

FOSTERING CIVIL DISCOURSE

A Promising Practice for Youth Development

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With a great deal of divisiveness in today's political climate (Gramlich, 2017), it is not difficult to imagine the impact that partisanship can have on youth. The Internet is filled with examples of social media rants, name-calling, and even violent incidents as adults engage in unproductive and uncivil behavior with those who are different from them. How can we as educators help young people learn the competencies for engaging in empathetic, appreciative, and supportive dialogue with people across differences in identities and perspectives? This article highlights a promising practice in character education to help middle school-aged youth reflect on their identities and learn to engage in civil discourse with those who are different from them. Evaluative findings from facilitator observations, participant reflections and evaluations, as well as parent evaluations point to increased learning and development with key social and emotional competencies.

INTRODUCTION

There is no greater time in an era of hyperpartisanship (Gramlich, 2017) to invest in developing our most precious commodity—our children. During and after the 2016 presidential election cycle, it was not uncommon to see friends, family members, coworkers, and neighbors on opposite sides of the political spectrum, holding tightly to their deep-seated beliefs. The polarizing chants and campaign rhetoric appeared to fuel the division of everyday Americans (Kraybill, 2017). Instances of unfriending people on social media because of differences in opinion (Selyukh, 2016) and the

emergence of groups like Pantsuit Nation offering a social media platform to share pro-Clinton views in a secret, safe place (Seltzer, 2016) underscore the climate of the polarization that exists today.

In addition, since the 2016 election, a large number of protests have emerged in the United States (Jordan & Clement, 2018), and controversial executive orders have been signed lacking critical conversation or collaboration (Korte, 2017). Whether kids are hearing the chants, seeing the memes, reading the headlines, or watching the news, they are witness to many examples of adults not engaging in civil discourse (Seib, 2017).

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Character Education and Civil Discourse

So, what does this mean for character education? First, educators may be up against a cultural shift in which civil discourse is declining in society overall (Conner, 2018). How are we to expect our kids to behave in a manner that reflects positive social interactions with others if many adults are not modeling that behavior? Bandura (1977) describes learning as a social process that can occur solely by observing others. And, if adults are engaging in unproductive and disrespectful behaviors, in some sense, it may give permission for youth to do the same. Consider kids yelling, “Build a wall” at school to their Mexican and Mexican American peers (Jacobo, 2016) or chanting, “Ashy knees” at an African American high school basketball player (Braziller, 2017). While this culture of incivility might be pervasive, engaging youth in educational activities designed to interrupt or challenge these behaviors might help change the culture moving forward as our youth age.

Second, Davidson (2014) asserts that character education is both an issue of “ethical conscience as well as an ethic of excellence” (p. 78). Thus, we must not simply teach kids of the importance of engaging in productive civil discourse, we must help them practice it. Gentile (2010) calls these practices “postdecision making,” as they reflect on how to engage in necessary behaviors within a real-world context after figuring out what should be done. Elias (2014) points out youth should learn “how to do” critical social and emotional competencies such as “fact finding, exploration, creative problem solving and nonviolent conflict resolution, perspective-taking, ... collaboration” (p. 40). Thus, in order to help youth engage in behavior that supports and encourages civil discourse, there must be space for them to practice it.

Identity

While the ability to effectively engage in civil discourse is paramount, it is also important to consider the topic of the discourse. For

instance, debating about environmental issues or how to address traffic in the community likely holds a different kind of weight than having conflicting ideas on identity-related issues like same-sex marriage, immigration, or racism, especially as those issues may be associated with the identities of those engaged in the discourse.

Identity can be defined as “an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (Marcia, 1980, p. 159). For adolescents, identities represent a flexible understanding of self, influenced by interactions with others (Best, 2011). One’s self-identity is evident in practices and rituals (behaviors associated with the identity), symbols (items associated with the identity), and sites (places associated with the identity) (Best, 2011).

While individuals simultaneously hold multiple social identities (e.g., African American, female, teenager), young people also possess identities associated with social-type labels given to them by others (e.g., jocks, nerds, and burnouts) (Kinney, 1993). Kinney (1993) points out that early adolescents, in particular, have difficulty differentiating how they see themselves with how others see them, incorporating the perceptions of their peers into their own self-identities. While some labels may be negative and lead to a negative self-perception or identity (Kinney, 1993), the alternative may be true in that positive or at least neutral labels could also be embraced. For example, someone who is labeled a jock may also self-identify as a jock, owning that label as an important component of his or her self-identity.

