was 59 percent Caucasian, 20 percent African American, 13 percent Asian (Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Tibetan, and Chinese), 7 percent Latino (mostly Mexican), and about 1 percent other minorities. Twenty-eight percent of the students had certified special needs, and 41 to 42 percent came from families earning low incomes.

The school's enrollment had increased by 185 students in three years, making it more than 100 percent of capacity, and everyone—staff and students alike—felt the squeeze. Every available cranny was being utilized, and many spaces were serving multiple functions. Teachers shared classrooms and had to negotiate the crowded hallways with carts packed with books and materials that they pushed from a central teacher planning room. Others conducted their "Super Study" programs (supervised study times for those needing extra help) in the library or in "specials" rooms. The school had been forced to shift to a complex double lunch and recess period to accommodate the presence of so many people.

In addition to the overcrowding, almost every special needs category had seen an exponential increase in students being served, especially the English as a second language (ESL) and learning disabilities programs. The number of at-risk students had also rapidly increased. Each grade level handled this increase in a different fashion. In the sixth grade, each academic classroom unit (three paired, or double, classrooms and two self-contained

classrooms) included a special program that served children who spoke English as their second language, or those with emotional, cognitive, or learning disabilities. The students considered at risk (not fitting into one or more of the above categories but behind grade level) in the sixth grade were mainstreamed in all the classrooms, because there were too many of them to fit in one program.

This year, my own self-contained classroom was created to accommodate a larger incoming sixth-grade class in general, as well as a sharp increase in children needing ESL services in the sixth grade. After the first-quarter hiring of an additional sixth-grade teacher, my class of 27 became a group of 23, 10 of whom were recent immigrants or refugees or the Madison-born children of the same. The racial and ethnic breakdown of my students was this: 12 Caucasian students, including a child of Albanian refugees (seven boys and five girls); one African American boy; two African American–Caucasian biracial students (one boy and one girl); four Hmong students (three girls and one boy); two Cambodian students (one boy and one girl); one Laotian boy; one Vietnamese girl; and one Honduran girl. I mention these demographics because they played an important role in the classroom dynamics that inspired my Classroom Action Research question.

MY QUESTION

My question emerged out of what I understood to be problematic classroom dynamics that surfaced immediately at the beginning of the year. For one thing, eight boys—six Caucasian boys, most of whom were from the same feeder school, one biracial boy, and one Cambodian boy—dominated the classroom, especially during all-class discussions. They did this by waving their hands in the air constantly and vigorously, expecting to be called upon. Of more concern to me, these same boys constantly interrupted, commented, and made noises and remarks without the formality of waiting their turns to speak. This had a powerful dampening effect on the other students in the room, both male and female. Not infrequently, direct girl-baiting remarks were made with the intention of getting a rise out of some of the girls in the room. Several girls were visibly angered and insulted; a few were willing to jump into the fray and trade insults, leading to a divisive and unpleasant atmosphere.

It was also interesting to me that when class members were invited to share or read something in front of the class—writings from journals, and so on—it was always the same boys who eagerly volunteered, working the crowd and relishing the attention they received at the front of the room.

I noticed how these boys would unselfconsciously share what was often mediocre work, while other students sat quietly, some with brilliant and creative work lying in front of them on their desks.

Some of these behaviors were more problematic than others. I welcome students' pride in their work and enthusiasm for what is being done or discussed in the classroom. But what does a teacher do when only a minority of the class is empowered to participate freely in this way? Some of the behaviors clearly angered, insulted, or shut down the other children. Gender domination by the boys occasionally had a very sharp edge, and the bloc of boys from our sister elementary school clearly felt the most empowered. Yet looking out at me were the faces of the majority of the children in my classroom who were inhibited in their participation, among these extremely shy Caucasian girls and most of the Southeast Asian students. They were extremely still, attentive, and reserved, and I feared that, without help, their voices would not be heard in front of the entire class.

