



ADL Workshop: Practicing Our Responses

Coleytown Middle School

Making it Meaningful: Interrupting Biased Comments in the Classroom

Rosalind's Classroom Conversations

By Rosalind Wiseman

What do you do if you think you hear one of your students make a racist, homophobic or sexist remark? Or more difficult, what if you hear it or think you hear it, but you're not absolutely sure who said it?

This is one of those common yet incredibly difficult moments in a classroom that matter: Handle it wrong and your authority in the class is compromised; handle it right and you role model how an adult can right a wrong in a profoundly meaningful way for children.

First let's look at how well-meaning teachers can contribute to the problem. "That's enough!" is a standard response from a teacher to a group of students when they're being loud and need to settle down. But it's also a go-to response when a student is bullying another child with a racist, sexist or homophobic comment. Take a step back and listen to the message communicated in that moment from the teacher—it's a tacit approval or acceptance of what's happening. Said another way, there should never be an amount of cruelty or bigotry that's acceptable.

Instead, at the minimum, as soon as a teacher hears a derogatory comment, they should say, "Using that word(s) to put someone down is unacceptable." At that point, they can go back to teaching their class or they can make the decision to spend a few more minutes addressing the remark with some depth.

When students push back, which happens all the time, there are two usual reactions:

"They don't care! I was just joking." Again, well-meaning teachers often turn to the target and ask them if this is true. In that moment you have lost the teaching opportunity. The target will tell you they don't care because they have to agree with their more powerful peer. Instead, teachers need to say strongly, "Saying X to put someone down is unacceptable. I don't want it in my classroom and I'm not going to get into a discussion with you about if you were joking or not because it's easy to say 'just joking' as an excuse to get away with this kind of comment." If you have time, use the opportunity to discuss how to challenge biased language.

"I didn't say it!" is a classic response and very tricky to handle well. Here's why. It can be hard to be sure that you identified the student correctly. Out of a basic sense of fairness, you don't want to wrongfully accuse anyone and if you get it wrong it's likely that the students know who really did it but won't tell you. Some teachers respond by saying something like, "If the person who said it doesn't come forward, the whole class will be punished." What usually happens is that no one speaks. Loyalty of silence reigns and the teacher is left fuming. Not only did a student get away with being cruel to another student but the teacher demonstrates that they are unable to handle the situation effectively. It reinforces the power dynamics between the students.

All while the actual issue gets lost. Communication shuts down. And really, finding out the “culprit” is not really the point. The point is that the comment was made and it’s important to help students understand why it’s wrong, no matter who said it.

Here are some suggestions for doing it differently.

Acknowledge that the point isn’t who said it but that it was said. Reaffirm with the quick values statement, mentioned above, about not using those words to put someone down. If any student argues with you, let them finish and then say, “You and I have a disagreement about this. I can’t allow you or any of my students to put people down. If you want to speak to me about this further, you can schedule an appointment to talk with me, but right now those comments need to stop. Are we clear?”

To address the comment in a meaningful way and to make it a teachable moment, spend a few minutes (or more, if possible) talking about these kinds of comments, why they are wrong and how we can address them in the classroom or school.

If you have only a few minutes, describe the different types of teasing. Explain that there is “bonding” teasing where you feel liked and connected to the person teasing you. “Annoying” teasing is when the person is insensitive to your reactions. And then there is malicious teasing when the teaser repeatedly goes after you specifically around perceived insecurities to humiliate you in public. As the teacher, it is critical to remind the students that everyone can be on the giving or receiving end of all of these kinds of teasing and malicious teasing can lead to or be considered bullying.

If you have a longer period of time to have this conversation, start off by describing the different types of teasing. Then, expand the conversation to include why it’s so difficult for the targets to speak out, why targets often laugh it off and how that destroys the target’s credibility later if they ever want to come forward to admit how upset they are. This discussion can easily connect to any history or social studies curriculum that teaches about the nature of bystanding and the importance of protecting people’s rights to come forward to voice a politically or socially unpopular opinion. You can also elicit from students why they think these comments are so pervasive and what they think should be done about it.

Unfortunately, racist, sexist and homophobic comments are prevalent in middle and high schools across the United States. However, teachers have a powerful opportunity to turn those remarks into opportunities for sharing, learning and change.

Do No Harm: How to Intervene Without Making It Worse

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By Rosalind Wiseman

For this edition of *Rosalind's Classroom Conversations*, I asked ADL education staff across the country what issues they were hearing about from teachers and students to address in my next essay. Not surprisingly, I received many thought provoking questions. The subject I chose for this article is a topic I have struggled with myself: When you see a young person mistreated by their peers, how do you intervene without making things worse for the target?

What's great about this question is it shows how the educator realizes that the way they interact with the group impacts the target's ability to advocate (or not) for themselves.

