

## **Your Community: Gender, Race and Putting It All in Place**

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### **Introduction**

On September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2009, President Barack gave a nationally televised speech to welcome back students to the 2009-2010 school year. At that time, I remember thinking, “My 1<sup>st</sup> graders are going to love this!” Six and seven year olds think the president is the person in charge of the whole world and I felt this would be so inspiring for them to hear a speech designed specifically *for them*. Usually when the President gives an address, my students would already be in bed or the topic would be something they did not understand.

Not only would it be televised, but it was streamed online, a great way to show my young learners about technology and its endless possibilities as a learning tool. As the date for the address drew closer, I started to receive notes from parents with statements (not direct quotes, I’m just generalizing the notes I received) “...please allow my student to have an alternative activity to viewing the Presidential address...” or “(student name) will be leaving school early so that he/she will not view the President speaking...”

I wondered if this was just going on in my classroom, so I spoke to teammates and found the same things were going on in their rooms. Of course, within the next few days, it was a “hot topic”: should schools show this speech? This really got me thinking! What if Hillary Clinton had been elected? Would this controversy be going on? What if the previous President George W. Bush had done this the year before? Would we be receiving such a high influx of early dismissal notes or requests for “alternative activities”?

Of course, I do realize when one is dealing with politics, there is always going to be controversy. But the president was going to speak to these children about the importance of staying in school, working to succeed, respect and numerous other issues! First graders get so excited about the smallest things that deviate from our normal classroom schedule, and this was a huge deal to them.

This led me to think: Was it because Barack Obama was a man? A black man? A Democrat? What prompted all the controversy? Gender? Race? Do either of these factors even play a role in whom 6 year olds choose as a role model or a friend?? The beauty of a child falls so much in their innocence. At this age, they choose their friends by who helps them pick up their crayons. Their feelings get hurt by the friend that doesn’t want them to play tag on the playground.

I thought back to when I was in first grade. Personally, neither gender nor race played a role in how I chose my friends. The first “best friend” I had was a black boy named Joey. He sat beside me in kindergarten and in exchange for me helping him write his name on his paper, he would let me play with his Transformers during recess. I thought this was the basis for the most awesome friendship in the world! I had NO CLUE that other parents were “whispering” in their little groups about how my mother “could let me go over to his house” when I should be playing Barbies with Lori up the street. Children don’t think about these kinds of things!

I think it was about 2<sup>nd</sup> grade when someone my own age approached me, and asked me why I was such good friends with Joey. “Did your mom make you be nice to him and that’s why you hang out with him? Because my mom said that must be why.” This is my first memory of questioning why it was a big deal. Again, was it because he was a boy? A black boy? Little did I know I would be asking the same question, 20- some years later about something going on in my OWN classroom.

In preparation for writing this unit, my seminar group talked about how schools teach diversity about different races, cultures and gender roles but we don’t really teach about the tolerance or acceptance of these concepts. The purpose of this curriculum unit is to create a tool other teachers of young students can use to have children embrace the idea that even though we are all different races and genders we can ALL achieve greatness by breaking down barriers and stereotypes, starting in the classroom.

This unit is designed for teachers of early age learners who feel there are resources lacking to really drive this point to our age group. If you use your favorite search engine and type in “diversity lessons, tolerance lessons + first grade” there are not a lot of quality lessons out there, especially lessons that cross the curriculum for multiple days. Naturally, there are many trade books that cover these topics, but I have created this unit for the teacher who truly wants to impact their students with this topic and get them to have an understanding and appreciation for people, regardless of gender or race.

If you are looking for a curriculum unit that will empower your young learners to believe their choices should not be limited because of their gender or race and to teach them an appreciation and tolerance for people that are different than them, this will be a great unit for you to use!

This unit can be taught in 5 lessons that incorporate standards of Literacy, Math, and Social Studies/Arts. I will use many different teaching strategies such as: Socratic Seminar, graphic organizers, and expression through art, as well as meeting math standards such as graphing, surveys and data collection and tallying.

