

How can I better understand my students' culture?

At the beginning of each year, my goal is to learn the names of all the student on my teaching floor grades 3-6 by Columbus Day Weekend. With a broader goal of learning the rest of the names in the student body by Christmas. It is altogether about 300 kids. By the time students get to me in 6th grade, I already have a connection to them. I need to take this connection and grow it deeper in my classroom. This year I feel like I failed to make as many connections as I usually do because of missing the first three months because of maternity leave.

My school and the schools in my area are starting to utilize a restorative justice program as our discipline plan. A part of restorative justice is using a community circle to get to know each other and help deal with behavior/bullying issues. The leader of the circle asks questions of the students, and all the students have a chance to answer the question (students may opt out of answering if they want). To start the year, I will use the informal circles to begin to get to know the students. Questions such as:

- What is your heritage? (A good majority of my current population is French-Canadian)
- What is the makeup of your family (brothers, sisters, step/half)?
- What is your favorite family tradition?
- What is one thing people would not guess about you by looking at you?
- What is something that is unique to your family?

During circles, I tend to start with a couple of questions then based on answers we tend to go deeper into particular topics or students come up with questions on their own. I have in the past taken notes during circles to remember key facts that have come up. I would utilize this practice to make notes about students while we are in our circle.

In my current school, I have the benefit of teaching a religion class. The religion book allows for several extensions that will enable students to showcase their cultures. Utilizing these extensions students can showcase where they are from and who they are in this class. For my math classes, I will create a variety of word problems that students can connect to better based on information I gathered through circles. During my math classes, I also do several STEM challenges. I can expand these challenges to make a better connection to the students, such as a challenge dealing with removing snow or one based on knowledge gained during circles. I have done a few challenges that have not go over well, but that could have been because students could not make a connection to the problem.

While I grew up in an area similar to my current school, the first school I taught at had a very different population than I was used to being around. To help myself make a connection with these students, I attended events held by the Sudanese and Ethiopian communities in the town. Students and families participated in these events and were always happy to see me there. In my current school, I attend community events that I know are being attended by students such as art shows and a couple of French-Canadian festivals held each year.