

LESSON PLAN

Words that Can Hurt, Help and Heal

Compelling Question: How can words have the power to hurt, help and heal?

LESSON OVERVIEW

Words have power. We see biased words and language all around us—on the street, in our classrooms, online, in workplaces, on walls and buildings, in the media and among celebrities and politicians. Biased words, even when unintended, can cause hurt, pain and harm to young people and can also lead to more consequential impacts like bullying and other acts of bias and discrimination. Therefore, it is important to address this language with students, helping them explore what biased language looks like, its impact and how to address it when faced with or witnessing it.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to explore biased language, reflect on the reasons why people use it, and consider how they can address and challenge biased words and language.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand that there are different ways we convey biased language.
- Students will reflect on examples of biased language.
- Students will explore why people use biased language.
- Students will consider the impact of biased language and what they can do about it.

Note to Teacher: Because this lesson plan helps students explore biased language including slurs, it is important to consider the level of trust and maturity

among your students to discuss this sensitive topic. Before proceeding, assess your students' ability to participate in this lesson in a productive way. If you haven't had discussions in your classroom about identity and bias before, please consider addressing some of those foundational topics and skills before teaching this lesson. Before teaching the lesson, review your classroom guidelines or rules if you have already created them. If not, take 15–20 minutes to establish classroom guidelines or use ADL's [Establishing a Safe Learning Environment](#) or [Creating an Anti-Bias Learning Environment](#). Throughout the lesson, remind your students that the goal of discussing biased language is to understand its impact and explore ways to address biased language like slurs and others. During the lesson plan, do not put students in the position of having to explain their identity or the biased language directed at their identity group.

It is critically important that you emphasize to students that they should never use any of the biased words, including slurs, during the lesson as it can cause harm to students. When explaining this to students, you can use language to this effect: "We will not use slurs or other biased language in the classroom. It causes harm to those targeted by it and can cause a great deal of harm to hear it out loud or see it in writing, even when that's not the intention. For example, we will never use the actual N-word or the F-word in this classroom and only use 'N-word' or 'F-word' or 'racist slur,' or 'heterosexist slur' when referring to it."

threatened
visibly

Here is a canva to go with the lesson:

https://www.canva.com/design/DAF42jDp8_U/Axy_fMpAuzTWLoQS9eKAzg/view?utm_content=DAF42jDp8_U&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=editor

Watch video: https://www.ted.com/talks/stacey_abrams_3_questions_to_ask_yourself_about_everything_you_do

Stop at 3:50

2. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking:
 - How did you feel?
 - Could you relate to something that was said? Please explain.
 - Have you ever been made to feel like you don't belong from someone's actions or words?
 - What is the message of the video? How can our biases affect our perceptions?
3. Explain or elicit from students that sometimes talking about the biased words directed towards us helps us to feel better or heal (heal means to make or become better) and that may have happened with some of the students in the video. We will talk about words that help and heal later in the lesson.

Defining terms - Use Slideshow provided

Explain to students that we are going to talk about biased language including slurs, name-calling and other biased words and language. Elicit and explain the following definitions that will be used throughout the lesson. Elicit and provide examples as necessary.

- **Ally:** Someone who helps or stands up for someone who is being bullied or the target of bias.
- **Bias:** A preference, either for or against an individual or group, that affects fair judgment
- **Bullying:** When a person or a group behaves in ways—on purpose and over and over—that make someone feel hurt, afraid or embarrassed
- **Name-calling:** Using words to hurt or be mean to someone or a group.
- **Slur:** An insulting remark or comment about someone, usually based on an aspect of their identity like race, gender, religion, etc.
- **Stereotype:** The false idea that all members of a group are the same and think and behave in the same way.

Reading Activity: Stories of Biased Language

1. Split students into 4 groups. Give each group a copy of the biased language stories to read.
2. Invite students to pick one of the quotes that they find important, meaningful, relatable or memorable. Then divide students into groups of three and have each student share the quote they chose and their responses to the following questions. Provide 8-10 minutes for this.
 - What is the quote about?
 - Why did you choose the quote?
 - How did you feel while reading it?

- What do you think the impact of this happening was on the person who shared their experience?
3. Display the following questions via the slideshow. Tell students to use post-it notes to respond. *How did you feel reading all of these quotes? What did you learn about biased words and language? What is your biggest takeaway?*

Four Corners: Biased Language

1. Stay in groups. Explain that each of the groups is going to discuss one aspect of biased words and language. The groups are as follows:
 - **Group 1:** Without using specific examples, how would you describe biased words? (e.g., “name calling” instead of the actual names or “slurs” instead of the actual slurs) Where have you heard biased words or language?
 - **Group 2:** Why do you think people use biased language?
 - **Group 3:** What is the impact of biased language on those targeted? What is the impact on others?
 - **Group 4:** How can we respond to or challenge biased language?
2. Explain to each group that they should answer the question/prompt, take notes and assign a reporter to share back with the whole class. Provide 5-10 minutes for this process. Remind students, especially in Group 1, that they should not say aloud and put in their notes actual biased words.
3. Invite the reporter from each group to share with the whole class what their group discussed. Below are possible additional responses if they are not already suggested.
 - **Group 1: What are biased words?**
 - **Group 2: Why do people use biased language?**
 - **Group 3: What is the impact on others?**
 - **Group 4: How to respond or address it?**

Fishbowl Activity: When I Experienced Biased Language

1. Explain to students that they will be doing a fishbowl activity that delves more deeply into the impact of biased language. Start by asking: *What is a fishbowl?* Explain that this activity is like a fishbowl in that we will make a circle and some students will be inside the circle (i.e., in a fishbowl) and the rest of the students will be observers outside of the fishbowl, looking in.