This unit can be taught through lesson per day, or week depending on how it fits into your state curriculum. Each day will focus on either gender or race and the concepts first graders have about these.

I will begin with a Literacy based activity to gain information from my class about their knowledge and views of gender and what “roles” they see as male or female. It will differ from other curriculum units in the way that it is more an exploratory unit as opposed to starting a unit on patterns in math or sequencing a story in Literacy, which all follow a basic generic template. Not only will the teacher act as a facilitator, but this unit will need adjustments based upon results of classroom discussion, which is why Socratic Seminar is a great teaching method to incorporate.

### **Classroom Activities**

To simplify this for educators using this curriculum unit, each day is generically titled as Day 1-5. When using this in your own classroom you may want to choose a title for each day based on the books and resources you use. Day 1 will be when you introduce this unit and the following days will be exploring various aspects of the unit.

#### **Day 1**

This day will serve as the introduction to the unit. The teacher will begin by telling students we are going to bring our classroom community together and explore our differences and similarities. (At the beginning of the school year, I always welcome my kids into my classroom by telling them it is not MY classroom, it is OUR classroom.) The first unit in Social Studies my state standards require us to teach is introduction of community. If you have not yet covered what a community is, I would suggest doing that before starting this unit. It is important that students have an understanding that a community is not just the city you live in, but can be narrowed down into what part of town you live in, your neighborhood, your school and then your classroom.

I will do this by using a KWL chart. If you are not familiar with this, KWL stands for what the learner “Knows” about a given topic, “Wants to Know” or “Wonders” about the topic, and after you have covered the topic, what the students have “Learned” I usually use a piece of chart paper for this.

COMMUNITY		
What we KNOW	What we WONDER	What we LEARNED

To have students gain a better understanding, you may want to gather images from the town you live in of familiar landmarks, neighborhoods, the school, etc. After establishing a sense of the word community, the teacher can emphasize how the classroom is a community and that we will work together to make our classroom community a great place for learning! (This is not a necessary step for using this curriculum unit, but I have found it is a great way to link this unit to previous knowledge.)

I will begin by gathering my students on the carpet for whole group time and telling them I have a story to tell them. Early age learners are so engaged by story time, and I find this is one time of the day that they are all engaged and almost entranced by the speaker. Whether it is the teacher just telling a story about their life or reading a story book, you completely have their attention!

I will begin by reminding students what good listeners do by having them “Give Me 5”. This is something my school uses as a school wide signal for letting them know their attention and focus is required. I tell my students this means two ears are listening, two eyes are focused on the speaker and 1 mouth is closed!

This will be the opening for the first Literacy based activity. The book used will be *Boy, He Can Dance!*, after my opening story. I came up with this idea after our seminar leader voiced her surprise that no one thought about gender as a lesson focus. You may want to change this based on a personal story you know about. I grew up in the heart of Pittsburgh Steelers territory and have been a fan since I was born. Of course, this was influenced by my father, but after reading how I introduce this unit, you may want to change it to a story that you are more familiar with.

Whenever I tell my students a story verbally as opposed to reading a book with pictures to show, I tell them to close their eyes and get ready to make a movie in their heads. I remind them that at the movies, no one likes it when the people behind them are talking, so students should pretend they are in the theater.

Here is my “lead-in” story:

“Today I want to tell you a story about a character named Lynn.” (At this time, review with students what a character is. Ask for a student volunteer to give you the definition of what a character is. If students struggle for a definition, depending on the time of the school year you use this unit, remind them that a character is a person involved in the story. To expand on this, the main character is who the story is MOSTLY about.) “Lynn was one of the best dancers in ballet class. Lynn LOVED to leap high in the air and could land hardly making a sound! Everyone in the ballet class tried to dance JUST LIKE Lynn. Right now, I want you to return to your seats and draw a picture of what you think Lynn looks like.”