A PROMISING PRACTICE

This article highlights a promising practice, the Identity Dialogues activity, designed to help youth engage in identity reflection around social-type labels as well as develop the social and emotional competencies necessary for engaging in respectful and productive civil dis-

course with people who are different from them. This educational exercise was embedded within the curriculum of a week-long day camp for middle-school aged children focused on character and leadership development. The purpose of the camp was to provide an opportunity for middle school youth to reflect on their self-identities and develop social and emotional competencies to help them navigate issues facing middle school students, creating a foundation from which to draw upon as they move into their teens and adulthood.

PARTICIPANTS AND STAFF

Why middle schoolers? Many can harken back to their childhood remembering the confusion and disorientation that being in middle school offers. Today, this age group is known as “tweens” (Dictionary.com, n.d.) and has their own issues vastly different than their older and younger youth counterparts. This time period is marked by puberty, changes in the brain, lower levels of self-esteem, formation of new peer groups, lower levels of motivation, and identity clarification (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005). The Association for Middle Level Education (National Middle School Association, 2010) highlights the importance of understanding the “developmental uniqueness of this age group” and ensuring that curriculum and learning assessments are appropriate. Thus, it was imperative to design a camp specifically for this age group, so as to provide learning opportunities pertinent to their developmental stage.

Participants

The camp was offered through a K–12 private, independent school as one of several different summer day camp offerings. Flyers, newsletters, and web pages were used to advertise all camps to both current students as well as general community members. This camp, in particular, was also publicized through the camp facilitators’ social media

accounts. All children entering sixth through eighth grade, regardless of the school they attended, were eligible to sign up for the camp.

Seven youth were enrolled in the camp, including two girls entering sixth grade, one girl entering seventh grade, one girl entering eighth grade, and two boys entering eighth grade. Five of the seven were from the school that hosted the camp, one participant was from a public middle school, and one was from a public charter school serving fifth through 12th grade.

Staff

Two curriculum designers and a doctoral intern served as facilitators for the activities during camp. An incoming female 10th grader and an incoming male 12th grader served as peer mentors and facilitated small group activities and discussions within the larger curriculum.

IDENTITY DIALOGUES ACTIVITY

Among the many exercises included in the camp, one particular activity appeared to enlist a great deal of engagement and learning from the participants: Identity Dialogues.* The purpose of the Identity Dialogues activity was to encourage participants to reflect on their self-identities and engage in inquiry and discourse with each other about their differences. The competencies addressed in this exercise included:

- Other Perspectives: Seeking and being open to other perspectives;
- Other’s Circumstances: Considering and appreciating others’ circumstances;
- Verbal Communication: Utilizing effective verbal communication; and
- Listening: Engaging in effective listening.

The activity began with one facilitator discussing safe space ground rules and providing an

overview of the concept of identity. The facilitator then described the six identities, or social-type labels, that were to be used in the activity: athlete, academic, artist, techie, involved student, and free agent. It was important that these labels were descriptors rather than stereotypical names of cliques (e.g., athlete rather than jock) in an effort to reduce the negative stereotypes associated with these types of labels. After describing the identities, the participants were asked to write the name of the identity that best reflected how they saw themselves. Their responses were collected, and the participants were then divided into the groups they selected.

Due to the small group size, there were not enough individuals to comprise all six identity groups. As no one selected the techie and free agent identities, those groups were eliminated from the activity. The composition of the groups was as follows:

- Athlete: 1 participant and 1 peer mentor;
- Academic: 2 participants and 2 facilitators;
- Artist: 1 participant and 1 peer mentor; and
- Involved Student: 3 participants and 1 facilitator.

The first part of the activity was dedicated to identity reflection. Participants were asked to reflect on three questions posted on the board about how they feel about having their selected identity. If only one participant was in a group, that individual was asked to write down his or her responses and then afterward discuss them with the peer mentor assigned to that group. Groups with more than one participant engaged in a small group discussion with one participant taking notes to synthesize the responses to the questions. In these groups, the facilitators were only present to help keep conversations on track, if necessary.

After each group had completed the identity reflection, the participants were told the name of the other group they would be paired with for the identity dialogues. Each group was then

asked to write down three questions they wanted to ask the other group during the dialogues. They were encouraged to ask questions based upon genuine inquiry, yet were respectful of the other group. Upon completion of this task, groups were brought together for the dialogues. Groupings were as follows:

- Athlete and Academic: 3 participants, 1 peer mentor, and 2 facilitators
- Artist and Involved Student: 4 participants, 1 peer mentor, and 1 facilitator

The groups were tasked with sharing their responses to the identity reflection questions and then asking each other the questions they wrote down. During the exercise, the facilitators and peer mentors quietly observed and allowed the participants to direct the conversation. The dialogues were followed by a large group debriefing where participants were asked to share their thoughts and feelings about the activity. A full lesson plan for the Identity Dialogues can be found in Appendix A.