A second interesting pattern emerged. Whenever I asked the class to voluntarily form groups, line up, or make a circle, they did so in exactly the same fashion, sorting themselves neatly, first by gender, then by ethnic and racial affiliation. This happened over and over again. The pattern generally went like this: biracial boy, African American boy, Cambodian boy, Laotian boy, Hmong boy, Albanian boy, Caucasian boys and then a gap, and then Caucasian girls, biracial girl, Honduran girl, Cambodian girl, Vietnamese girl, Hmong girls. This, I knew, was perfectly natural. "Look at the way we sit in the teachers' lunchroom!" my Classroom Action Research buddies said. But the voluntary reproduction of this identical arrangement over and over again seemed so outrageous to me that it made me laugh out loud! I really had to see if I could help increase the comfort level of these students so that they might eventually choose to broaden their voluntary selections of groups and partners. At the very least, I wanted everybody to get to know each other and to feel comfortable enough to work well with one another, regardless of the particular configuration.

Thus my concerns were twofold: (1) How could I defuse the domination of one group while encouraging the participation of other students; and (2) how could I help my class get to know one another better so that they could work comfortably together and maybe even begin to voluntarily expand their choices of partners? My official question remained in two parts and in early October was as follows:

1. How can I increase participation in all-class discussions by those less willing or able to risk and share?

2. How can I help the students in my classroom feel comfortable working with diverse groupings of classmates and ultimately overcome, at least part of the time, their desire to always be with their friends?

Awkwardly stated, but there it was. The essential nature of this question changed little over the course of the following months. Here is what I attempted to do about it.

WHAT I DID

I knew that my approach to this problem had to be multifaceted. I wanted to build a sense of community and ownership in the classroom and to increase everyone's comfort level so students might feel more free to take risks. I wanted to teach openly and positively about the differences among the children in the classroom. I wanted to deal directly with problematic issues and behaviors as they arose, and I wanted to experiment with a variety of class formations and cooperative groupings.

DATA

To initially get a handle on the problem and to document change over time, I recorded several types of data. I made videotapes of cooperative group activities, and I made notes about the composition and outcomes of all cooperative groups—voluntary, modified choice, and teacher-selected. I had my practicum student create many checklists that kept track of class participation (who raised their hands, who spoke out of turn, who got called on, and so on). This turned out to be *very* interesting and useful information. I included questions about class participation and working with partners on student self-evaluations. I copied all relevant written student feedback (journals and other writing) and attempted to record in my journal all discussion and verbal feedback on this topic.

During parent conferences, I spoke with the parents of the more reserved children (especially the Hmong and Vietnamese girls) about my desire to have their children become more assertive. In each case, the parents assured me that they wanted this for their daughters. In one case, a Hmong father, acknowledging the stereotype, stated that it simply is not true that Hmong families raise their daughters to be submissive.

Finally, I had the class fill out an inventory listing (1) those classmates with whom they already knew they worked well; (2) those classmates with

whom they knew they did not work well (some of these being good friends with whom they became distracted); (3) those classmates with whom they felt they could work well but had not yet done so (a very important category, because it became the pool of classmates they were frequently asked to choose from); and (4) a classmate of the opposite gender, if they had not included one already in their list.

CLASS PARTICIPATION: DEALING DIRECTLY WITH THE ISSUES

From the outset, I called attention to some of the issues as they occurred. For example, I might say to the class, "Did you happen to notice who is always willing to come up and speak in front of the class? I love it that these boys always participate, but what about the rest of you? What about the girls in this classroom?" Some girls were eventually able to articulate why they held back: they did not want to be laughed at, made fun of, or teased. For the ESL students, language was always an issue, as well as "not wanting to give the wrong answer and be laughed at." I realized that two different things needed to happen: some of students needed to be asked to practice greater restraint, while the others had to be encouraged and challenged to participate. The put-downs were unacceptable in my Stress/Challenge classroom (see below), and so I dealt with this behavior immediately and became increasingly stern with those who habitually and impulsively made inappropriate comments. I privately coached others on their people skills (for example, what do kids usually think about showing off, and what behaviors shut others down?) and challenged the heretofore silent to speak out. Rather quickly, when they saw that I would not tolerate inappropriate noises and remarks, a new group of girls (Cambodian, Caucasian, and biracial) found their voices. For others, full participation would come more slowly.

