



# **Bridging Cultural Gaps: Healing Racism through Violence Prevention**

## **Application of the Study Circle Model in Sarasota High School**

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# **Center for Religious Tolerance**

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# BRIDGING CULTURAL GAPS

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## Background and Summary of the Project

A \$2,500 grant was received from *Teaching Tolerance*, a program of the *Southern Poverty Law Center*, to apply Study Circle technology in Sarasota High School. The project was embraced by school administrators in part due to the recognition by the School Board of increasing numbers of local hate crimes, racial stereotyping, bullying, and violence, with no existing curriculum to address these problems.

The project had two major components: 1) Weekly class sessions with an ESE classroom for a total of six classes, starting in September and ending in October; 2) teacher training, which included an all-day workshop for the school district held in conjunction with the *Anti-Defamation League* on October 30<sup>th</sup> and six one-hour in-depth discussions conducted as part of routine in-service training for Sarasota High School teachers. Dr. Deri Ronis, who has extensive experience in the Study Circle model, conducted all training. In addition, classroom materials (videos and DVDs) and 14 curriculum kits were purchased and donated to the school libraries where the participants work to assist with replicating the project in the future.

**ESE Classroom.** The classroom selected for the project was a self contained ESE classroom for students identified as having emotional and behavioral problems. There were a total of 12-14 students in the classroom, ranging from 14 – 17 years old. Average attendance at the class was 11. A wide range of racial and ethnic identities were represented, including African American, Caribbean, Hispanic, Asian, and Caucasian. Several of the students had a history of disciplinary action for behavioral incidents, including fighting. Some were adopted, lived in foster care, or had abusive environments at home.

The Study Circle model used in this classroom had four major goals, as described in the original proposal:

- 1) Increased self awareness of their own beliefs about people who are different
- 2) Increased knowledge about why they think the way they think
- 3) Increased tolerance towards others who are different, decreased stereotyping
- 4) Take action to improve their school or community environment

The curriculum used in the classroom was as follows:

Week	Topic	Issues	Methods
1	Making Connections	Goals and motivations Overview of Study Circles Our hopes and concerns Study Circle Guidelines	Video, group discussion
2	Our Ethnic Backgrounds and Racism	Making connections - stereotyping Understanding key words	Individual sharing, small group discussion with report back, case studies, didactic presentation
3	Our Unequal Nation (School)	Making connections – institutional racism Deepening understanding Opportunities, challenges Let's move on	Small groups divided along racial or ethnic lines with report back, interactive exercise
4	Why Do Inequalities Exist?	Making connections – media portrayals Why do inequities continue? Community report card	Small group discussion about media portrayals, selected viewpoints, and personal experience with racism, with report back
5	Looking at Our Community	Making connections – the Study Circle process Community report card Approaches to change	Group discussion and planning
6	Moving to Action	Making connections – identifying issues Planning – brainstorming, prioritizing, strengths and weaknesses Evaluation	Group discussion, individual reports on experience in class, videotaped



Dr. Deri Ronis & Students

**Teacher Training.** The teacher training centered on providing K-12 educators with skills to create conflict-free classrooms and to defuse potentially threatening situations. A full-day training was offered to all teachers in the district, and monthly in-depth discussion sessions were provided for Sarasota High School teachers.

The curriculum focused on the skills teachers need to explore their own biases and to begin integrating the training into their curricula area. Topics covered include:

- Understanding prejudice (experiential exercises)
- Breaking the cycle of hate and violence
- Examining concepts of personal identity and cultural awareness and how they influence one's teaching
- Improving the ability to assess incidents of bullying and name-calling and the best ways to respond
- Conflict transformation skills
- Practical applications in the classroom

35 teachers attended the all-day training. Attendance at the in-depth discussion sessions varied, with four teachers coming consistently.

## Evaluation Methods and Results

**ESE Classroom.** An independent participant observer trained in evaluation research, Dr. Andrea Blanch, attended the first and last ESE classes to hear firsthand from the students what they were thinking and feeling about the subject and to record any observable changes in behavior. Students were initially unsure about the purpose of the class, but by the end of six sessions, they were visibly enthusiastic, expressing disappointment if the class was cancelled and engaging fully in class discussion. Evidence of progress towards project goals is summarized below:

1. *Increased self awareness of their beliefs about people who are different.* Students appeared to become more aware of their own beliefs and biases over the six week course. During the first class, most students were reluctant to talk at all, let alone to talk about their feelings. By the end, they were having a spirited discussion about how it feels to be labeled "ESE," about the ways in which they segregate into cliques by color and class, and about other ways in which they discriminate and are discriminated against. By the last class, students had clearly learned some basic concepts, including *prejudice, discrimination, verbal abuse, avoidance, and psychological violence*. This was evidenced by their ability to define the terms, to give examples, and to discuss the impact of each kind of behavior on self and others.

