**Are You an Avoider, Guardian, Rejecter, or Nurturer of Students with Visible Differences and Disabilities?**

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I always regarded teachers as having a high moral compass, incapable of exhibiting bias, until I read the poignant essay “Chalk Marks” written by Nina Ji Yunbaek, a Korean student who contributed to the hard-hitting anthology *YELLO-Oh-Girls.* I overlooked the fact that teachers, like everyone, including me, have explicit and implicit biases that impact their communication, attitudes and behavior toward students with visible differences and disabilities.

As a woman with a facial and physical difference caused by a burn injury, I too feel a bit squeamish talking about such a personal issue. It is like divulging a repressed memory about something that causes embarrassment. Perhaps, you share my uneasiness recognizing and talking about your biases, but it is essential to discuss and address our biases if we are going to teach and treat all students equally.

The “Chalk Marks” essay depicted Nina’s experience of being singled out every day by her American, fourth grade teacher who forced her to take the erasers out to the playground to dust them. No other students were required to perform this task. Cleaning the erasers often caused Nina to miss her bus; sometimes the teacher intentionally made Nina late for the bus. This forced Nina to call her father to pick her up. One day, Nina summoned the courage to ask her teacher why none of the other students had to dust the erasers. The teacher glared down at her and said it was because she was “different!” The teacher implied that the only thing this young Asian student would ever do would be to clean up after white people.

**Racism, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping and the stigma associated with being different**

Nina was devastated and didn’t understand why the teacher was so mean to her; she was too young to recognize racism, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping and the stigma associated with being “different.” The teacher’s cruel communication and behavior discouraged Nina until high school when she encountered a nurturing, articulate and intelligent English teacher who recognized her talent and discouragement and helped her overcome the false belief that she could never be successful because she wasn’t white. Nina said that she would never forget the way the English teacher touched her life and inspired her to pursue her dream of becoming a writer.

Students who have any type of visible difference or disability are subject to the same marginalization and mistreatment that Nina experienced because she was from a different race and culture. Hart & Williams ( 1995 ) would have described Nina’s fourth grade teacher as a “rejecter, because she destroyed the student’s confidence and intentionally discouraged Nina. Bainbridge Frymier & Wanzer (2003) found that if students encounter communication problems with their instructors, learning is likely to be negatively affected.

**Avoider, guardian, rejecter, or nurturer**

Hart & Williams ( 1995 ) identified four roles in communication between students with disabilities and teachers who are identified as avoider, guardian, rejecter, and nurturer. The study examined the communicative relationship between instructors and students and found that able-bodied instructors communicate in a different manner with students with disabilities than with able-bodied individuals. Many instructors are uneasy interacting with and providing instructions to students with disabilities ( Hart & Williams, 1995).

**Avoiders** remain physically and communicatively distant from students with disabilities and refrain from any discussion of disability ( Hart & Williams,1995 ). One student with a visible difference described a teacher who refused to make eye contact with her, and said that the teacher couldn’t stand to look at her face ( Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000). The nonverbal behavior of avoiders sends a clear message to the able-bodied students that it is okay to ignore and avoid students with visible differences.

**Nurturers** offer accommodation, warmth, humor, nonverbal immediacy, open discussion of disability issues, and encourage contact and communication between non disabled students and students with visible differences ( Hart & Williams, 1995 ).

**Guardians** engage in protective behavior and advocate for students. These teachers “prevent students from discussing their disabilities, reduced their interaction with able-bodied persons or changed academic standards and policies” (Hart & Williams, 1995, p.147). This resulted in the perception of unequal treatment by able-bodied and disabled students ( Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000).

**Our biases affect our interactions**

In spite of our best intentions, our biases affect our interactions with those who are different from us. It is damaging and unacceptable to allow biases to rule how we treat and communicate with students with visible differences and disabilities. Together, we can discuss and address our biases and work to normalize our communication, attitude, and behavior toward those with visible differences, to move from avoidance and rejection to tolerance and ideally acceptance.

**Five** t**ips to face and conquer biases that cause teacher avoidance and rejection of students with visible differences**.

**1.** **Accept and identify your biases.** Take time to explore and reflect upon why you feel a certain way toward individuals with disabilities. What was your first experience with someone with a disability? Journal to excavate your feelings about individuals with visible differences.

**2. Read books, view videos, plays, and films written by and about individuals with disabilities** who have overcome their limitations to lead meaningful lives, books such as *Wonder,* and *Double Take.* Through exposure to individuals with disabilities, we can see firsthand that “others” (Goffman, 1963) who have visible differences can achieve major accomplishments, just like able-bodied individuals.

**3.** **Avoid singling out students with visibilities in front of a class;** this causes individuals to publicly acknowledge and discuss their impairments ( Hart & Williams, 1995).

**4. Avoid damaging generalizations that cause stereotyping**

**5. Initiate teacher training** to develop sensitivity and skill in pedagogical interaction with students with visible differences and disabilities ( Hart & Williams, 1995 ).

Creating experiences to build empathy and to increase understanding of disability and visible differences can help to bridge the divide between able-bodied teachers and students with differences (Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000). A college campus is a microcosm of society, therefore, understandings and interventions on the college campus may hold important insight for enhancing communication, and attitudinal behavior in the general population toward people with visible differences and disabilities (Braithwaite & Thompson, 2000).

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