ASSESSMENT

There were several evaluation methods designed to gauge participant learning. These included facilitator observations of participant behavior during activities, participants' daily reflections, participant end-of-camp evaluations, as well as parent end-of-camp evaluations. Data from all sources were analyzed to specifically assess the participants' learning and development from engaging in the Identity Dialogues activity, specifically.

Facilitator Observations

During the activity, the three facilitators and two peer mentors noted a number of observations. Because the first half of the activity involved writing responses to questions, there was little to observe. Thus, observations were made primarily during the second half of the

activity when the groups were paired for the dialogues. At least one facilitator and one peer mentor were present in the merged groups quietly taking observational notes in their camp curriculum guides.

Observational data were collected in two different ways. The first occurred more informally after the activity when the facilitators and peer mentors gathered to debrief their observations. One of the facilitators recorded notes on this debrief so as to make any curricular adjustments necessary for the remainder of camp as well as to discuss any participant issues that may have emerged during the activity. Second, after the camp ended, the two facilitators who were the curriculum designers debriefed all of the activities. The two met and shared more detailed notes of the activity. One of the facilitators recorded their thoughts to make modifications to the activity for future use.

In analyzing the observational data, there appeared to be two distinct themes. The first centered on the process of the activity and the behavior demonstrated by the participants. As Elias (2014) points out, actually putting social and emotional competencies into practice is critical for development. During this activity, the participants engaged in several different behaviors reflective of utilizing social and emotional competencies. The most observed behavior was the practice of Listening, which was one of the intended outcomes of the activity. The participants appeared attentive, had no instances of interruptions, and displayed supportive nonverbal behavior such as making eye contact and nodding their heads when someone was speaking.

In addition, the facilitators also observed respectful Verbal Communication, another intended outcome. This was most evident when participants engaged in asking insightful questions to gain new perspectives about each other's experiences. Both the questions they designed during the activity, as well as on-the-spot follow-up questions, were asked in a respectful manner and reflected an authentic sense of curiosity.

Due to the small group size, the activity was initially shortened to 45 minutes from the hour and a half as written in the full lesson plan. It was anticipated that the activity would have the same impact and achieve the same learning outcomes in the shorter amount of time simply due to having fewer people who would be talking. Yet, the participants appeared to be very engaged in the process, ultimately taking 30 minutes longer than planned, which is nearly the entire time allotted to facilitate the activity as written in the original lesson plan for a larger group. One reflection from the facilitators was that regardless of group size, the activity still needs the time outlined in the curriculum, or close to it, to adequately facilitate deep and meaningful conversations.

The second set of observations came from the large group processing of the activity with the participants. Some participants expressed how they did not realize how much they had in common even though there were differences between them, while others shared how they do not fit stereotypes and do not like to be stereotyped. Overall, the comments during the debriefing suggested that the participants learned about Other Perspectives and Others' Circumstances from the activity as well as really enjoyed the experience.

Participant Reflections

At the end of each day, participants completed a written reflection focusing on something interesting, surprising, and/or useful they learned as well as how they plan to integrate that learning outside of camp. The analysis of their responses involved comparing their comments to the four intended competencies for the Identity Dialogues Activity: Other Perspectives, Others' Circumstances, Verbal Communication, and Listening.

For Other Perspectives and Others' Circumstances, the participants made specific comments about the Identity Dialogues that centered on understanding the similarities and differences between themselves and others. One participant noted the similarities across

identities in saying, “I thought it was interesting how similar I was to ...,” whereas another participant highlighted the appreciation for understanding differences in saying, “I learned about people with other identities than me. It was interesting to see their perspectives.” In addition, some shared how learning about their own identities can help them in “connecting with others,” “better understand[ing] the way others work,” and “collaborat[ing].”

In regard to Verbal Communication and Listening, the participants did not share any specific comments that reflected learning and development with these competencies. However, as discussed, the facilitators observed a number of participants utilizing these competencies during the activity.

