

Culture Sensitivity Training¹

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Ms. Quintana's Morning Literacy Class

As Liz left her apartment, she joked with her doorman that she “works finance hours but gets paid a teacher’s salary.” She made sure to wake up early enough to grab a cup of coffee at a trendy neighborhood coffee shop before she jumped on the subway. Liz liked getting to work an hour before her students showed up so that she could feel ready when they arrived, but of course she never felt ready enough.

The bell rang at 8:00 a.m., and the students started pouring in. Daysean and Yesica walked into Ms. Liz Quintana’s class a few minutes after the bell. Since they were among the last students to enter the classroom, there were only a few seats left.

“Yo, I don’t wanna sit next to Yesica, she’s mad-racist,” Daysean shouted.

“Shut your black ass down,” shouted Yesica.

“Quiet down class! Daysean, take a seat don’t be ridiculous. And not another comment from either of you. Okay, please take out your note...”, Liz tried to calm the class before it got out of control.

“But Miss, no joke, Yesica is always talking about blacks and only hangs out with Spanish² kids. That’s why you got your ass kicked the other day, you Mexican!” Daysean continued.

“Enough, Daysean. Take out your literacy notebook,” Ms. Quintana said.

“Where you comin’ from? I don’t say s*** about you and I didn’t get my ass kicked you f**in’ liar. And I ain’t no Mexican, I’m Dominican!” Yesica angrily shouted.

The students were fully aware of what was happening. Some students had their literacy notebooks and were ready to start, but several were in such a trance that they had not moved since this argument began.

“Who gives a f***, you all look the same!” shouted Daysean.

“And blacks don’t?” returned Yesica.

“Enough! Daysean and Yesica stop your nonsense,” said Ms. Quintana, trying to intervene.

“F*** this, if I have to sit next to her, I’m out” Daysean blurted out to Ms. Quintana.

“Yes, Daysean, sit,” said Ms. Quintana, looking at him straight in the eyes.

“Peace!” said Daysean, as he made his way for the door.

It was too early for all of this so Liz decided to start her lesson instead of going after Daysean.

MS 562, Bronx, NY

MS 562 is a school located in the South Bronx. It has been on the School Under Registration Review (SURR) list for three years and was recently labeled as “Persistently Dangerous.” It is located near a busy intersection that abuts Yankee Stadium. Most of the students who attend MS 562 come from the immediate area and many come from the

¹ Based on the action research of Jeremy Copeland and Jen Dryer, TNLI MetLife Fellows, *Lumps in the Melting Pot: What Happens When Diversity Isn’t Enough?*

² “Spanish” in this case is used to describe anyone of Latino descent.

surrounding feeder schools. Many of these feeder schools have been suspected of cheating on the state ELA (English Language Arts) and Math state exams. Several of the feeder schools have also recently received either a “D” or “F” on the city’s newly launched public report card.

MS 562 has 803 students in grades six through eight. There are 112 special education students in self-contained and collaborative classes, where regular and special education students work together, and 255 English Language Learners. The largest ethnic group of students is Hispanic, approximately 74.6%, with 22.9% Black, 0.5% White, and approximately 1.4% Asian students. Nearly 100% of students are Title 1-eligible.

Faculty Lounge, Lunchtime

“What was happening in your class, Liz? I heard shouts, but I was busy talking to a student.” Ms. Delp asked.

“Oh Ms. Delp, it’s the same as always; Daysean and Yesica shouting racist comments to one another. And it’s not just them” Liz explained, already sounding exhausted even though it was not yet noon.

“Oh, really? Does it happen all the time?” asked Ms. Delp somewhat nervously but trying not to be obvious with her disappointment. Ms. Delp thought very highly of Ms. Quintana and believed she was one of the best new teachers this year.

“Yes!” Liz answered, but felt silly because she hated admitting that she occasionally had problems in the classroom. She cannot understand how being a Latina teacher has given her no advantage. Her grandparents were immigrants from Ecuador and had the very same struggles that many of her students are currently facing. Ms. Quintana immediately felt her face turn red as she tried to imagine what was going through Ms. Delp’s mind. Ms. Delp never had any problems with students in her class and she was white. It’s true that she had been teaching for a few more years than Ms. Quintana, but it still didn’t explain the whole race thing.

“And how do you respond?” Ms. Delp asked desperately trying not to put Ms. Quintana on the defensive. Just as Liz thought. Ms. Delp doubted her. She could feel her judgment.