COMMUNITY BUILDING: STRESS/CHALLENGE PROGRAM

From the first day—if not the first minutes—of the school year, I introduced and initiated the Stress/Challenge (S/C) program in my classroom. What I pull under the S/C umbrella includes bona fide Stress/Challenge activities, presented in a sequence from "ice breakers" to "deinhibitizers" to "trust builders" to increasingly sophisticated group challenges or "initiatives"; Odyssey of the Mind-type challenges; and conflict resolution/peer mediation activities as needed. I cannot say enough about the value of this program for

bringing a diverse classroom together. For one thing, the student buy-in is almost total. As educators, we see a lot of sophisticated and important learning happening. For the kids, the activities are almost always seen as a lot of fun. Stress/Challenge, which, after daily activities in the beginning, settled into a last-hour-on-Friday activity, was for most of my class the favorite part of the week, something they looked forward to enthusiastically. This program has clarified for me the role of teacher as facilitator: one who clearly sets up the challenge and the parameters but who then backs off to allow the students to work together and learn from their own successes and mistakes. The sequence of the Stress/Challenge activities is very important. A group cannot be successful at a more challenging level until it has pretty well mastered the earlier levels, and a group cannot accomplish some of the more complex challenges until total focus and cooperation are achieved.

Stress/Challenge activities and concepts set the tone for my classroom. We became a Stress/Challenge classroom, one in which I did not have to repeatedly ask students for attention but could quietly wait for the class to quickly settle. The students gained a more sophisticated understanding of group process and saw what could be accomplished by working together. They noticed the different impact that “put-ups” versus put-downs made on their energy and spirit, and we learned a format for processing our experiences. The extension activities available in this district—the low and high ropes courses at the School Forest, spelunking at Popp’s Cave in Richland Center—were extremely motivational. Furthermore, it was often the case that the most valuable and successful participants were children who struggled in academic areas. One student, who was the most behind in grade level of all the children in my class, was a key player in many Stress/Challenge activities and all Odyssey of the Mind activities. He was extremely and visibly proud of his key role in his groups’ successes, and this transformed his defensive and adversarial posture to a full and willing participation in classroom activities. I could not come up with a better advertisement for these types of activities for *all* children than that.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES: GARDNER’S SEVEN INTELLIGENCES

Another framework that fits in well with the other orientations of my classroom is Howard Gardner’s delineation of the seven intelligences. I have on the wall a large poster with Gardner’s terms along with their simplified forms (word smart, body smart, music smart, and so on) and illustrations for each category. We do a number of activities during the first weeks to understand Gardner’s model and to explore what people’s obvious talents

are and what their unrealized talents might be. The power, however, is in using Gardner's model as a touchstone throughout the year. One must refer back to this scheme again and again, pointing out how smart the children are—as individuals and collectively—recognizing strengths as you see them, nudging the nonbelievers into acknowledging their own talents, encouraging students to recognize and praise these talents in others. I am always so pleased when I begin to hear from some members of the class, "Wow, that's really word smart!" or some such comment. Reference to this scheme is also useful in explaining differences in abilities and therefore urging tolerance and patience in peer tutoring and other activities. Everyone shines at something; no one is perfect in all areas. We can use our diversity to help and support others. And, of course, the teacher must strive to provide a curriculum that speaks to all abilities.