2. *Increased knowledge about why they think the way they do.* Over the six weeks, students came to understand the role of the family in developing prejudiced attitudes and behaviors. In response to a question about how and where you should learn not to discriminate, they answered: “At home” and “From your parents.” They also clearly recognized that prejudice is a learned phenomenon, answering several times that people are taught hatred, not born with it. However, they also saw their own responsibility, responding that “You are the only person” (who can change this), and reflecting on the fact that people sometimes call people names “To get you mad” and that if you *do* get mad, “You give them power.”
3. *Increased tolerance towards others who are different.* The participant observation, which occurred only in the context of a structured classroom setting, was too limited to observe any actual changes in behavior. However, students identified specific actions they could take that would reflect tolerance, including “Don’t judge,” “Respect people’s boundaries,” “Talk to other races,” and “Hang out with different people.”
4. *Action to improve their school or community environment.* No action was taken to improve the school or community environment during this initial phase. However, the class is being continued with financial support from a Service Learning grant. Plans are being made to bring the ESE class together with a media class in the high school to do a PSA about being labeled as ESE, tentatively to be called “Through the Double Doors” – a reference to the students’ observations about how it feels to be the only ones who walk through the double doors to get to the ESE classroom.

Classroom teachers were also interviewed at the end of the course about what impact, if any, the course had had on their students. Their responses validated the observer’s conclusions that the students gained a great deal from the class, and were making strides towards increased tolerance. Sample teacher quotes:

“The students found the class thought provoking. They are so affected by what’s going on at home – some of their families are really racist, prejudiced. The last part of the discussion today shows how deeply they are affected by being in the ESE class. It’s a self contained classroom, and they are really isolated – the class at the end of the hall. They have to go through the double doors to get here – and no one else ever goes through those double doors.”

“The dyads and role plays were great. They developed some empathy – they came to see that things they really don’t like about others, well, they do the same things. For example, K calling R a “retard” – she called him out, and her eyes teared up. You could tell it affected him. ”

“They did learn some of the concepts. We’d really like to see this kind of class starting in elementary school, looking at why kids are acting out and giving them a model for dealing with frustration.”

**Teacher Training.** The one-day training was evaluated with a standard evaluation form using a five point scale where 1= Poor and 5= Excellent. Results are below.

Item	Mean Response
Clarity of Objectives	4.72
Achievement of Objectives	4.72
Quality of Content	4.64
Effective Use of Time	4.76
Relevance to Your Work	4.48
Effectiveness of Speakers	4.72
Effectiveness of Activities	4.64

Participant comments were also collected concerning the strengths of the workshop, suggestions for improvement, comments regarding the speakers and whether or not they would recommend the training to others. Comments were overwhelmingly positive, particularly concerning the speakers and the activities. Participants particularly liked the Study Guide they received, the emphasis on teaching skills, and the “fun” activities. All respondents except one said they would recommend it to others; the one exception stated that they would recommend it only for teachers who had no previous diversity training.

Participants in the ongoing monthly discussion group found it very helpful in dealing with the daily problems they are encounter. They brainstormed and offered ideas to help each other. One issue that kept emerging each month was the stress of the job in terms of “dealing with the frustration to educate students according the state guidelines” when many of the students they teach do not want to be in school. There are new state statutes and mandates which indicate that not only should no child be left behind, they cannot be expelled or arrested. If racist or judgmental remarks are made in the course of a class, the teachers are actually using these incidents as a “teachable moment” to include in the curriculum or the lesson.

## Project Impact

The project had a clear impact on the students and teachers involved (see above). The Sarasota School System has made a commitment to continuing and expanding this kind of training for both students and teachers. Funds have already been allocated for continuing the ESE class by combining the project with a Service Learning initiative. Planning is currently underway to find a mechanism to continue to build educators' skills in handling diversity and violence in the school setting. Connections have also been made with other similar community initiatives, such as *Peace Jam*, giving students an opportunity to continue to build their understanding about these issues.

