SEEK TO UNDERSTAND

Artist Book by Spence Rake-Marona
4th Grade

Principles for Brave Conversations

- Assume that, at any given moment in the conversation, the other person is doing the best he or she can
- Forgive yourself and others for making mistakes
- Suppress hidden agendas
- Remain nonaccusatory when you see things differently from another
- Seek first to understand
- If you disagree with someone, paraphrase their point before responding
- Avoid language that blames
- Don’t ask anyone to speak for a whole race
- Acknowledge that casual conversation makes us all vulnerable
- Avoid associating the quality of a colleague’s teaching with exploratory comments offered in conversation about racism

“Of course our top two students are the two Vietnamese kids in the class.”
How I can push back against racist comments that are put forward by my colleagues while still being respectful?

This book was created as the result of reflecting on my work student teaching in a fourth-grade classroom. Through the process of journaling on a regular basis, I was able to recall four comments that were made by my colleagues to which—in the moments in which they occurred—I paid little heed. These were comments that were made nonchalantly, either during a planning period or after school in the rare occasions when my PLC would meet to celebrate, commiserate, or laugh with one another about the day's events. Although I do not believe the comments were intended to be racist, to see them as anything else is impossible. In all four of these instances, I did not offer any pushback, but instead responded with silence. In my work reflecting on these comments, it became immediately clear to me that responding with silence was, of course, unacceptable because it perpetuates racist structures in the school and in the classroom.

The book that I’ve made is meant to help build a repertoire for teachers so that, rather than responding with silence as I did, they are better prepared to push back against racist comments or behaviors. On the left side of each page, one of the comments that were made to me during my student teaching experience appears in black text on a blank page. On the opposite page there is only a black page, which is meant to highlight the silence that I offered in response to the comment. However, underneath these black pages are pullouts—much like a children’s book—on which I have included two questions that I might have asked in response to each comment. There is also room for the reader to add their own questions or insights because the process of creating a culturally responsive and antiracist community cannot be done by one person. It is critical that we remain in a constant process of communication, sharing ideas, and working together.

The reason that the questions must be pulled out helps to underline the fact that it was not immediately clear to me that these were questions that I should have asked. I had to actually work to bring these questions into my consciousness in the same way that the reader will have to work to remove the pullout from the silence of the blank page.

Works Cited