“It’s not like I don’t do anything. I tell them to stop, but they don’t. And today Daysean walked out. What was I supposed to do? Run after him?!” finished Liz, feeling frustrated and angry at the same time.

“I know it’s hard. And racial comments are never easy to deal with. Maybe you can try to talk to them,” suggests Ms. Delp.

“And say what? ‘I’m Latina, I understand’?” said Liz, very upset. She was getting advice from a white teacher, and she felt like there was something backwards about this. She was not angry at Ms. Delp; she felt confused because she, a Latina, was the one having problems with this and not Ms. Delp. It just did not make sense to her.

“Maybe we can talk about it later,” suggested Ms. Delp in a lower voice, sensing that Liz was frustrated.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Delp. I guess I just thought that it would be easier. You know, with me being Latina and all. I thought I would automatically have their respect. The truth is that I don’t really understand them. I didn’t grow up in this kind of neighborhood, and I can’t pretend that I did. I want to empower them, but I don’t know how,” Liz admitted.

“And you will empower them, Liz. This is your first year, and you can’t burn yourself out. You are doing a great job, but you need help dealing with this,” said Ms. Delp.

“But this is big!” exclaimed Liz, noticing that Ms. Delp never mentioned anything about her race.

“It is, but it isn’t the end all, be all. You came in through Alternative Teaching Program (ATP), right?”

“Yeah, why?” answered Liz, wondering where Ms. Delp was going with this.

“I was just wondering if your program provides any course on culture sensitivity.”

“We talk about it,” Liz said. “But we don’t have a class. There is too much we need to learn. How to lesson plan, how to grade, how to differentiate. All those things are important, but not as important as learning how to deal with different cultures. Besides, I’m Latina, shouldn’t I know a thing or two?”

Liz was hoping that Ms. Delp would tell her that it did in fact count for something, and that it would all work itself out. But even deeper, she knew the truth. The truth was that she didn’t know about her kids at all. She had grown up in the suburbs and had traveled.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Ms. Delp. “Being Latina or any other race does not necessarily make this job any easier. Yeah, it’s true that first impressions were probably different for you and me. But it really comes down to how you deal with students after that initial meeting.”

“Yeah, but—” Liz attempted to interrupt.

“No, wait. Look, Liz. It’s very clear that you are a bright teacher, and it’s also crystal clear that you truly have these kids’ best interests at heart, but you simply don’t have the answers to everything, and that’s okay. Your classroom management is coming along and your instruction is great. In time you will be a wonderful teacher.”

“Not if I don’t deal with these issues,” replied Liz, “I don’t think I can be fully successful until I can connect with my students on this level. I don’t know, maybe it’s for selfish motives, but I really want to learn to be able to address these issues. And I won’t rest until I do.”

“Look, Liz, I gotta run, I have a meeting with Gilbert’s parents, but maybe you can talk to someone at ATE. I’m sure in all the years that program has been in place, you aren’t the first to deal with this issue. Ask a professor and see what they say. I’d hate to see you be miserable because of this.”

“Thanks, Ms. Delp. Good idea, and good luck with the meeting.”

“Don’t mention it. See you at the inquiry meeting after school,” Ms. Delp said as she made her way out of the faculty lounge.

Liz was left with her own thoughts. She wanted to be the best teacher she could be, but she couldn’t help thinking that this issue was big enough to ruin her year. She made up her mind, since it was January and the English-Language-Arts (ELA) state test was on a few weeks away, she would wait to deal with it, but she would begin her search for answers now. Liz would take Ms. Delp’s advice and talk to someone at ATE. Ms. Delp was right; someone in the program must have dealt with this before. It would be absurd to think otherwise.

Riverbank College, in New York City, is known for being progressive. It costs about \$35,000 a year to attend but because of the college's partnership with the city, ATE teachers pay half the price. The college is affiliated with various teacher preparation programs and it also has its own traditional teacher preparation program in which its students first become teacher's aides and then move on to having their own classes.

ATE participants attend an intensive summer program and then the college for the next two years in order to complete a master's degree. The college offers a wealth of both practical and theoretical classes to best prepare teachers to enter the classroom. All teachers are assigned to advisors with whom they have the opportunity to check in with on their progress. The fact that there are so many teachers makes it difficult for the advisors to make regular visits to all the schools in which the teachers are assigned. New teacher mentoring is provided by the city.

