

## Un-Talking the Talk: creating an inclusive space

You're good with words. It's why you're here. You are someone who has expressed an interest in sharing meaningful creative enrichment with K-12 students in our community. That's huge. **Thank you for your commitment.** The information on this sheet is designed to get you thinking about some key questions that will help you ensure an **inclusive, culturally compassionate classroom experience.**

Let's get started.

First things first: We are entering students' learning space as outsiders. We need to be thoughtful about their experience. Students have formed a community in their school or residential treatment facility that we enter as guests: welcome guests, but guests nevertheless. Our students also belong to multiple communities (neighborhoods, faith communities, cultural identities, etc) outside their schools. **It is very likely that you will be working with students whose background and experience is unlike yours.**

This doesn't mean we shouldn't visit classrooms. It means, instead, that developing trusting relationships with our students and mentees requires an extra level of openness and investment, a critical consciousness of what you say and how you say it.

You've already got the most important tool, which is an *honest interest in your kids' wellbeing*. Here are a few tools that can help supplement that:

### Make No Assumptions

Let's be honest with ourselves: In the short term, assumptions can make teaching easier. When we can apply a rule to a whole group—"Everybody looked bored today;" "Every first-grader loves Disney!"—our job becomes simpler. We can apply a one-size-fits-all model to our youth. But, as experience has shown you, each child in your classroom holds within them an unseen world of experience. It's different from that of every other child in the group. We honor that unseen world when we refrain from making assumptions about our students. Some things to bear in mind:

- Students have disabilities that you cannot see.
- Many students live outside of a "traditional" nuclear family structure.
- Students' gender identity may not correspond with the gender "on file" with their school.
- Students may be immigrants or first-generation Americans; they may have very little experience living in Iowa, or in the United States.
- Students may be living with hunger or chronic economic difficulty.
- Students may have a history of trauma.
- Students do NOT all have access to the same channels of pop culture.

## How to Honor Your Students' Individuality

Our students come, literally and figuratively, from different places. Their diversity of experience makes our shared time interesting, but we don't want to take that sentiment too far. Specifically, we don't want to exoticize or tokenize our students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds. So, how do we celebrate student diversity without making anyone feel like a spectacle?

The process is nuanced and, especially if we as volunteers come from privileged backgrounds, we may mess up. One question to ask yourself continually: If you were a student from a background that differed from your teacher's, how would you like to be treated? If you've experienced that type of situation, what did you like about the way you were treated? What would you change?

Exercises like this help us to more carefully consider **our own positionality** and preferences when we are writing our curriculum. Remember that your own experience can be a good rubric for addressing a child respectfully, but that experience is representative of your cultural upbringing alone, and other students may not share it. To put it more concretely: Perhaps you loved Disney movies or a certain comic fandom as a child. Instead of assuming your kids also do, go ahead and ask, "Who has heard of....?" before leading a lesson on it. Or better yet, pick a lesson where students can use **knowledge or experience they already have** to produce creative writing.

In other words, we want to create lesson plans that ask questions that are interesting for EVERYONE to contemplate, not just students who love Marvel, who have straight parents, who can walk. Make sure your prompts leave room for *everyone* to respond!

## Kill Your Normative Language

Normative language is a way of speaking or writing that assumes a particular status quo, for example: "Everyone in this classroom is a boy or a girl." If we assume this, we might see nothing wrong with greeting students by saying, "Good morning, boys and girls!" But seemingly pedestrian statements such as this can reveal our implicit biases. Consider how a non-binary student would feel upon hearing the above greeting.

Some more examples of unintentional normative language:

- In an exercise, you give students the prompt, "Write a fanciful story about how your parents met." This seemingly innocuous story-starter may alienate students who don't have two parents, or don't have any at all.
- A student with she/her pronouns tells you, in confidence, that she has a crush on someone in her class. You give her a high five and ask, "What's his name?"
- In late January, on returning to your classroom after the holiday break, you ask your students to write about the coolest gift they got for Christmas. One of your students didn't get presents at all, another received only clothing from a local service organization, and five of them don't even celebrate Christmas.

### ***How do I correct it?***

It isn't easy. But when you craft your writing exercises, try to make the language as accessible to as many people as possible.

- Instead of asking students to write about how their parents met, say, "Write an adventure story featuring all the people who live with you."
- When that student confesses her crush, give her a high five and say, "That's exciting - tell me more!" or, "What's your crush's name?"
- Instead of asking students to write about their coolest Christmas gift—which is a little mundane, anyway—take the prompt out of this world. What would holidays be like on Mars? What would people get as gifts? If students had received a magical power as a present, what would they want it to be? We've also had great success asking students to write about their favorite holidays to enjoy with their families. Almost everyone celebrates something, so this is a favorite!

It sounds tricky, and it can feel bulky at first, but killing your normative language really makes a difference.

### **Never Force Participation**

This can seem like a counterintuitive thing to tell a teacher. We want our students to benefit from the lessons and activities we've so carefully planned for them. But a student's reticence to participate is rarely the result of stubbornness alone—that student might be coping with experiences or feelings that prevent him/her/them from completing the task. It's also possible that the task is not accessible to the student. So, if after some gentle prodding and suggestions for different ways to complete the activity, a student still doesn't want to get into the groove, don't force it. After all, you're there for fun.

### **What if a student asks me personal questions?**

They will! Questions along the lines of, "Do you have a boyfriend?" and "Why does your face look like that?" are common at IYWP sites, especially among younger children.

As with any interaction, you reserve the right not to answer those questions. If you're more comfortable keeping your personal information to yourself, you can redirect the conversation: "Did you just ask if I had a boyfriend? This is writing club! Let's talk about stories."

You are also welcome to answer students honestly. Sometimes, this can set good examples for them and normalize healthy relationships. "I do have a boyfriend! His name is Li-Ting and we love to watch movies together." Or, "My face looks like this because I chose not to wear makeup today. Usually when you see me, I'm wearing it."



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(Note from Mal: When students ask me if I have a boyfriend, I often use it as an opportunity to come out. “I don’t have a boyfriend, but I do have a girlfriend.” Taking this small risk can help queer students feel more comfortable and seen.)

### **What should I wear to volunteer?**

Most of all, something that’s comfortable. If you’re feeling a little nervous, wearing an empowering outfit might help. Kids notice *everything*, so if you wear an attention-getting outfit (flashy colors, weird logos, etc), you can expect to get attention.

The only prohibited clothing items on site are items with alcohol- or drug-related logos, symbols, or pictures.