Here's what I believe we always need to keep in mind. No matter what we teach, our credibility and effectiveness as educators is based on authentic, meaningful, respectful engagement with each and every student. It's easy to say but in practice, it can be difficult to accomplish.

Let's admit that some of our students can be personally very challenging. For example, have you had a student that got on your last nerve because they were really good at being mean and negative to other students but refused to take ownership for their actions? Have you ever been frustrated with a young person because they kept going back to the same kids who treated them like dirt or covered up for them?

We are going to have feelings about the cruel social dynamics that can occur between our students. And those feelings are a gift and a liability. A gift when they fuel our passion to uphold our students' dignity and motivate us to self-reflect about our own effectiveness. Or, a liability if our emotions blind us from seeing how we may make the problem worse. We have a responsibility to intervene appropriately and effectively. But, specifically, how do we do that?

We have to dig deep and get honest with ourselves. How did we grow up learning to speak truth to power? How did we learn to intervene in a conflict between people? Almost all of us learned to respond to aggression and anger in three ways: avoid, attack or acquiesce. These three responses have the potential to control our relationships in every aspect of our lives including family, friends, intimate partners and work colleagues.

None of these responses are responsible or effective ways to intervene when we see people ridicule or dehumanize each other. Let's call it our "conflict baggage" and examine how it can affect our interactions with young people (and keep in the back of our mind how this same baggage also affects our ability to face conflicts with our school colleagues).

For example, do you describe yourself as someone who just doesn't like conflict? That would be the avoid strategy. But what this means is as educators, we would be more likely to convince ourselves to not intervene in situations where we should. In the eyes of our students, we easily look like we are too scared to face the problem or condone abusive behavior.

If our strategy is to acquiesce, we intervene without projecting authority or we are vulnerable to debating with socially aggressive or verbal students and losing.

If our strategy is to attack, we can come across as “rescuing” the target and going after the aggressors. Our intent may be to make the aggressors know what it feels like to be ridiculed or embarrassed so we say something that cuts them down. We may feel in that moment that we have dispensed justice but what we really have done is continue the cycle: using domination to attack the aggressors and taking away any power the target has to advocate on their own behalf.

So here’s what we shouldn’t do:

1. We can’t ask the target in front of others if the other kids are “bothering him or her” or any other question that asks the target how they feel about what the other kids are doing to them. If we do, we reinforce the power dynamic between students. We put the target in the position to say the other kids are playing with her/him and they don’t care. This makes it much more difficult for the child to say anything different later—to you or their peers.
2. We can’t say anything sarcastic, condescending or bullying to the aggressors like, “Wow, now do you feel good about yourself?” Even if the aggressors stop their behavior in the moment, they’ll go right back to what they were doing the moment the adult turns away. Why? Because we used the same strategy (i.e. ridicule) to silence them as they used to silence the target.
3. We can’t say, “That’s enough” because that communicates that you’re ok with some part of what’s happening. As I have said in *Making It Meaningful: Interrupting Biased Comments in the Classroom*, it’s a tacit acceptance of what is happening
4. We can’t say, “How would you feel if that happened to you?” Of course, the purpose here is to teach empathy but that statement is constantly dismissed by people who are abusing their power. It goes right up there with “make healthy choices.” These are sound bites young people ridicule as “adult speak.”

Here’s what we can do:

1. We need to manage ourselves as we approach the group. That means being aware of any triggers we have and then putting them aside to talk about later with a professional mentor or friend.
2. We look at everyone in the group and succinctly identify the problem. Succinct means we don’t repeat ourselves, we don’t lecture and whatever we say shouldn’t last more than a few sentences. We are not there to get into a debate with the students. Then, make a “values declaration” statement that communicates every student’s dignity and why we think their behavior is in contradiction to that value.

Here’s an example of an exchange:

You: “Hey, just overheard you calling Jennifer a slut. We don't do that here.”

Two girls in the group roll their eyes and one says, "Ok but we don't mean anything by it."

You: “I expect you all to hold yourselves to a higher standard than using tired words that put girls down. You all have to get to class now but if you want to talk to me later, I'm totally up for doing that. Does that make sense?”

Girls: “Yes, fine.”

You: "Great. And remember I'm here if you want to continue having the conversation.”

Possible counters that can get you off course:

If any of the aggressors say the target doesn't mind what they're doing or asks the target if it bothers them, say "If you want to tell me why you think what you're doing is acceptable, then schedule a time with me. Right now, what you need to understand is that calling anyone "gay" (or insert other derogatory comment/joke/ behavior) is unacceptable. And I'm not going to have the target answer anything right now because I'm not going to put them in the possible situation of having to choose between admitting what they really feel and coming across as disloyal to you. I'm not saying that's happening but it's a possibility. So...just so we are clear, please tell me what you're hearing me say."