At this point, the students will return to their seats and draw a picture on the pre-made activity sheet. The teacher should give the students about 10 minutes to do this, reminding them to add details such as what Lynn would wear, what Lynn looks like, and the image they got of Lynn while the teacher was telling the story. The teacher should also direct the students to write a sentence about their picture using the prompt: “I think Lynn looks like this because....”. This will give the teacher great insight as to what impacted your students to draw Lynn the way they did.

After gathering students back on the carpet, have several student volunteers share their drawings. Have them describe what points in the story lead to them creating their drawings. I will then tell my students I am going to show them a picture of Lynn.

What my students will now see is Lynn Swann, former Pittsburgh Steelers, Hall of Fame Football Player! As information to teachers that may use this instead of a personal situation, Lynn Swann is most famously known for being MVP of Super Bowl X. If teachers would like to include a picture or statistics, I recommend using a search engine your school supports to project this image on the board, if the school has the technology to do so.

Students (hopefully!) will be shocked by this image! Never would they expect to see a black man that is a football player as I described in my story above. This will facilitate great conversation about gender as well as race, and provide a great ground basis of how you can transition this to your particular classroom.

I will then introduce the book *Boy, Can He Dance!* by Eileen Spinelli. For those of you unfamiliar with this book, here is a synopsis of it: “Young Tony loves to do nothing but dance; his father, however, a brilliant chef, wants him to have a culinary future. The lad gamely chops carrots and peels potatoes at his father's restaurant, but inevitably ends up tripping the light fantastic around the kitchen. Luckily, Tony gets his big break before breaking too many plates: One of the evening's dinner-theater troupe can't make the show, and Tony triumphantly fills in, impressing his father at last.” (Spinelli)

I always begin a story by reviewing the basics of the book. Have students identify the main elements of a book: front, back and spine of the cover. Ask what the author does, what the illustrator does. Take the students on a “picture walk” A picture walk involves you showing the students the illustrations of the story and recording what their predictions are. The teacher can record these and should keep their responses neutral. Remind students that a prediction is a “guess” and are never right or wrong, just what is on their mind. I will then read the book to my students and we will review the predictions they made during the picture walk.

After reading the book, the teacher will ask my students if they think there are things “only boys” can do and things “only girls” can do, as far as hobbies. Using a Venn Diagram with one circle labeled “Boys” and one circle labeled “Girls” the area in the middle will be for hobbies my class thinks that are “okay” for both. After taking student responses, here is a list of questions I will ask my students to understand their thinking:

1. Why do you think only \_\_\_\_\_ can have this as a hobby?
2. Would you not participate in something because you think only \_\_\_\_\_ should do it?
3. Why do you feel this way?
4. Would you tease someone that chooses a hobby you think only a boy/girl could do?
5. How would you feel if someone teased you about something you loved to do?

For closure, we will review how the students felt when they found out that Lynn was actually a famous football player. The teacher should emphasize the point that hobbies and talents are not limited to gender or race and we should not judge someone based on their choices, but instead support and celebrate their talents!

#### Day Two : Math Activity

The teacher will begin today by reminding the students of the lesson we did yesterday about being tolerant of people’s hobbies and how gender shouldn’t matter if you really enjoy doing something

Part of my district’s math curriculum is a unit on surveys and collecting data. I will begin by passing out a short survey that I will read out loud to my class. Our surveys vary in topics, such as food, vacations, sports, etc. so I will tell the class that today’s survey will be about jobs. Here are the survey questions (keep in mind, this is a 1<sup>st</sup> grade survey so it is VERY basic, just asking \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_ questions so they can easily graph the idea):

1. Would you rather be a firefighter or a policeman? Why?
2. Would you rather be a nurse or a librarian? Why?
3. Would you rather be a scientist or a teacher? Why?

The teacher should allow their students enough time to make their choices and write 1-2 sentences on why they made their choices. I chose the jobs I did for “pre-meditated” reasons. Obviously, society has their views on “jobs for men” and “jobs for women.” I picked careers that young students may see as these. I thought a scientist or teacher would show interesting responses and reasons, as many still view teaching as a career “just for women”.

