

“IT’S NOT OFTEN THAT I SEE MYSELF IN BOOKS.” EMBRACING INTERCONNECTEDNESS IN THE CLASSROOM

By Flossie Chua

This picture of practice describes how teacher Britanie Risner invites 3rd-graders at the Hoffman Trails Elementary School^{1*} to participate in their class community by engaging in open dialogue with one another. In the process, her students come to understand their interconnectedness and how their own stances on people and issues shape how they see the world, and how they can create shared ideals, values, and practices.



Britanie Risner’s 3rd-grade class has just finished voting for the book they are to read for their picture book study. Two books are in contention: The Proudest Blue – A Story of Hijab and Family written by Ibtihaj Muhammad, and Rescue and Jessica: A Life Changing Friendship by Jessica Kensky and Patrick Downes. After much discussion about the themes of the two books, the class holds a vote and the second book wins. After the voting has ended, student Malick talks to Britanie.

* Hoffman Trails Elementary School is a public K-5 school of 547 students in Hilliard, Ohio.

Malick Ms. Risner, can I talk to you about something? I'm feeling really upset.

Britanie Of course, Malick! What do you want to talk about? Is this something that you want to talk about to me or to everyone? *Malick is quiet for a while. Then he decides.*

Malick Everyone. *Britanie pulls out the carpet and calls the students to gather on it to create a stress circle for honest and open conversations.*

Britanie Thank you for coming together for this stress circle, everyone! Malick, shall we start now? *Malick nods.* I think you're upset about something, Malick. Do you want to tell us how you're feeling and why? *Malick looks directly at each student across the circle for a few seconds before speaking.*

Malick I just feel so hurt because this story, *The Proudest Blue*, is so important to me. It's written about someone like me. And it's not often that I see myself in books and... *[Malick pauses to take a deep breath.]* it really surprised me that you didn't see that, but it feels so obvious to me that you would associate me with this important character in the book. So, I don't feel good about this.

Malick's classmates listen carefully to him, most nodding their heads as he speaks. Then, one of them speaks up.

Clara I'm so sorry, Malick! I did not... I didn't think about how much the story would mean to you. Can I change my vote, Ms. Risner?

The other students erupt in a chorus: Yes, yes! Can I change my vote?

The theme for the picture book study this year is "courageous characters." Prior to voting on the picture book, Britanie spent a lot of time with her students discussing what "courage" means and what aspects of identity feel valuable to them. She is looking forward to looking closely at a picture book and engaging in meaningful conversation with her students about how and why we have differences in opinion and exploring what they think and value. Voting for a picture book to read aligns with Britanie's objective of supporting her students' agency; it gives them a voice in what they will study and also demonstrates her trust in them.

When Malick shares his disappointment about his perception of his peers' disregard for his feelings, Britanie realizes that sometimes giving a voice to the class ends up silencing minority views. What is lost when quieter voices are not valued? According to Britanie:

Malik had thought that it would be obvious to his classmates that the characters in the book, their religion, were similar to him. He felt deeply the struggles of the main character's sister who began to wear her hijab in school but was not always treated respectfully after that. I think some of his hurt and pain came from us not recognizing the importance of his religion and who Malick was. I felt that he needed us to know right then how he felt.

After most of his classmates clamor to change their vote, Britanie brings Malick aside and asks him, “What do you think about people changing their vote?” Malick thinks for a bit before responding that he thinks it is the right thing to do. In the end, the second vote is in favor of *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family*.

This is a memorable moment for Britanie because it illuminates the tensions inherent in being an individual as well as members of a community. While it is critical that the classroom support the community’s shared identity and values, this can sometimes conflict with aspects of an individual’s identity and values. Britanie realizes that Malick’s religion is an important part of his identity, and while she has no doubt that her students see him as part of their class community, it isn’t enough for him. Malick also wants to be seen as Muslim, as somebody who doesn’t get the same chances to pull a book off the shelf and see someone who looks like him. By courageously bringing his peers’ attention to the hurt he feels at not finding himself in the book they choose to read, Malick opens the door for his classmates and Britanie to ask themselves: how do we recognize that we are always both individuals *and* part of intersecting communities and systems? How do we make decisions that recognize that everyone is unique while also considering the wishes of the community?

“This is our classroom, our learning, our everything!”

How does Britanie create a class environment where Malick’s lone perspective can find a voice? Britanie explains that from Day One, she tells her students that this is “our classroom, our learning, our everything.” She also makes it a point to signal to students that they can approach her at any time with questions, opinions, etc.

If something had been said or not said, I asked kids to call me out on that. I'll usually say, you know, I'm going to give myself five minutes to tell you what's most important about this, but then it's okay for you to advocate otherwise. And it's okay to say, Ms. Risner, we need the time now to think about it.

This is why Britanie feels so proud that Malick has the courage to say, “Wait, this is not what you said this room should feel like! You know, the values we shared through our vote and the ideas we came up with shouldn't make me feel so icky.”