After the student responds, thank them and then direct them to where they need to go.

We can and should approach the target later for a check in. When their peers aren't around, say the following:

- "Maybe what they're doing to you is happening a lot but just because it seems normal doesn't make it right."
- "Even if it doesn't bother you now, you can always change your mind. Real friends accept your right to say they have gone over your personal line."
- "You can always talk to me. Obviously that's your choice but I'm here."

For any of this to work, the scripts I suggest here are just that: suggestions. To make this work for you, make these words your own. And that means you really should take some time and write down responses that are authentic to you. Don't wait until you're in the middle of a really stressful situation. If you do, you're that much more likely to let your emotions dominate your response.

You are going to see conflict, mean behavior and bullying and will need to address it. The quicker you learn that you have the ability to manage yourself, speak effectively and maintain everyone's dignity in the moment, the better off everyone's going to be.

Jokes, Excuses and Why Words Matter

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Words matter. Our words can comfort and express that we understand or that we “see” the other person in front of us. And of course, our words can do the opposite: they can hurt, isolate and make someone feel insignificant.

For better and for worse, our words signal our values and beliefs.

For the past several years, I’ve been hearing students use the word “terrorist” to mock or joke about any student who looks Middle Eastern or is Muslim. Like many other times when my students use racist terms to make jokes, their usual defense is they don’t mean anything by it. I’ve even had Jewish students defend their right to use these terms by saying they also make anti-Semitic jokes about Jews.

In other words, they think that as long as you make racist jokes about yourself, it’s acceptable to make racist jokes about others. Their justification continues that as long as no one objects, there’s obviously no problem. If you don’t complain, the only interpretation for your behavior is you don’t care. And if you do complain, you’re “blowing things out of proportion” so it’s entirely reasonable to dismiss the objection.

I have had countless conversations with young people about these issues and what I always remind myself is that I’m probably not going to get them to agree with me in the moment. In fact, I may get a response that I find highly irritating and frustrating like the ones I cited above.

But my goal is to start them on the path that gets them to reflect about the things they say in the future. That our conversation is somewhere in their head so the next time they see someone degrading another person, our discussion springs right back up and makes them so uncomfortable they are compelled to pay attention to what those feelings are telling them.

When I do have the opportunity to have a group discussion with my students about these kinds of comments, I ask these questions:

- If the joke is meaningless, if you don’t mean anything by what you’re saying, why are you saying it? What are you trying to communicate?
- Have you ever had someone say something to you that made you incredibly angry or embarrassed but you didn’t say anything? How do you know that the same thing isn’t happening here?
- If you were told that you are offending someone, regardless of what you think about the hurtful intent of your words, what would be your most likely response?
- If we accept the possibility that people may not be admitting how they feel, why is it so important for you to have the right to make these comments? What are you getting out of it?

I know that some of our students may think we make “a huge deal” out of these moments. They may think that we blow things out of proportion. That’s okay. Our job is to pierce the bubble some of our students (and of course some of the adults in our lives as well) are in — that just because it’s “common” doesn’t make it right and banking on other people’s silence doesn’t give you a pass to say things that serve to denigrate others.

Our job is to speak out so other young people see what we stand for and it gives them a little bit more confidence to do so themselves.

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“common” doesn’t make it right and banking on other people’s silence
doesn't give you a pass to say things that serve to denigrate others."**

Zero Indifference Toward Bias & Bullying Behaviors

A “Zero-Indifference” response to bias and bullying behaviors means that members of the school community take collective action to not tolerate these behaviors. Although there is no one right way to intervene, consistent intervention is key to establishing a school environment where all students feel safe and respected.

Three things that you should avoid:

1. Ignore the incident.
2. Excuse it.
3. Allow yourself to become immobilized by fear or uncertainty.

Effective interventions consist of two steps:

1. **Stop the behavior immediately.**

Some sample responses:

	LESS TIME / PUBLIC SPACE (between periods, at dismissal, during recess)	MORE TIME / PRIVATE SPACE (during class or practice, after-school activities)
IN A STRUCTURED SETTING (a classroom, library, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That is unacceptable in this room. • You know the class ground rules. • Please apologize. • Leave the room. • Leave him/her alone! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did you mean by what you said? That was a stereotype. • Stereotypes are a kind of lie and they hurt people’s feelings. • That was a putdown, and I don’t think it belongs here at our school. • You may not have meant to be hurtful, but here’s how your comment hurt...
UNSTRUCTURED SETTING (hallway, locker room, cafeteria)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut it out! Using language like that is no joke. • That’s out of line! • Keep your hands to yourself! • Go to the office! • Stop it right now! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That’s bullying. It’s against the school rules. • We don’t harass people at this school. It could get you suspended. • That was mean. Why did you say that? • Do you understand why that was so hurtful?