After collecting our data, the teacher will have the students graph their results on a pre-made chart. In first grade, we ask the following questions after completing a survey:

1. How many people took this survey?
2. How do you know?
3. How many people chose\_\_\_\_\_?
4. How many people chose\_\_\_\_\_?

I will take this a step further and ask which jobs did most boys pick and most girls. With my students that are comfortable sharing their choices, we will discuss if they think there are jobs that only women/men do. Why do they feel this way? I may switch the questioning around for this and pose the questions as: a firefighter or a nurse, a policeman or a librarian? I will keep the 3<sup>rd</sup> question the same.

For closure of this lesson, the teacher will again emphasize that gender nor race should impact what a student's goals are for a career choice. I chose to do this lesson immediately following the lesson regarding how gender should not affect one's choice about hobbies to take it a step further and let young learners know that their gender should not affect their career choice.

### Day Three

This lesson will be Social Studies based. The teacher will begin by reminding students how we have talked about the differences in gender, and how we need to be tolerant of choices others make and not let our choices be limited! .The teacher will ask students if there are other things that make us different, besides just gender. Hopefully they will say yes and a student will say we are different races. If they don't, the teacher will bring this up. The book I will use for this lesson is *The Skin I'm In* by Pat Thomas. I chose this book because it was described, by the author, to "encourage kids to accept and be comfortable with differences of skin color and other racial characteristics among their friends and in themselves"

The teacher will begin by introducing the book by discussing the details of the cover, author, illustrator, etc. The teacher will take the students on a "picture walk" (as detailed in Day One) and have them make predictions about the story, while recording their predictions. When doing this with my own class, I will read the story and then lead the children in a discussion about how in our classroom community we are all friends and how proud I am that we all treat each other with great respect. I will tell my students that our class is like a chain, we are strong when we stick together. If one of our links "broke", we wouldn't be as strong.

The activity that follows will need these materials: different shades of brown construction paper (ranging from peach to dark brown) and crayons. The teacher will

present the students with a variety of shades of construction paper and have them choose the color that they feel best represents them. (They sell construction paper packs of “skin tones” that include shades of peach, light brown, dark brown, etc.) . The teacher will direct students to write their names and draw an illustration of themselves on the paper. The teacher will bring the group back together on the carpet and show the students how to chain it together by stapling it.

When doing this in my own classroom, I will remind them that a chain is only as strong as its links and hang it in the front of the room to remind them that we are a strong classroom community! I will hang the chain across the board to remind students of this each day, and tell them if they ever feel weak or sad, look at the chain of friends we have!

If a teacher is having problems with their class not getting along, this would be a great activity to model how people are stronger when they work together instead of not “linking” together to be stronger.

#### Day 4

This day will be another Literacy based activity. I will use the book *I'm Gonna Like Me* by Jamie Lee Curtis. For teachers unfamiliar with this book, it is a book written to promote self esteem and it uses illustrations of children in all colors, shapes and sizes. It promotes loving yourself and others regardless of the mistakes we make or what we look like. This will be the lesson I use the Socratic Seminar method for discussion. For those of you unfamiliar with this method, it can be used in upper grades by breaking the students into small groups.

Because I teach 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I will keep my class as whole group, and I will act as the facilitator. Socratic Seminar is used following a reading, or in our case, the teacher reading a book to the whole group. The teacher should remind students of the main rules:

1. Respect each other.
2. Only talk when it is your turn.
3. If you disagree do it politely. Also, if 2 people start speaking at the same time, someone should say “You go first.”
4. Stay in the group. Bathroom = emergencies only!

The teacher should begin by asking a question to the whole group and letting each student answer. Students do have the opportunity to pass if they feel uncomfortable speaking. The questions you ask will depend on the book you choose. (If you use *I'm Gonna Like Me*, I have included the questions that I will ask.) The next 2-3 questions can be answered by anyone, and it is important to keep in mind that the teacher should not select questions that be easily answered by “yes” or “no”. Remember, the point of this



method is to generate discussion! My final question will be for the student to pick out the part of the story that meant the most to them and have them explain why.

