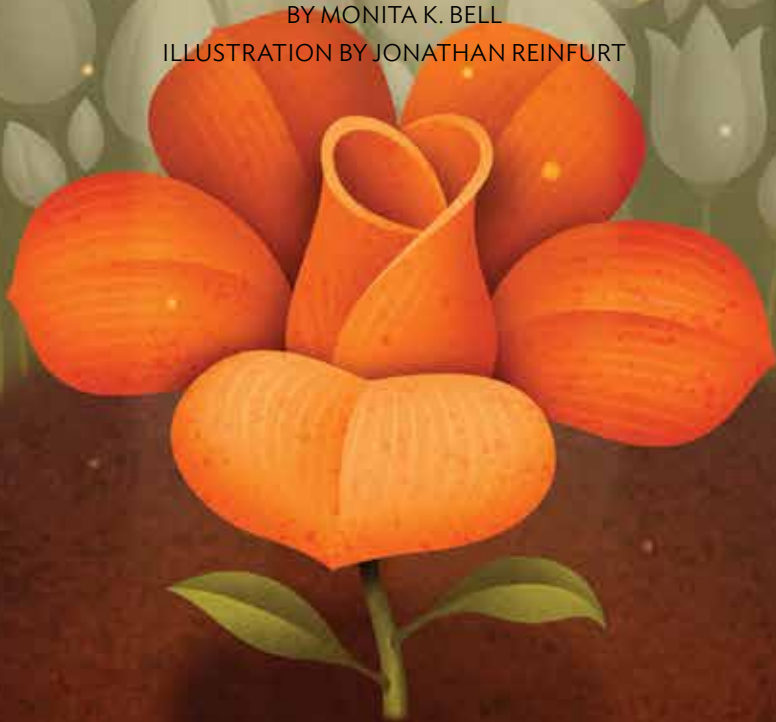


MAKING SPACE

Affinity groups offer a platform for voices
often relegated to the margins.

BY MONITA K. BELL

ILLUSTRATION BY JONATHAN REINFURT



ROSH HASHANAH, YOM KIPPUR and Good Friday have long been on the calendar at Madeira School in McLean, Virginia; no major tests are given on those days. But it wasn't until students in the school's Muslim affinity group were discussing the dilemma of choosing between taking tests or attending Eid services that the lack of inclusion on the calendar became apparent.

"You really shouldn't be having tests on a major holiday. We can communicate this up to the teachers and the administration," math teacher and affinity group leader Jeannie Rumsey told the students. "We can find another time for you to make that up, but this is a major holiday for you and you should be able to celebrate it." After organizing and communicating with their administration, the group succeeded in adding the major Muslim holy days to the following year's school calendar. The dates were given the same treatment as the Christian and Jewish holidays: no tests.

This example of collective action is one of the purposes of affinity groups in schools: They allow students who share an identity—usually a marginalized identity—to gather, talk in a safe space about issues related to that identity, and transfer that discussion into action that makes for a more equitable experience at school.

Dylan Posos, a student at John F. Kennedy High School in San Antonio, Texas, attests to the power of affinity groups to create safer learning environments. Dylan joined Kennedy's LGBT club in November 2014 after being disturbed by anti-LGBT bullying happening at school. He had not yet come out as transgender and was nervous about being judged. With the LGBT club, though, he found he could just be himself.

"The club motivated me to email my teachers. I came out with all my teachers, and now all my teachers call me Dylan," he says. "I'm more comfortable in school instead of being uncomfortable, not paying attention. It's like

a weight off my back. The club gave that to me. It makes learning easier, really. It just gives me more confidence."

Having confidence in their identities is not always a given for students. Schools, like other institutions, are spaces in which those outside the dominant culture can feel disregarded, whether the disregard is intentional or not. Trying to negotiate and learn in such spaces makes the process of going to school stressful. Students of color, for example, may be dealing with what education professor Howard Stevenson calls racial stress: anxiety or fear that stems from racial encounters with individuals who are unaware or uncaring about the experiences of people of color. This kind of stress can contribute to feelings of loneliness and being "unseen" at school.

Affinity Groups Gone Right!

Keep these guidelines in mind when supporting an identity-based student group.

➔ **Put students in charge.** Arriving with an adult agenda will not serve students' needs. Go where they want to go. "You should be a facilitator, not a ventriloquist," Fine warns.

➔ **Go beyond celebration.** An affinity group should not be simply an "identity pride" space. Ensure that your group translates conversation around identity-related issues into action that helps mitigate those issues at your school.

➔ **Focus on empowerment or allyship.** Effective affinity groups serve the needs of marginalized students—those outside the dominant culture—to undermine systemic inequities. A group that is *only* about the identity of whiteness, without acknowledging the dominance of whiteness as a source of inequity, will fail to meet this goal.