If “time and place” allow for only punitive or reactive responses, or if you believe the needs of the targeted student will be better served by speaking to the offending student(s) later, be sure to schedule a future “time and place” to deal with the situation. Education is more effective at changing students’ future behaviors than punishment alone!

2. Educate those involved.

- Determine when to educate.

The determining factor about when to educate should be the needs of the targeted student.

EDUCATING ON THE SPOT

- Provides immediate information and support
- Models taking a stand
- Reassures others school is a safe place
- Sets a compassionate tone

EDUCATING LATER PRIVATELY

- Allows harasser to “save face”
- Prevents possible embarrassment of target
- Allows you to cool down
- Allows more time to explore and discuss facts

- **Distinguish between what feels right and what is best for a given student or situation.**

Incidents of name-calling and bullying can be complex, calling for thoughtful, critical judgment in each situation. You may want every student within 50 feet to hear you loud and clear when you reprimand the tormenters of a targeted student. But this response may cause targeted students to cringe at the attention your public intervention draws, and increase their concerns for their safety on the way home, when no one will be there to protect them.

- **Ask targeted students what they would like you to do.**

As a teacher, you may feel you need to take charge and determine on your own what is best for all students. Instead, you can stop the name-calling immediately, and set aside a time to educate harassing students later. Establish a time to meet privately with targeted students and discuss what they think might work best for them. Determine whether targeted students have a history of being harassed in general, whether offending students have a history of harassing other students, and whether the involved parties have a history with each other.

Some Considerations for Forming Effective Responses

- **Where and when did the incident occur?**

An effective response to name-calling and harassment is dependent on where the incident occurred and time available in the moment. Choices you make about intervening walking down the hall to your next class will differ from those you make when you have the time and structure of the classroom to support your decision.

- **Was the incident isolated or part of a pattern?**

A one-time transgression can be dealt with swiftly, but a persistent pattern on the part of any of the involved students requires more intensive intervention. If a student has a history of harassing other students, in addition to stopping the behavior and making decisions about educating those involved, consistently apply and enforce existing school rules and policies, and take disciplinary action when appropriate. If a student has a history of being picked on, a guidance counselor can assist the student in dealing with the considerable emotional strain of being targeted. Targeted students need support.

- **What was the harassing student's intent?**

Consider the ages of the harassing student(s), their understanding of the meaning and impact of their behavior, and the existing relationships between the involved students. Are the students best friends?

Is it possible they are only repeating language they have heard someone else use? Are the students developmentally able to understand the meaning and impact of their behavior?

Although individual circumstances may require educators to occasionally make judgment calls that violate their sense of what “feels right,” name-calling and bullying provide daily opportunities for “teachable moments” for educating students to show respect for all people.

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

- Ask if they know the meaning of the derogatory word(s) they used.
- Explain, in age-appropriate language, the origins, meaning, and hurtful impact of the word(s).
- Clarify school and/or classroom rules and policies about the behavior.
- Communicate that, regardless of the original intent, the word is a put-down, and that you do not want to hear the student use it again.
- Take steps to ensure the safety of the targeted student.

MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

- Consider the history, age, and intent of parties involved.
- Determine whether to educate publicly on the spot or later, in private.
- Firmly communicate the seriousness and consequences of the behavior, and that you do not want to hear or see it again.
- Refuse to sanction behavior as joking or “fooling around.”
- Take steps to ensure the safety of the targeted student.

PRACTICING OUR RESPONSES



PRACTICE PAIR #1

A white student greets another white student in the hallway by loudly saying “What’s up, my n—ga?” A black student in the hallway just shakes their head and keeps walking.

Option 1: Practice addressing the comment in the moment.

Option 2: Practice having a one-on-one follow-up conversation with the black student who overheard the white students.

PRACTICE PAIR #2

One of your students, Allie, has asked everyone to start calling them Alix. Another student, Matt, continually refers to Alix as Allie during class. In today’s class, after Alix answers a question, Matt says, “Okay, Allie,” loudly enough for the whole class to hear him.

Option 1: Practice addressing this comment with the whole class.

Option 2: Practice having a one-on-one follow-up conversation with Matt.

PRACTICE PAIR #3

You discover that someone has drawn a swastika on the desk of a Jewish student in your classroom. You receive a call from the student’s parent, who is very upset, and wants to know what you are going to do about it.

Option 1: Practice having a conversation with the parent.

Option 2: Practice addressing this with the whole class.

PRACTICE PAIR #4

You hear a group of girls telling another girl she is “such a slut.” When you confront them, they say they were just joking. The target of the name-calling, who looks upset, forces a laugh and says, “We always joke around with each other like that.”

Option 1: Practice addressing the group of girls in the moment.

Option 2: Practice having a one-on-one follow-up conversation with the targeted student.