Riverbank College, Tuesday 8:00 p.m.

After class that night, Liz decided to talk to one of her professors at Riverbank about her problem. Professor Chen-Schwartz taught Tuesday's evening class and Liz felt a special kinship with her because she had taught in New York City's schools for many years before becoming a professor at Riverbank College. She was one of the few teachers Liz had met who seemed to truly understand the issues of the New York City schools. Liz figured if anyone was going to know about culture sensitivity at the college, it would most certainly be her professor.

"Professor Chen-Schwartz, may I speak to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Liz. Oh, by the way, great paper!!"

"Oh thanks. Um, I don't even know how to start this because I'm still working it out in my head. I'm having a few problems in my class with racial comments being thrown back and forth and, to be completely honest, I have no idea how to deal with them. I'm confused because I am Latina, and I feel like I should be able to better communicate with my students, but I can't. They yell insults at one another, and I really do not know what to say."

"Wow, that was quite a mouthful. So what do you say?" asked Professor Chen-Schwartz inquisitively.

"I'm ashamed to admit it, but I ignore it. I wish I could say that I do something, but I don't know what to do!" said Liz, feeling very guilty and hoping that her honesty would not affect the way Professor Chen-Schwartz looked at her.

"Look Liz," began the professor, "This situation is very common and not at all easy to deal with. But you cannot ignore it. As teachers, we have a responsibility for not only teaching the curriculum, but also teaching students how to interact civilly. Now, these issues, have you brought them up to any of your immediate supervisors?"

"No, I have not. I have only spoken to a more veteran teacher."

"And what did your colleague suggest you do?"

Liz was a little nervous about this answer, although she was not sure why. "She suggested I speak to someone at ATE and see if they have had this problem before. She also asked about some culture sensitivity training."

Professor Chen-Schwartz smiled, "Wonderful suggestion. I've wanted that for so long but no one seems to find room in their busy schedules. You are not the only student to ever come to me about this issue, and every time I go back to the college and to ATE

and argue for culture sensitivity training, I'm rebuffed. I know there are several teacher preparation programs out there that offer some sort of training, maybe if only for a semester, but at least future teachers are exposed to the issue. Unfortunately, even if we were to institute a culture sensitivity course, it would not address your immediate need." Professor Chen-Schwartz went on, "How close are you to the students who are having these issues?" Liz wanted to lie, because she really did not know them at all. That might have been her first problem. Liz had spent much of her time doing lesson planning and trying to earn their respect, but not much time getting to know them. She felt her palms get sweaty, "I don't know them that well. I think they respect me, but I don't know that they would talk to me about their personal lives."

The professor asked, "How do you know? Have you ever tried to have a conversation with them?" Liz responded, "No, I haven't. And I don't know that I feel entirely comfortable doing it. I'm not sure that I would know what to say. What do I know about what their experiences? I used to think that being Latina was enough to connect with them, but I'm beginning to realize that it isn't enough. I almost feel guilty for having grown up in a different environment."

"Liz, you can't do that to yourself. You care about the kids and that's what matters. Of course, it would be helpful to have taken a course on culture sensitivity because the culture in which you grew up is very different from the one in which our kids are living. But that does not make your experiences any less valid. If anything, you can use that to your advantage and learn from theirs in the process. Next time you teach, sit them down and try to talk through this. Don't expect any miracles the first time around, but you'll definitely be planting seeds. Unfortunately, even though society doesn't see it this way, we have become much more than just teachers. Many times, we are all they have. If we don't help them through this very difficult time and teach them that holding on to racism is wrong, we may be making their futures even bleaker."

Liz loved to listen to Professor Chen-Schwartz. She admired her so much, but so many questions were running through her head. *What if she made the situation worse? Could it possibly get any worse? Would she have to leave at the end of the year? Would she lose the respect of her students?* She couldn't admit these thoughts to Professor Chen-Schwartz though, so she said "okay" instead.

The Next Day, 2nd Period

During silent reading, Liz walked over to Daysean, who was clearly trying to waste time by looking through his desk. She silently tapped on his shoulder and whispered, "Daysean, is it okay if I talk to you for a few minutes during lunch?"

"I was looking for my book. I was gonna start reading, Miss!"

Liz smiled, "I'm sure you were. But it's not about that. I wanted to talk to you about something else. Can you please come see me at the beginning of your lunch period?"