Because of the tone of this curriculum unit, the teacher wants to facilitate a conversation that reminds students how our actions can affect how someone feels and that if their feelings get hurt, it is something that can stick with them for a long time.

In closing, discuss with students how what we have learned in the past few days about gender and race have made them feel. The teacher should remind students that in the future, maybe even in their class next year, they will meet people that may have hobbies or do things they view as different or silly. The point of these lessons is to encourage our young learners to not only accept these differences but encourage them to learn more about them and create new friendships based maybe not on similarities but differences!

#### Day Five

The final day of this unit will be a fun, creative day! The teacher should review each day. Discuss how surprised the students were upon finding out “Lynn” was a ballet dancer, as well as a Super Bowl winning MVP. Ask students how Tony’s father felt after seeing that Tony saved the day in *Boy! Can He Dance!*. The teacher will review the results of the class graph and the career choices they made. Remind your young learners to NEVER feel limited to a career choice because of their gender. Continue to discuss how your Socratic Seminar went.

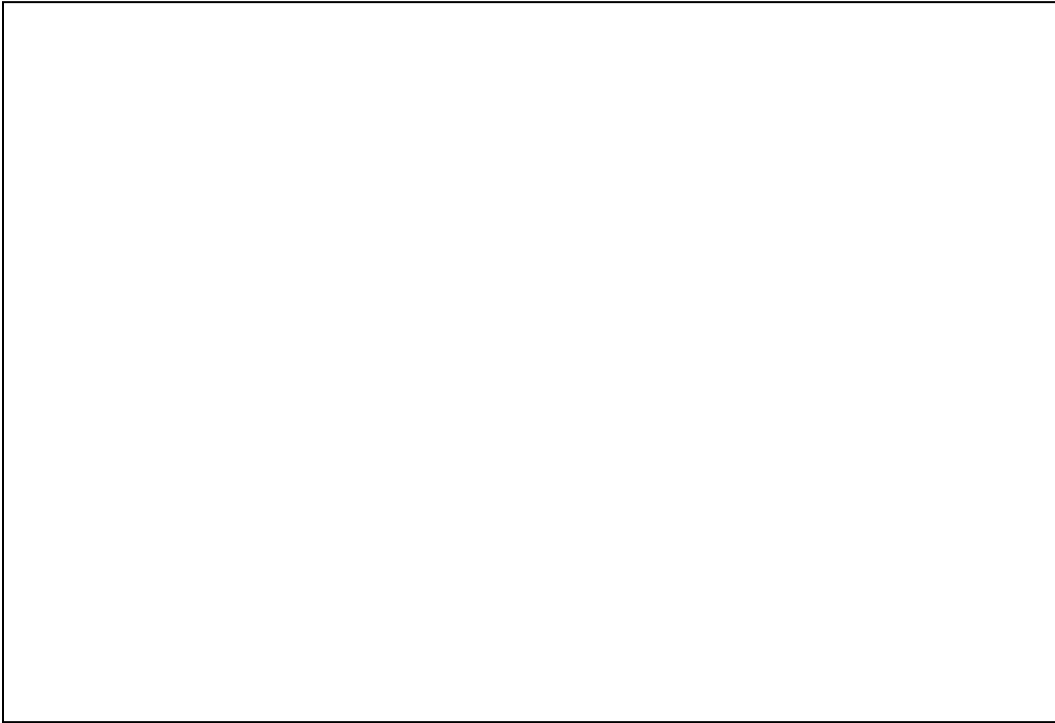
Introduce the closing activity for this curriculum unit. The students will paint a mural of their classroom community as they see themselves when they are grown ups. The teacher should have brown, black and white paints so students can “mix” a color to match their skin tone. Have students illustrate themselves in a way so a person looking at the mural can see what career choice they have made. Remind students to feel free to choose WHATEVER career they want to do and that there is no right or wrong choice for how they paint themselves.