Participant Evaluations

After the last session on Day 5, all participants completed end-of-camp evaluations. The first question on this evaluation involved the participants quantitatively rating their learning on a 4-point scale for 12 topics. The scale included “I learned nothing about ...,” “I learned a little bit about ...,” “I learned some about ...,” and “I learned a lot about....” Each of the 12 topics was associated with a particular lesson plan during the camp. The topic for the Identity Dialogues activity was My identities. Six participants indicated learning “a lot” (the highest possible choice) and one indicated learning “some” (the second highest possible choice). Of all topics, My identities tied for the highest with a mean of 3.86 in a range of means of 3.43 to 3.86. While the N for this data is far too low to test for statistical significance between means, simply looking at the overall ratings can be informative in determining specific topics in which the participants self-reported their greatest learning.

The second question on the evaluation asked participants to rate their abilities on a 4-point scale. Participants were asked to select the choice that best reflects their development, responding to the prompt, “After participating in [this camp], “I am not any better at ...,” “I

am a little better at ...,” “I am somewhat better at ...,” and “I am a lot better at....” There were eight topics overall, with Appreciating others who are different from me, being the one associated with Identity Dialogues. This topic tied for the third highest with a mean of 3.7 in a range of means from 3 to 3.86.

Parent Perceptions

The primary parent who transported the participant to and from camp during the week was asked to complete the parent evaluation at the end of camp. One participant had her older adult brother and a parent share in transportation to and from camp, so both family members asked to fill out an evaluation. Thus, the total number of evaluations collected was eight for seven participants.

The evaluation was comprised of three parts. The first part included a list of 11 capacities from which the respondents had to select the three they believed were the most important capacities middle school students should develop. This question was simply used for a needs analysis for future iterations of the camp and not used to measure intended learning.

The second part of the evaluation included the following prompt: To what extent do you believe your child increased his or her capacity in each of the following areas as a result of participating in [the camp]? Respondents selected a choice from a 4-point scale. These included “not at all,” “minimally,” “somewhat,” and “a great deal.” There were 11 topics parents were asked to rate.

In looking at the response means, Appreciating others who are different from them, the capacity associated with the Identity Dialogues activity, was tied as the highest rated capacity with a mean of 3.5 in a range of 2.63 to 3.5. Both participants and parents rated Appreciating others who are different from [me/them] towards the top of the range, indicating both a self-reported and observable learning with this capacity.

The last part of the parent evaluation included two open-ended questions asking,

What, if anything, do you believe your child learned or developed the most as a result of participating in [the camp]? and How can you help your child apply what he or she learned at [the camp] after camp? Only the first question was considered in the analysis as it focuses on the participant's learning and development. A prominent theme of understanding and working across differences emerged from the data. Comments such as "[the participant] learned to understand that others in his class session may have different views on topics and that is OK for them to have those opinions. The different views contribute toward the strength of the team." Another said, "Working with teams of different people to accomplish challenging or creative tasks helps him to understand how to work with different types of people to accomplish a common goal." Other phrases like "learn about herself and her relationships with others" as well as "working with others" emerged among the responses.

While this activity was done with a small, cohesive group and the assessment findings are not generalizable, the observable engagement of the participants, their self-reported reflections and evaluations, and their parents' evaluations all point toward participants better understanding their self-identities, appreciating those of others, and engaging in productive dialogue. In an era of what could be deemed as tenuous adult civil discourse, this activity offers a promising approach in helping students develop critical social and emotional competencies for use now and in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Identity Dialogues can be a powerful activity. However, it is important that this exercise is done with a group that has a foundation of trust already built. If not, students may not open up or share authentically out of fear of judgment or that someone will share their secrets outside of the group. If the group is not already cohesive and trusting, it is recommended to sequence this activity later when the group has

formed a more trusting bond or has engaged in teambuilding and trust exercises to create a foundation.

On another note, this session, occurring toward the end of the camp week, followed sessions on communication styles, assertiveness, finding common ground, and listening. It is highly recommended that the students work on developing foundational competencies to be successful in this activity prior to engaging in it. Students who have not learned how to use "I statements," for example, or how to actively listen without interrupting, may engage in behavior detrimental to the activity.

It is also critical that enough time is allocated for this activity and that it occurs at a time in which students can fully engage. Trying to quickly insert it between math and social studies might make the experience rushed and disconnected. It is recommended to place the activity at the end of the day (if at school) and give some time afterward for reflection or unstructured time. This can be a heavy activity; making it difficult to reengage the students back to business as usual once they are done.

CONCLUSION

Helping students develop competencies to engage in honest and respectful dialogue, especially across differences, can be challenging in an era of hyperpartisanship (Gramlich, 2017) and declining civil discourse (Conner, 2018). As educators, though, finding promising practices such as the Identity Dialogues activity could provide young people the tools they need to reflect on their self-identities and engage in productive and respectful civil discourse even beyond their adolescent years.