"Um, sure miss. Is it gonna take long, cuz it's the only time we get to chill with our friends?"

"I understand that, and I promise not to take too long. Just come see me right at the beginning of lunch. Now, how about your continuing to read the book you were reading 10 minutes ago."

After a long pause, Daysean grunted, took out the book, and began to read. Next, Ms. Quintana walked over to Yesica and made the same request. Yesica agreed to come and see Liz at the beginning of lunch. Soon after, the bell rang, and the students were dismissed.

Same day during lunch period

Liz felt surprisingly less nervous than she thought she would. She felt excited and eagerly awaited Yesica and Daysean.

Yesica walked in, "Hey miss. What's up?"

"Oh hi, Yesica can you take a seat? We'll start in a minute, we are waiting for Daysean."

"Daysean? Why?"

"Because I want to talk to you about your comments yesterday, but I want to wait until he gets here."

Daysean walked in the door and immediately his face showed how displeased he was with the fact that Yesica was also sitting in the room. "What is she doing here?"

Ms. Quintana responded, trying to be calm, "Come sit Daysean, this won't take long, I promise." Daysean was reluctant about sitting down and showed it by his slow stride to the seat.

"Okay, so Daysean, Yesica, I wanted to discuss the argument that led to Daysean's walking out."

Defensively, Daysean said "What about it? I didn't want to sit next to Yesica so I bounced."

"And I didn't want to sit next to your ass either," Yesica responded defensively.

"Okay, okay, enough. I didn't bring you guys here to reenact last week. I wanted to talk about why you said those hurtful things to one another."

A silence followed that Ms. Quintana did not fully expect. "So" she proceeded, "Can one of you guys tell me what the word racist means?" More silence. "Yesica? Daysean? Wanna give it a try?"

"Miss, no disrespect, but what is this, social studies?" Daysean said in an almost sarcastic tone.

"No, Daysean, it isn't. I really want us to talk about what happened the other day so that it doesn't happen again."

"Just because it doesn't happen in your class doesn't mean it won't happen outside!" Yesica said, looking straight at Ms. Quintana.

"Okay, that's an excellent point, Yesica, but unfortunately I can only manage what happens in this class and, possibly, this school. Why did you guys say those awful things to each other?"

"Because it's true, Miss."

"What's true, Daysean?"

"That Yesica is racist."

Yesica interrupts, "Look, Miss, you don't understand. You come here on the subway every day and go back to your nice neighborhood by Central Park. You're just mad because we interrupted your class. If we hadn't done it during literacy, you wouldn't be talking to us."

The words Yesica said were very painful and completely shocking. Liz broke into a cold sweat because not even in her wildest dreams did she think the conversation would go this way. “That’s not true! I would have wanted to talk about it even if it happened outside of our class.”

As if Yesica knew that Ms. Quintana would say what she did, she replied “Really? Then how come you didn’t ask me about the fight I had with Daysean’s cousin? It was about the same thing.”

“I didn’t know about it, Yesica,” Ms. Quintana replied.

“Daysean mentioned it in class, but since it didn’t happen during your class you didn’t do s***.”

The words stung. Liz was speechless and felt too many emotions rushing through her to be able to respond. Before she could say anything, Yesica continued, “My friends are waiting for me, so is it okay if I go?”

“Me too?” asked Daysean.

“Yeah, you guys can go,” said Ms. Quintana in a lower voice.

Yesica and Daysean walked towards the door and Liz followed them with her eyes. As soon as left she placed her elbows on her knees and her hands on her forehead. She was still in complete disbelief about what had happened. Why didn’t she just ignore this whole thing? Maybe her job was just to teach and keep things under control. Or was it her job to really get to know them? Would Ms. Delp have handled this any differently? How would Professor Chen-Schwartz have dealt with this? In her heart, Liz was worried she had waited too long to get to know them. Being Latina was only one thing to use to relate to the kids; it was not the solution she thought it would be.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What should Ms. Quintana do next? How should she follow up with Yesica and Daysean?
- 2) How can Ms. Quintana get the culture sensitivity training she needs? What responsibility does Riverbank College have for providing this training? What is ETA’s responsibility here?
- 3) How can Ms. Quintana use other teachers in the school to help her deal with this issue of cultural sensitivity?
- 4) What systems should be in place to help teachers better communicate with their students? Should it be based on culture?