The end result will most likely be a beautiful image of the hopes and dreams of our future generation! I hope this curriculum unit provided you with an outline of a topic that needs to be addressed in education today: not only knowledge of other genders and races but ACCEPTANCE and TOLERANCE of choices made by people of all races, regardless of gender.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions: After listening to the description of Lynn, draw what you think Lynn looks like!**

**Next, write 2 sentences to describe your picture.**



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Name\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

**Complete this survey and be ready to share your results to create a class graph!**

**1. Would you rather be a POLICEMAN or a FIREFIGHTER?**

**WHY?**

**2. Would you rather be a NURSE or a LIBRARIAN?**

**WHY?**

**3. Would you rather be a SCIENTIST or a TEACHER?**

**WHY?**

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

**Complete this survey and be ready to share your results to create a class graph!**

**1. Would you rather be a POLICEMAN or a FIREFIGHTER?**

**WHY?**

**2. Would you rather be a NURSE or a LIBRARIAN?**

**WHY?**

**3. Would you rather be a SCIENTIST or a TEACHER?**

**WHY?**

**K.W.L**

**What we KNOW**

**What we WONDER**

**What we LEARNED**

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### **Student Resources**

*The Skin I'm In* by Pat Thomas

*Less Than Half, More Than Whole* by B. Goodnight

*The Colors of Us* by Karen Katz

*Hope* by Isabell Monk

*I Love Saturdays Y Domingos* by Alma Flor Ada

*Boy, Can He Dance!* By Eileen Spinelli

*Pinky and Rex and the Bully* by James Howe

*Little Granny Quarterback* by Bill Martin Jr. and Michael Sampson

*Amazing Grace* by Mary Hoffman

*Tough Boris* by Mem Fox

*I'm Gonna Like Me* by Jamie Lee Curtis

*Is There Really A Human Race?* by Jamie Lee Curtis

### **Teacher Resources**

*The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* by Debra Van Ausdale

*"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

*Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences* by Leonard Sax

*Legal History of the Color Line: The Rise And Triumph of the One-drop Rule* by Frank W. Sweet

*Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black And White Southern Children Learned Race* by Jennifer Ritterhouse

*Breaking Bad Habits of Race and Gender: Transforming Identity in Schools* by Sarah Marie Stizlein

*SOCRATIC SEMINARS AND LITERATURE CIRCLES* by Victor Mueller

*Socratic Circles: Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School* by Matt Copeland

*What's the Big Idea?: Question-Driven Units to Motivate Reading, Writing, and Thinking* by Jim Burke

### **Internet Websites**

<http://www.education.com/reference/article/K-W-L-charts-classroom/>

<http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/venn/>

[http://www.studyguide.org/socratic\\_seminar.htm](http://www.studyguide.org/socratic_seminar.htm)

## **Bibliography**

Bereiter, Carl. *Imagine it!* . 2010. Reprint, Columbus, OH: SRA/McGraw-Hill, 2010.  
This is a Literacy teacher's manual. It is helpful in describing how to introduce a new reading to students, as well as other story elements.

Curtis, Jamie Lee, and Laura Cornell. *I'm gonna like me: letting off a little self-esteem.*

New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 2002.

The story uses children telling about their daily lives and the challenges each day brings. Boy and girls of all races, gender and handicaps share their day and what makes them different. It promotes appreciating yourself, and others, regardless of color, gender or handicaps.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage inequalities: children in America's schools.* New York: Crown

Pub., 1991.

This book is an account of Jonathan Kozol's visits to schools all across the United States. He includes detailed "inequalities he sees between the upper white class and poor lower class schools."

Moore, Rita A.. *Building classroom reading communities: retrospective miscue analysis*

*and socratic circles.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2010.

An excellent resource for teachers using the Socratic Seminar method for the first time. It includes examples and modeling of questions to use for small groups as well as whole class discussions.

Sax, Leonard. *Why gender matters: what parents and teachers need to know about the*

*emerging science of sex differences.* New York: Doubleday, 2005.

This title includes advice for teachers on handling of gender discipline and "provides a helpful reminder that gender can affect every aspect of life." It provides gender based research on various school age children (early learners – high school) in a variety of settings.

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