DEALING WITH DIFFERENCES: THE CURRICULUM

An "ancient civilizations" social studies curriculum is an easy one in which to include many lessons about cultural differences, both historical and modern. I choose the ancient cultures that we explore in response to the ethnicities of the children in my classroom: ancient China, India, Southeast Asia, Africa, Egypt, Mesoamerica, and Greece. Integrated with this historical study is our reading of myths, legends, folktales, or historical novels that relate to each cultural group. This provides us with many opportunities for cross-cultural comparison and finding connections to our own lives and experiences.

Before we launched into the study of ancient civilizations, I had all the children write extensive autobiographies and family histories. It is very important to me that my students have a clear sense of who their classmates are and why their families came to live in this country. Because of the makeup of my class this year, I added a short unit on Southeast Asian cultures, the Vietnam War, and the resulting immigration. An Indonesian staff member and a Hmong parent told their stories of escape and resettlement, and my class became involved in a service project raising money to purchase reading glasses for elderly Hmong villagers living on the Thai border. We were able to send a photograph album and drawings to the children of Huai Ku (the village where the relatives of two students live) and we received an album in exchange. Such efforts, I believe, contribute greatly to the feelings of connectedness and belonging of immigrant and refugee children. I overheard one Hmong girl tell another: "Ms. Coccari understands us." In fact, I find that I have to watch carefully for feelings of alienation and backlash from my other students, who may be unused to so much

emphasis on foreign cultures in the classroom. One White male student asked me, "When do we get to study about *us*?" I am still trying to convince him that our study of human origins, Indo-European migrations, and the culture of ancient Greece is, in fact, about him, but he remains skeptical.

EXPERIMENTS WITH COOPERATIVE GROUPS

I launched into all kinds of experiments with cooperative groups. I tried all types of configurations and alternated among my careful choices of group members, to modified choice of different sorts, to free choice of partners. The aforementioned inventory turned out to be very useful. I would often ask the students to choose as partners classmates in category #3—people you have never worked with but with whom you feel you could work well. This method of choosing a partner became, for many, a source of new potential partners and, in some cases, friends. My most controversial request (which I eased into gradually) was to ask the students to work with a partner of the opposite gender. This was and still is a very big deal for some children but is not such a big deal for others.

RESULTS

Well, my students *still* (on May 6) line up in almost exactly the same order as they did at the beginning of the year, and they still would rather work with their friends! At the recent Action Research of Wisconsin (AROW) conference, a psychologist who heard my presentation suggested that this behavior is totally appropriate developmentally for children of this age. The identities of sixth graders, she said, are not settled and secure enough for them to easily and readily take on the kinds of risks that I was expecting. In another two years, apparently, it will be a different matter. This certainly resonated with my observations of the students in my class, many at a seemingly shy, fragile, tentative, or protective place with regard to their images of themselves. Further reading in this area would be extremely interesting. The tenacity of these choices notwithstanding, I feel that there has been some progress, which I will detail as follows.

Male Dominance

The male dominance that had existed at the beginning of the year, and the atmosphere created by the freedom that certain boys felt to speak out

and make sharp, critical, sometimes taunting and girl-bashing remarks and noises, abated almost immediately. As certain behaviors were named and discussed—and it became clear that they would not be tolerated—some of the girls were able to be as free in their participation as the boys. There is still a lot of male exuberance, and certain boys still want to be first in many circumstances (e.g., exploring rooms in the cave) and still flock to and dominate certain activities (e.g., microscopes and manipulatives), but they are much less aggressive about these behaviors and much more sensitive to the group and more amicable about backing off if necessary. The unsafe feeling that pervaded the classroom at the beginning of the year went away.

Cooperative Groups

The largest strides can be seen in the way this class performs in cooperative groups. Quite some time ago, the students became a class able to work well together as a whole group and in almost every cooperative group configuration, so much so that I almost forgot why I was so worried about this issue in the first place! In fact, I couldn't ask for better group work. I was heartened to see solid working relationships develop, and even friendships form out of new partner choices. More mixed-gender partnerships were initiated, but most of the students still preferred partners of the same gender. I find that I have been dealing less with whole-group process issues and more with fine-tuning interactions when subtler issues, conflicts, and misunderstandings arise between individuals. As kids get to know each other better and become more familiar with each other, new conflicts and issues appear. I still stop and mediate these issues the moment they come to my attention, and try to model positive mediation and active listening techniques.