Darnell Fine, a seventh-grade English teacher and middle school diversity coordinator, speaks to the predispositions of many schools to overlook the needs of students outside the dominant group. "I think [school] can be a place that relegates students, especially students of color, especially students of marginalized groups, to silence," he explains. "It strips them of their voice. The students aren't voiceless, but due to the parameters of schools and how schools can marginalize students, they are at times not a place ... where students can express themselves."

Students need to be able to be themselves at school—and that's where affinity groups come in. A group of students who share an identity are going to relate to each other in ways they can't with peers who can't or don't understand their experience. It's about safety and, in some cases, about fundamental issues of injustice.

"The reason why affinity groups exist in the first place isn't because students want to segregate themselves from the rest of the population," Fine points out, "but because the population is excluding them to begin with." Gathering in safe spaces around shared identity allows students to engage in conversations about how they can subvert the structures that push them to the margins. In turn, these conversations "push the school to be more social-activist-oriented and less assimilationist-oriented," says Fine.

First Things First

Before a school can become more social-activist-oriented through affinity groups, someone has to get the ball rolling. Mike Ackerman, a counselor and affinity groups coordinator at Nashoba Brooks School in Concord, Massachusetts, suggests starting by assembling a task force to get the initiative off the ground; this group should absolutely include students. Early collaboration can also involve soliciting the

THE CLUB MAKES LEARNING EASIER. IT JUST GIVES ME MORE CONFIDENCE.

experience of other schools that have gone through the process of launching affinity groups, Rumsey noted.

In the idea-generation stage, an important step is to assess the attitudes and needs of the school. Fine recommends an anonymous diversity or multicultural survey of students, parents and school staff. Learning about concerns within the school community provides a springboard. “Let’s say students of color don’t feel comfortable going to their teachers,” Fine illustrates. “You need to create a safe space for those students to voice those concerns and to start to organize.”

Getting backing from the school’s administration is also key, says Rumsey. “If your administration isn’t in support of [forming affinity groups], it’s not going to be successful. And, for that matter, the group’s impact on your students will be severely limited,” she says.

“I needed to have my principal and my admin on board with this because the conversations that we were having [in the affinity group] were very hard conversations. They were conversations that threatened the power structure,” Fine says. “I knew my principal and the dean of students had my back. I wasn’t tip-toeing around the conversation. I was allowing kids to voice their concerns and then propose initiatives to effect change in the school.”

Launching a Successful Group

Once the higher-ups are on board, the task force can begin determining (based on the needs assessment) what groups are most necessary and finding

facilitators. Another survey can be useful here, this time to find out how the adults in the school identify and what groups they’d be interested in leading. Rumsey and her team were careful to look for facilitators whose identities fit with the groups in question. Otherwise, the authenticity of the group’s work could be in jeopardy. Fine puts it this way: “I can be an all-out advocate for my female students. It still doesn’t erase the male privilege that I’m bringing into that affinity group.”

But sometimes students need a group for which there is no appropriate adult leader. In that case, ask the students what they want to do. At Rumsey’s school, Muslim students showed strong interest in having an affinity group for a couple of years, but no adults in the school identified as Muslim. She asked the students if they wanted to look for someone from the wider community or if they wanted her to lead it; they were comfortable with her and chose her.

In the case of the LGBT group at Dylan’s school, an LGBT student approached math and debate teacher and newspaper advisor Matthew Lynde Chesnut about starting the group. Chesnut, who identifies as straight and cisgender (someone whose biological sex aligns with their gender identity), accepted reluctantly. He teaches in a district where there are no protections for LGBT employees, which means his LGBT colleagues might endanger their jobs by stepping forward. He looks forward to the day when an LGBT teacher can fill his role as facilitator without fear.

Preparing for Pushback

A common argument against hosting affinity groups is that they’re separatist and racist. Rumsey explains her approach with a colleague who opposed the groups: “We were really just providing a space for kids to have conversations that they felt *they* needed. It wasn’t about what we as adults were wanting.”

Another common form of opposition: “Why don’t we have affinity groups for white students?” Some schools do have affinity groups for white students that focus on allyship; others host groups only for students of color. One affinity group leader, who asked to remain anonymous, says he has been challenged by white students on this issue. “We make every effort here to help people understand different perspectives, but there’s only so much we can do to help,” he explains. “I say to students, ‘You can’t fully understand the experience or the perspective of being a minority student in this population. That’s why we have to offer these students those groups.’”

Still another source of conflict might arise with disagreements around the purpose of an affinity group. In Fine’s experience, that has happened when adults in the building learned that a group’s conversations weren’t about mere celebration of identity but about social action. “If you’re pushing to make changes with your school status quo, there probably will be some pushback,” he says.

Until a school is so inclusive that a student doesn’t feel silenced in any school space, affinity groups can be an important tool for change. Their purpose is to make schools better, safer places where every student feels heard. But that takes work. “It doesn’t happen by accident,” Chesnut says. “It’s something that a teacher has to be very deliberate about.”

Meanwhile, Dylan wants teachers to know that affinity groups can positively affect students’ well-being. He says with certainty, “It’s made me happier as a person.” ♦