The project also brought the issue of prejudice and labeling of special education students into the forefront. The students in this project reflect the diversity of the general population and bear the additional load of being labeled and treated differently due to their emotional or behavioral issues. The hope is that as this work continues, at least some of the students involved will be able to become "goodwill ambassadors" to the rest of the school, modeling and demonstrating the skills they are learning about how to deal with prejudiced and stereotyped attitudes. The video currently being planned (see above) will assist in this process.

## Sample of Student Learning

**"You make us feel like the Freedom Writers."**

(Student quote)



**Sample of Student Responses from discussion in last class:**

Q: Why is it important to understand and accept other cultures?

A. All people are different and they have the right to be what they want.

Q: How would you define prejudice and discrimination?

- A. Judging by skin color.
- B. . . . By shape of eyes.
- C. . . . By where they come from.
- D. It's wrong.

Q: What are ways to overcome prejudice?

- A. Talk to other races.
- B. Don't do anything.

Q: How and where should students learn not to discriminate?

- A. At home, from your parents.
- B. (How to change things, if your parents taught you to discriminate?) Learn new ways
- C. Hang out with different people.

Q: Why is prejudice such a negative force?

- A. Its hate that puts people down.
- B. Nothing positive comes out of it.
- C. (Are you born with hatred or taught it?) Taught.
- D. (Has anyone experienced hatred?) Yes, in school, but I ignored it.

Q: What damage is created by prejudice?

- A. Life damage. One racial comment could affect you for the rest of your life. Should ignore it.
- B. Can cause emotional and physical problems.
- C. People's feelings get hurt. Fights start.
- D. (Who can change this?) You are the only person.

Q: Do you know what "verbal abuse" is?

- A. Calling someone a bitch.
- B. Using the N word.

- C. (Why would someone say those things?) They were taught.
- D. . . . To get you mad.
- E. (What happens if you get mad?) You give them power.
- F. . . . They'll think you're soft.

Q: Can you give me an example of "psychological violence"?

- A. Cyber bullying.
- B. Threats over the phone.
- C. My Dad would laugh.

Q: What about this class? Do you feel labeled?

- A. They say ESE (Exceptional Student Education) but it means "retarded."
- B. No, they say "disability" "behavioral issues" "hyper" "ADHD."
- C. (What do you do?) Take pills.
- D. . . . They don't work.
- E. . . . Yes they do.
- F. . . . It depends on your body.
- G. You don't need meds, it's all in your head. You can learn how to calm down. You can learn how to control yourself, if you want to act crazy, you can. It's all in your mind.
- H. I'm bored with this class. (Who creates boredom?) The teacher.
- I. . . . You yourself.
- J. Special diploma is a joke. We're not being taught everything the others are.

Q: Do you know what "avoidance" is?

- A. Everyone in this room has experienced this. It's the way it is.
- B. They judge you.
- C. I don't care, they leave me alone.
- D. (Do people sometimes segregate themselves?) By color, by class, by cliques.
- E. People you feel comfortable with, I want to hang out with people who understand me.
- F. It's not a race thing, if they understood my level, I'd want to hang out with them.
- G. I have black friends, white, Hispanic . . .
- H. Honestly, I don't understand the other kids in this class. Its not a color thing. I don't want to be around them all day. I disrupt the class, but not for 15 minutes. You're trying to force this (ie, applying concepts of prejudice)
- I. (Are there consequences for disrupting?) They're different in this class.

Q: Why do people act out?

- A. Get attention.
- B. I love attention. It depends. Sometimes I like to be left alone.

Q: What's one thing you've learned in this class?

- A. Don't judge.
- B. Respect other people's boundaries.

## Suggestions for Replication

This project can be replicated by providing training at other school sites, as the study circle model can be easily adapted into existing curriculum. The lesson plan is experiential and can be integrated into a wide variety of classroom settings in addition to the ESE classroom described.

The intention of the project is that students will step forth who want to be cultural ambassadors for their school and then train other students to be facilitators of groups and carry on the legacy to incoming students. Since the pilot program was so successful, and another twelve weeks will be continued at this particular school site with a service learning grant, we anticipate identifying the students who will become the first of the cultural ambassadors. The goodwill ambassadors, along with the planned video, will be available to assist with replication in other sites. If we are successful in finding additional funding, this training will be brought to other school sites in Sarasota that would benefit from this program.



Students in Teaching Tolerance class; Miss Wilmot in classroom

Photos by David Matthew Marshall