All Class Participation

This has been the most problematic area. While an initially reluctant few have begun to find their voices, speaking in front of the whole class remains a challenge for many. What I increasingly began to tune in to were individual differences. Different things hold back different people. For example, one student has low self-esteem, another is almost pathologically shy, and a third is thinking about lunch or daydreaming about Leonardo DiCaprio! Many students are sensitive about their English. Some were able to jump in as soon as they saw that their feelings and opinions were going to be protected. Others have come around more slowly. Even when individuals agree in principle to full participation, doing so with each still takes some time.

I was conflicted at the beginning of the year about how much I should restrain the more exuberant students in certain circumstances, and how much I should push the shy ones. What about cultural issues? Don't some people have a right to be shy? Parent conferences resolved some of this for me, as did experiences like participating in a professional development experience where it was expected that everyone contribute their voices at least once a session. I think all students should be required to participate. I think everyone should be encouraged and challenged to ask for what they need and to freely express their views. I eventually became unequivocal about this requirement. Presenting to the class was painful at first for many students but eventually became more routine. Observations and checklists both reveal that voluntary participation has increased. But the instruction needs to continue. My Hmong and Vietnamese girls are now asking, "What will we do next year if we don't have a teacher who will help us?" I tell them that everyone *deserves* the help they need. Teachers are busy, preoccupied people. Sometimes they overlook students, sometimes they forget. You must ask. If you don't get what you need, you ask again. We practice the language that they might use. I've even acted as a voice coach! We practice speaking louder, from the diaphragm, finding that deep and powerful voice. "How loud are you when you yell at your little brother? Okay, now say it that loudly!" Hey, I wish that someone had done this for me when I was young!

This is not to say that the students who are quiet in front of the whole class do not feel uncomfortable in the classroom or when expressing their opinions or telling their stories at other times. The classroom is a place where most of the kids want to be before school, during lunch and lunch recess, during study halls, and after school. The girls take over the classroom during lunch and recess periods, when they are much more relaxed, expressive, and uninhibited. "Lunch bunch" grew from a small group of the shyest girls to all the girls and some of the boys. Absent only are the boys who desire the physical activity of the playground and want to be with friends from other classrooms, and those avoiding a teacher who demands too much work of them! In these smaller groups, I hear all about people's lives and am asked endless, probing questions. So the students themselves came up with the missing format—a time and space in the classroom for informal, voluntary gatherings of smaller groups of students.

Academic Achievement

It's interesting that, while I did not include academic achievement as part of my initial question, I always assumed that a comfortable environment would help to facilitate academic success for the majority of my students. To quantifiably assess student achievement, I have only two

objective measures: a comparison of class grades between the end of the first quarter and the end of the third quarter, and scores from the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test.

At the end of the first quarter, the students had an average grade point of 3.16, with 12 students (52 percent) on the honor roll (earning at least a 3.2 cumulative grade) and six of these (26 percent) on the high honor roll (at least 3.7). At the end of the third quarter, the class averaged a 3.2 grade point, only a slight increase, but 19 students (83 percent) had made the honor roll. The Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test—out of date and culturally inappropriate as it is—revealed an average grade-level increase of 1.2 in vocabulary and 1.8 in reading comprehension. Not everyone in my class achieved as much academically as I would have liked. I have four students who are extremely challenged in their learning, each with individual and complex issues that make learning difficult. But I think these figures are witness to some increasingly focused and hardworking students.