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APPENDIX A: IDENTITY DIALOGUES LESSON PLAN

Personal Identities (20 minutes)

1. Begin by sharing the concept of safe space indicating any ground rules for discussion that are important to the activity. These may include active listening, not interrupting, not asking questions that are inappropriate, keeping what was said in the dialogues in confidence, not laughing at or making fun of others' experiences, etc. Make sure everyone has a chance to add to the list and keep the list posted for all to see.
2. Introduce the concept of self-identity as being how you see yourself. Identities often involve understanding the culture,

- language, and norms that others with that identity also have. For example, someone who might identify as a “bookworm” likely reads a lot, knows where to get the latest books, and might even belong to a book group.
3. Make sure to point out that everyone can have multiple identities and that not all identities that people have will be discussed in this activity. In addition, it is important to explain that although identity labels can be limiting, using “labels” in this exercise is purposeful in that it models students’ experiences with cliques and grouping. The first step to breaking down labels is to dialogue across groups uncover the uniqueness of each individual, thus challenging the notion of needing labels at all.
 4. Go over each of the identities listed below describing each. [Facilitator note: Although we know that for many individuals, identities related to their race, gender, social class, religion, etc. can be salient, before moving into identity work around these more complex and power-laden identities with this age group, it is important to start with more self-claimed identities around interests to help students understand the concept of identities. Doing this activity instead with more complex identities often results in more time discussing power and privilege rather than understanding what identities are and how our preconceived perceptions influence our behaviors. For this age group, it is highly recommended to start with a lesson plan such as this and then moving later, if appropriate, to more complex identities.].
 - Athlete: Someone who likes and plays one or more sports; often enjoys being a spectator of sports, discussing sports, and hanging out with others who play sports
 - Academic: Someone who spends a great deal of time studying, often taking on additional projects, extra credit work, joining honor societies, and/or tutoring others
 - Artist: Someone who enjoys art and participates in some form of artistic expression regularly (sketches, dances, paints, performs, designs, etc.); often likes to attend events in the arts, discussing art, and hanging out with others who are into art
 - Techie: Someone who enjoys using technology; often can be gamers, coders, or just those who fix, program, or teach others how to use technology
 - Involved Student: Someone who is very active in one or more clubs or organizations, takes on leadership roles when there are opportunities to do so, and spends time hanging out with others who are actively involved in clubs, organizations, and/or leadership roles
 - Free Agent: Someone who likes to do their own thing, but is not formally involved in a program or activity in or out of school; can sometimes hang out by themselves or can have a variety of different friends
 5. Have everyone think of which identity describes them the best and have them write that identity on a slip of paper and turn in. If another identity emerges that is not on this list, feel free to create an additional group.

Identity Groups (30 minutes)

1. Put everyone in one of the six groups based on their slips of paper.
2. Write the following questions on the board and have the students discuss and take notes for each. For those groups that only have 1 person, that person should write down their responses to the questions on their own.
 - What does it feel like to have this identity?
 - Based on this identity, what are you most proud of?

- What do you not want others to think about this identity?
- 3. While they are discussing in their small groups, create group pairings for the dialogues. Try to pair up groups you believe would benefit most from the dialogue, given the composition of the group members
- 4. After 15 minutes, bring the discussions to a close and let everyone know that their identity group will be dialoguing with another identity group.
- 5. Let them know which groups will be matched for the dialogue.
- 6. Give them 10 minutes in their identity groups to write down three questions they would like to ask the other group. Let them know that the questions should be about learning more about them and should not be insulting, rude, or too personal.

Identity Dialogues (20 minutes)

1. Cluster the matched groups together for their dialogues.
2. The groups should begin sharing their responses to the three questions they discussed in their identity groups from earlier. It is advised to have both groups share their answer to question 1 before

moving to question 2. Encourage participants to ask each other follow-up questions or probe beneath the surface for examples. This is meant to be a dialogue and not simply a sharing exercise.

3. Once both groups have shared their responses to the original questions, the groups should begin by asking the questions they developed specifically to ask the other group. Have the groups go back and forth asking one question at a time to the other group.

Large Group Discussion (20 minutes)

1. Bring the groups back together for a larger discussion, asking the following processing questions:
 - What did it feel like to reflect on your identity?
 - What did it feel like having a dialogue with another group?
 - What can we learn by dialoguing with others who are different from us?

*Identity Dialogues was adapted from a collegiate level activity facilitated at a social justice retreat at the University of Arizona, the author's former workplace.