



Teaching Segregation History

It is not easy to study the history of segregation, to confront the darkness created by racism. But just as ignorance is fertile soil for hatred and prejudice, knowledge of history, of the events, forces and movements that created the world today, can prepare and motivate us to make a powerful challenge to prejudice and injustice.

Recognizing the importance of teaching the history of racism and discrimination, however, doesn't change the reality that the subject can make African American children, especially those who are minorities in a classroom, feel singled out, like oddities or victims on display. When asked what he found the ugliest word in the English language, the poet Carl Sandburg answered, "Exclusion." Because everyone wants to belong, he said. It takes thought and sensitivity to balance the need of all your students to belong, with the need of all your students to learn a critical part of their nation's history.

Because we often explore collective experiences in history, it may seem natural to make assumptions about individuals based on generalizations about their particular ethnic or socioeconomic groups -- natural, but not accurate, valid or respectful. In the context of learning about segregation with your class, don't assume the African American children in your class share a common experience with all African Americans across history or even with other contemporary African Americans. Though we form generalizations in history, the reality is that every individual has their own experience. While many human experiences are shared, geographic, family and personal differences create a unique context for every individual. Exceptions to a perceived "average" experience are actually the rule. African American children in your classroom may not identify with events in the African American history your classroom studies. Or if they do identify with those events, they may not wish to share those feelings with the class. For these reasons, during class discussions you will want to avoid singling out students whose ethnic or economic background is similar to that of historically oppressed individuals or groups your class is studying. Said more simply on the website Understanding Prejudice, "Be sure not to single out minority students or call on them unsolicited to represent their group."

In your day-to-day classroom life, you can create a model for inclusion by involving the class in daily games that include everyone, possibly with rotating partners so that everyone gets to belong with various people. Children's discrimination is often unintentional and occurs in the form of cliques or excluding certain individuals during playground games. The websites listed below offer various activities to help your students become more mindful of one another and inclusive by habit.

If you do sense the segregation unit is generating uneasiness for some students, you may wish to make time to talk with them privately. Acknowledge that history is



painful sometimes, and ask how they feel during history class. Is it scary or do they feel uncomfortable? Reassure them that the focus is on *history*, that we study the past to make the present and future better. Ask if there is something you can do to make them more comfortable during the activities. Reassure that you view them as their own unique person, not as a faceless member of a group.

Classroom activities

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/elemact.htm>

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/www/guides/looking/contents.html>

Tips for the Elementary Classroom – from the Understanding Prejudice site

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/teach/elemtips.htm>

Links to Sites on Prejudice

<http://www.understandingprejudice.org/links/>

Anti-Defamation League

<http://www.adl.org/education/>