Britanie attributes her students’ supportive responses to the work they had done earlier in the year on listening. Her students had highlighted the importance of listening carefully instead of rushing to speak. By listening more, they were building a close community that supported one another. Britanie believes that the focus on listening helps students recognize moments in the classroom when they need to press pause on the discussion or activity to attend to someone’s discomfort. More specifically,

We had learned to notice when we need to pause and we need to ask, what is going on? Like when Malick told everyone he was hurt, I could see that the students immediately thought, that needs my attention. It's that moment or that comment that says, this is important to me, and the students think, we need to figure that out. You know, I find it's really important to ask the students, what do you need from me? If he needs an audience, he can certainly tell me and us. And I always let them know that. I think that if we're going to operate as a true community, that communication and transparency just have to be at the core of what we do.

That communication and transparency make difficult sharing possible. When a student's grandmother—her primary caregiver—suddenly passes away, leaving her all alone because her parents were also dead, she comes to the classroom and asks for a stress circle just so people can hear her fears and grief. Her classmates offer their undivided attention and caring support. For Britanie, such stress circles send the message to students that the class community can be trusted to support them in their vulnerability. The culture of the class puts the wellbeing of the individual and the community at the heart of everything they do together.

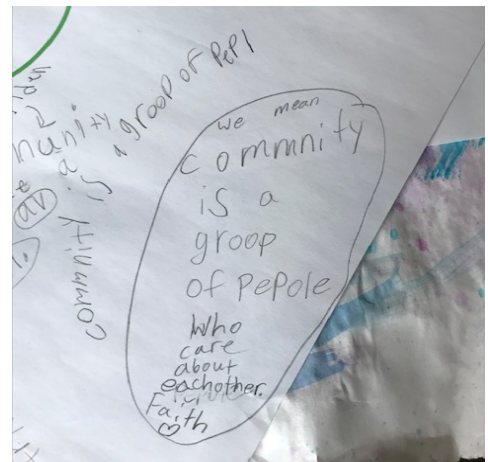
“I try very hard to not skirt over what's in their world...”

With so many competing demands on her time and attention, how does Britanie find the bandwidth to build a safe and supportive space for difficult exchanges? While it is hard not to feel weighed down, Britanie emphasizes:

At every moment, we are making decisions and those decisions can be for children feeling valued and learning being at the center, or it can be more about what I want. I think just the awareness of those forces is so important. I'm very clear that my time will always be spent on kids first. I'll never choose a standard over a student. I do allow or invite the students to influence where we're going and so they know that if they come in and say, oh my gosh, our bus had an accident today, that's what I pay attention to. I try very hard to not skirt over what's in their world, and I use it as a springboard to something that's important. Had the students said they were in a bus accident when I first started teaching, I'd probably have said, well, that's terrible, but we're doing reading right now!

Listening for what is in her students' world and on their minds is a move that Britanie intentionally makes to show her students that who they are and what they think matters deeply to her. To create a strong and lasting sense of community, Britanie looks for opportunities for students to engage with one another. Whenever students come to her to share how they feel or what they think, she asks them if there is anyone else who should hear what they have to say. More often than not, students suggest the entire class hear them. In this way, Britanie shapes the classroom as an inclusive space inhabited by trusted and caring peers:

What matters to me is that they have voices. It matters to me that they have relationships and that they know they are valued, that they know they are capable, that hard work can get them places. I also think it's important that they know that some things are harder than others and that they don't define us. There are too many children who feel like they don't belong in school, and those messages they receive are heartbreaking because everyone belongs everywhere.



“Why don't we have more books that represent different people?”

Later, when one student indignantly asks Britanie, “Why don't we have more books that represent different people?” Britanie recognizes an opportunity for students to learn that we all carry a range of different identities. Reading books together in class is a critical step towards expanding students’ notions of what makes up “identity.”

Britanie asks her class what could be done to get more books that represent different people and identities. The students begin brainstorming ideas and decide to create a book wish-list to be displayed prominently on the classroom wall to guide the creation of a classroom library:

So, we just put a big piece of paper up on the wall, and if people heard or saw or read books that represented different perspectives, or featured people who looked differently than them, they would write it on the paper so that we could create a classroom library. It may be just a small action, but I think it made Malick feel that, hey, they heard what I had to say and they want to make an effort to do something about it. The conversations we've had since have shifted. When we read a book now, they would notice more: what's the same, what's different, why is that so, and so on. Some people might say that changing the vote for one person is not fair, but it's not about fairness. It's about how one person in our community was hurt, and that we needed to understand why he felt that way. It was about taking care of one another. That's just what we do.

Reflection Questions

- What do you notice in this picture of practice? What does it make you think or wonder?
- Where do you see *teachers* cultivating students’ civic and creative capacities?
- Where do you see *students* demonstrating civic and creative capacities?
- How does Britanie’s practice *connect* to or *extend* the ways you foster students’ civic and creative capacities?