Kelley is an apprentice teacher at Central East Middle School in Philadelphia. This is her first full year with her own classroom and she has been working hard to build a sense of community in her fifth grade class. As part of their community building this culturally diverse group of ten year-olds has begun to tackle issues of gender, race and class. Last Friday, Kelley decided to hold a class meeting that would use the poem “Making Room” (below) as its starting point.

Kelley, by her own admission, was very nervous. She had been unsuccessful in her efforts to combat anti-gay remarks the previous year and didn’t want to make the same mistakes again. This time she was determined to handle things differently, starting with the foundation of trust she’s been building steadily since September, and relying on the structures for conversation that the class has adopted as their norm. She began by telling her class they were going to have a meeting and that they were going to share some “poetry and stuff.” She appealed to the bunch as young adults and laid out the agenda. She told the students she wanted them to listen carefully while she read them. However, much to her surprise, after she gave the offenders her best stony stare, other students told their peers to stop and get serious.

The initial remarks on the Chalk Talk with “Making Room” at the center ran the gamut from, “It was stupid” to “It was very good” to “I’m not gay!” However, after the first few comments, the kids started to write about friends and relatives who were gay. They also said “everyone deserved a place at the table” and that “people shouldn’t be judged by their skin color or if they are gay.”

They went on to say “the poem was sad” and one child volunteered that he/she “didn’t think there would ever be room for them at the table…”

The follow-up conversation was equally honest and students picked up right where the Chalk Talk ended. They talked about their sadness when gay friends of their family, or relatives, were mistreated. They told their less comfortable classmates “it wasn’t nasty to be gay, it’s just what people are.”

The bell rang for dismissal and Kelley promised they’d finish their discussion on Monday. After the weekend, when the students arrived, she decided to conduct a follow-up Chalk Talk with the prompt, “What?” This time the many ways people shared the many ways they are different. One child shared that her parents were deaf, while others wrote about being “Spanish” or “Black.” Quite a few students wrote that this class was a family, and one child said they were happy to have Kelley as their teacher.

Finally, a parent of a recently transferred student, who volunteers in the class, approached Kelley to say, “You really work with them on how to act. It’s great! I see a difference in my son just since he’s been in your room.” When Kelley asked how he was different, the parent replied, “He used to hit his sister every time she walked by, but now he doesn’t do it so much. Now he even says he’s sorry, if he hits her by accident. My husband and I couldn’t believe it the first time it happened! Now I see where it comes from.”

We hope that this is just the first of many stories about the ways we’re translating our belief in equity into practice in our classrooms.

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A New Teacher “Makes Room” in Her Class
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

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