TEACHING TOLERANCE Teaching Tolerance - Diversity, Equity and Justice

Facing the 'N Word'

Overview:
Can racial language in literature be an effective teaching tool?

Sometimes teachers can be torn between the desire to teach good literature and the fear of offending students, especially when the literature in question uses derogatory racial terms and the class itself is multiracial.

Those teachers who do not share the ethnic backgrounds and experiences of their students may be timid about reading aloud or discussing racially insensitive language in novels.

But controversial language in fiction can lead to powerful discussions, deeper understanding of sensitive topics and critical thinking. Diversity of race and experience can add insight and perspective to classroom discussions. Students can often be the guide to what is right and fair.

I am a white, female teacher of five years experience. This year my classroom of 25 fifth graders included four Asian Americans, three African Americans and two first-generation European Americans. The novels that complemented our U.S. history curriculum presented plenty of hot topics for discussion.

One book that generated controversy was *The Cay* (Doubleday, 1969) by Theodore Taylor. It is about Timothy, an elderly, illiterate black sailor, and Phillip, the blind white boy with whom he is shipwrecked.

My mentioning that *The Cay* had been banned in some schools made my students eager to read it.

The Cay prompted our most in-depth character studies of the year. After listing the positive and negative qualities of both Timothy and Phillip, we speculated about where those qualities came from.

Were they learned? Innate? Circumstantial? Which, if any, were due to ethnicity?

Some students thought that Timothy was portrayed in a racially unflattering light. Others saw him as a genuine hero. They concluded that Phillip had been taught bigotry and that his rise from it was redeeming.

When several students determined that Phillip was prejudiced when he called Timothy "ugly," a whirlwind of debate followed. The students' comments were filled with logic, insight and humor.

"He only said he was ugly because he was black."

"You don't have to be black to be ugly."

"Phillip probably thought anyone who is black is ugly."

"Maybe he really was ugly."

The next day's commentary offered no relief from controversy. It was clear that despite valid arguments and passionate debate, no consensus would be reached.

I explained that since each reader brought his or her own experience and point of view to the story, there was no right or wrong interpretation of the character's meaning.

Peter (all students' names are fictitious), an African American student, suggested that Phillip was racist when he called Timothy a "Negro."

I asked the students which of them found Negro to be offensive. To my surprise, more than half raised their hands. "It means the same as 'nigger,'" Peter explained.

As a class we looked up the word "Negro" in the dictionary. We learned that the English word was borrowed from the Spanish for the color black. The definition read that a Negro is a member of the black race.

I explained that many people consider Negro offensive because of its use during the Jim Crow era of segregation. The racial epithet "nigger," though derived from Negro, is usually considered far more derogatory.

Some students still believed Negro to be a racist term, so everyone got a homework assignment: to ask their parents what they thought Negro meant and report their findings.

I did my homework, too. I went to an African American staff member and asked her what she thought. She told me that although Negro is not a derogatory term, her family and other people whom she knows from the South don't like it.

"It's just another term that white people put on us," she said. "We didn't give it to ourselves."

The students and I shared our findings the next day. They reported that in their homes, Negro was considered everything from "just fine" to "strictly forbidden."

The discussion went on and on and soon developed into an intensely personal discussion about racial slurs and name-calling.

"If someone calls me Negro, I'll get mad," Peter insisted.

"There are words they call people from Japan," said Sam, a Japanese American, "but I won't say them."

The great debate was never completely settled. But every student had given bigotry and labeling serious thought.

I stepped in to end the argument. "Some words are considered crude and inappropriate everywhere," I said. "But out of respect, you should never call anyone what they don't like to be called."

Two months later the pressure was on again. I was reading aloud *War Comes to Willy Freeman* by James and Lincoln Collier (Dell, 1987). In it, Willy, a young, freed slave girl, disguises herself as a boy during the Revolutionary War.

Throughout the book, some characters refer to the African Americans as "niggers." Again I consulted my class.

We read and discussed the authors' afterword in which they explain that, despite their discomfort, they decided to use the term for historical accuracy. We talked about the dangers of censorship.

Ultimately, the class decided that they preferred not to hear the word "nigger" read out loud.

"We know it says that," said Amy, "so you don't have to say it."

I was relieved. I would substitute "Negro" instead. The Class agreed that is was OK as a substitute. Although derogatory, it was not as repulsive as the alternative.

The decision on how to handle racially sensitive literature ultimately lies with the teacher, who may choose to avoid material that causes discomfort. But we cannot ask children to question the meaning of literature if we shelter them from those selections which offer the greatest springboard for thought and discussion.

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