

# Avoiding Bias in the Classroom

The world becomes more diverse every day. Even if your classroom is homogeneous, someday your students will probably live near people who are not like themselves, so you'll want to help prepare them.

## Questions to ask

Ignoring ethnic, religious or other differences among students in your class may send the wrong message.

Ask yourself these questions:

- Will this activity in any way either promote or inhibit religion? If so, dump the lesson.
- How does this activity serve the goals of the course or the mission of the school?
- Will any student (even just one) or family feel like an outsider, not a full member of the community because of this activity?
- Am I prepared to teach the meaning of holidays to enrich students' understanding of history and cultures, not merely as a religious celebration?

## Unintentional slights

Are you hurting any of your students by your assignments or language? See how you're doing:

- Am I giving important tests or assignments that can't be made up on a religious holiday when students will be away from school?
- What is the Halloween policy at my school? If some kinds of costumes are not allowed, have I shared the policy with families?
- When discussing Thanksgiving traditions like what people have at dinner, will all my students have an elaborate meal?
- Can my students name any African American leader besides Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.? Do they know current leaders who are African American? Hispanic? Asian?
- Do I allow my students to use derogatory terms?
- Do I help them feel comfortable with differences that exist between them? Is my classroom safe for all students?
- How will students from single families be impacted if I assign an art project for Mother's Day or Father's Day?

## Things to avoid

- **Misrepresenting.** Don't use activities and books about Mexico to teach about Mexican

American, books about Japan to teach about Japanese Americans or activities about Africa to teach about African Americans.

- **Stereotyping.** Don't use images that assume that all people of color are poor, that all Native Americans lived in the past or that all people from outside the United States dress in traditional attire.
- **Disconnecting.** Don't read books about people of color only on special occasions or teach about other cultures in isolation from the entire curriculum.
- **Tokenism.** One black character book among many white character books or one ethnic bulletin board is not sufficient.
- **Trivializing.** Don't organize all multi-cultural activities around holidays or food or involve families from other cultures only for holidays or cooking.

## Avoiding gender bias

Studies have shown male favoritism in some classrooms. To help avoid bias:

- Use inclusive language. "You guys" may be a popular way of addressing a group, but it's an example of bias.
- Make sure your expectations are the same for all students. Both genders can succeed in math and in reading.
- Use examples that are gender balanced. If there are none in your textbooks, do some research.
- Avoid stereotypical classroom jobs for students. Ask both boys and girls to clean up and to carry things.
- Screen books, posters and other material for balance.
- Make the classroom atmosphere one where both girls and boys are encouraged, questioned and reinforced.
- Never use gender to group students and don't allow self-segregation.
- Model gender balance by what you say and do in the classroom.