FINAL REMARKS

Our efforts in the classroom this year resulted in much learning for students and teacher alike. I am very happy to have gotten to know so many wonderful children, and I am glad that so many seemed to be comfortable and successful in my classroom. I cannot attribute any specific effect to any specific effort or practice on my part, yet I feel that all the actions discussed here had value and I will certainly continue the cultural learning and sharing, community building, and experiments with cooperative groupings in the future.

At the beginning of the year, I really thought that I could have a huge impact on the voluntary choice of student partners. My impact upon this factor was, in fact, minimal. I was naïve, it turns out, about the cultural and developmental aspects of identity at this age and profoundly naïve about the importance of gender. But the students did broaden their friendships and were able to work well with almost anyone when called upon to do so.

As the year progressed, more students became more comfortable expressing themselves in front of the entire class, but some continued to remain quiet and reserved. Yet it was this group of shyer students who initiated smaller groups within which they could be more expressive and relaxed. I also became increasingly appreciative of the students as individuals—their humor, talents, quirks, needs, and differences—and I think that the students grew in their appreciation of their classmates as well.

I was far more organized and systematic with data collection concerning these issues than I might have been had I not been involved in Action

Research. I am quite sold on data collection as an initial and follow-up response to problem solving and will try to do this on a regular basis in the future. I have seen how the results of data collection may sometimes be surprising or unexpected. This is an important lesson for a teacher—to realize that what may actually be going on is not exactly what you thought, that your perceptions are subjective and limited. I have also seen that it is especially critical to include as an important source of data student perspectives and voices as they relate to any issue.

Last, the time provided by the Action Research process to get away from the classroom and talk and reflect with other professionals was invaluable. Our days are full of performing, acting, and reacting, and there is so little time for the critical and nurturing activities of sharing, supporting, and reflecting.

EPILOGUE

Several years have passed since I conducted this Action Research project. If anything, the children entering our classrooms are more challenging each year. The lives of many of these children and their families are difficult, the number of children with special needs has increased, and previously extraordinary behaviors have become ordinary. But these children are quite wonderful, and they are who they are. They bring an incredible richness of experience and diversity to the classroom, and they deserve the best we can give. We as teachers need to constantly strive to stay at the top of our game, and we need to be encouraged, supported, and renewed in approaching what we do.

On my best days I continue to use the skills that I learned as an Action Researcher and relearned and reinforced as an Action Research Facilitator. I try my best to avoid personalizing the challenges that I face in the classroom but to focus instead on collecting data that shape my responses to the issues and challenges before me. These practices are part and parcel of what I regard as professionalism as a teacher. The Action Research process is fundamental in serving the needs of every single child in the classroom, and that includes taking into account each child's personal and cultural differences to the extent that we are able. It is important to acknowledge that this is an ongoing struggle, but this struggle is front and center for me.

Beyond our own classrooms, we also must try to encourage reflective practices in our schools and school districts. As part of my participation in school subject-based cadres, leadership, climate, and equity teams, and as a member of districtwide committees and regional conferences, I have tried to learn about, support, and encourage research-driven and reflective

teaching practices. But these are, in many ways, top-down approaches to change and reform, or exercises in preaching to the converted. Far more powerful is the impact and example of good teaching. Change is a complex and nonlinear process, and in these days of increasing challenge and shrinking resources, teachers are under stress and under siege as never before. So we have seen periods of progress, but also reaction, regression, and even reversals in the growth of school community, trust, personal and academic experimentation, and risk taking. Often as professionals we do not always model what we expect from our children, and that is a very big and complex problem. Perhaps this is naïve, but if we are to survive and thrive in this crucible of funding caps and growing challenge, it has never been more critical for all school districts to invest in the deep professional development of their teachers. I feel with great conviction that, as struggling professionals, we deserve the time away from our schools and classrooms to reflect and to be nurtured and supported in our attempts to take risks, experiment, grow, and change.

For me, equity is all about each student getting what she or he needs. This is not an easy task, for we are not perfect teachers or perfect people, but if we are to remain in the game we must accept the challenges and appreciate the gifts of every working day.

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