

Prejudice Is More than Black and White

Marlene A. Davis

With winter vacation over and January upon us, the topic of discussion in my elementary school was how to commemorate the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. I browsed through several packets of suggested activities, but none seemed to convey adequately the serious issues of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. I knew if I began my lesson with the typical question, "Is it fair to judge someone by the color of his or her skin?" I would get the expected "no" answer. I needed a way, without revealing my purpose, to measure the stereotypes my 6-year-olds had already formed.

The idea came to me to make a series of cards picturing pairs of people identical except for one selected characteristic of age, sex, race, or handicap and then to question my students on their perceptions about them. Each card had an "A" and a "B" half. I asked my students to choose A or B (C if undecided) in response to questions designed to measure the presence of stereotyped thinking.

For instance, one card showed two identical girls, one seated in a wheelchair, the other sitting in a regular chair. I asked, "Who is the better student?" I was amazed and saddened when many of them exclaimed, "Oh, that's easy" and immediately recorded their answers. Of my 42 students, 29 chose the girl sitting in the regular chair, 6 said the girl in the wheelchair, and 7 were unsure.

Another card depicted an elderly man on one side and a young man on the other. When asked, "Who is happier?" 25 chose the young man, and only 15 picked the elderly man.

When I displayed the card showing a boy and a girl and asked, "Who is better behaved?" another stereotype was revealed: 27 children chose the girl. However, when asked "Who is better at sports?" 38 chose the boy. Not one child picked the girl.

On a brighter note, the responses to issues of race were not so clear-cut. For example, I showed my class pictures of a white boy and a black one. Responding to the question, "Who is smarter?" 16 chose the white boy, 10 selected the black one, and 16 said they didn't know. When viewing the card with a white businessman and a black businessman, 18 children had difficulty deciding who was richer.

When we bring such attitudes out into the open to be examined and challenged, students realize how unfounded their views are. For example, when discussing the attributes of a good student, my students agreed that good listening skills, the ability to follow directions, and good communication skills are all necessary. When asked if the wheelchair prevented the girl from having these attributes, they realized that their choice was based on learned bias and snap judgments.

Activities like these illustrate the variety of stereotypes that educators must deal with on a daily basis, not just in January. If we are really to pay tribute to Martin Luther King, Jr., we must remember his commitment to the belief that *all* people should be judged fairly at *all* times.

—Marlene A. Davis is a 1st Grade Teacher, Merion Elementary School, 549 S. Bowman Ave., Merion Station, PA 19066.

A



B



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