Ask for 3–5 volunteers who are willing to sit inside the circle and talk about their experiences with biased language, either as someone who experienced or witnessed it.

[Note to Teacher: Due to the sensitive nature of these discussions about biased language, you may choose to do this fishbowl activity in a variety of ways. You can have students who are inside the fishbowl talk about their own experience with biased language or talk about biased language that they witnessed or observed. If you don't think there is the maturity and emotional safety to have students speak directly about their experiences, another option is to have students write about their experiences anonymously on notecards and then have students share some of the thoughts on the notecards—not their own—in the fishbowl for students to discuss.]

2. Create a small circle with chairs for those sitting inside the circle. Arrange the other chairs to sit outside this smaller circle. Before discussing the specific ground rules for the fishbowl, review your classroom guidelines as past experiences and strong feelings may emerge from the fishbowl.
3. Explain the ground rules for the fishbowl:
 - The observers are not allowed to speak. Their task is to listen and learn from the students in the fishbowl. The observers will have an opportunity to discuss any issues that emerge later. Explain to

students the reason for this. Share that when we listen only to understand and not to respond, like we did when we watched the video, we give ourselves more time to understand and think about what someone is saying and consider what we can learn from the situation, rather than just trying to participate right away.

- You (the teacher) will facilitate the fishbowl discussion and you will make sure everyone has the opportunity to talk.
 - (Optional) Once the fishbowl discussion has happened for at least 10 minutes and you sense that others want to speak, you can allow a time where if someone in the observer groups wants to join the fishbowl, they can take the place of someone in the fishbowl. Use this step at your discretion.
4. Use the following questions to guide the fishbowl discussion and at the same time, allow it to move in the natural direction the conversation is moving.
- Have you ever been the target of name-calling or biased language? What happened? How did you feel?
 - What, if anything, did you do?
 - Have you ever seen or witnessed biased words directed at someone else? How did you feel?
 - What, if anything, did you do?
 - In the situations you described, did anyone do anything to help? What happened?
 - Have you ever tried to help when you've seen this happen? If so, what happened? How did you feel?
- 5.

After the fishbowl, engage the whole class in a discussion by asking the following questions:

- To the observers, what did you learn by listening to the students in the fishbowl? Was it difficult to not respond to the comments made during the fishbowl? Why?
- To the students in the fishbowl, how did it feel to share your feelings about biased words and language?
- Did you hear anything from the fishbowl that surprised you?

Closing

•Please have students complete the survey after the lesson.

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=MNRd2DZlrkS7nnRxZaAHNcuDqBXxFaxAtRWpNOTDJNNUMEZWVUdYWVVGtKQ2RU9SR1o2R05NNEVCRy4u>

Reading Activity: Stories of Biased Language

1. The first time I remember being told that I didn't belong here was when I was 12. I'd recently started wearing the hijab, a head covering worn in public by some Muslim women. I was doing a mock parliamentary session in Quebec City. I'd earned the right to attend after winning our regional young politicians' competition. I was proud to be representing my school and neighborhood. On the first day, someone came up to me and said, "What are you doing here?" I was confused. I told them about the competition and how my project won. They frowned and told me, "No, people who look like you don't belong here." At first, as a teen interested in politics, I started to argue back. I told them that I was a citizen here, and that I had every right to be there and represent my peers. They responded again. This time, they threatened to call security. They said that people wearing the hijab were not welcome. I left that day feeling like the place I called home didn't have room for me. ([Kids Help Phone](#))
2. At a school board meeting, a student says he has been called Jewish slurs and approached by a student who had a swastika on his arm. He said a student in his civics class once held up his arm in a Nazi salute and said, "Heil Hitler." I'm supposed to feel safe in the schools and at the moment, when I go to school, there's that one, little percent chance I am going to be a victim of this yet again." Three other students shared their experiences with antisemitism at different schools, with one 14-year-old becoming visibly emotional when she recalled being told she should have died during the Holocaust. ([The Gainesville Sun](#))
3. The first time someone directed a racial slur toward me I was at a pizza place in Everett, a town in western Washington State. One of my friends who works with me on our high school newspaper wanted to get lunch early, and the place was already crowded with a line stretching around the block. I was waiting outside of the restaurant and chatting on the phone when out of the corner of my eye, I saw two dudes walking by. They were young looking — teenagers or 20-somethings — with light skin and blond/brown hair. As they passed me, I heard them laugh and say, "(expletive) ch***. It took me a few moments to process what I had just heard. I was taken aback, but not exactly surprised. ([The New York Times](#))
4. Shortly after enrolling in kindergarten, one of my classmates threw the N-word at me in a small scuffle. I cannot remember what the little boy was so upset about — it was probably something elementary school students usually get upset about. Maybe I was hogging the markers; maybe I cut in line, or vice versa. It was the first time I had ever heard that word. I didn't know how to react. I had many questions. Should I be upset? Could I call the white student the N-word, too? Who invented this word? Do adults use the word? Before that moment, I had no idea what race was or what class meant. Now I had to grow up. ([The New York Times](#))
5. "They would just be like 'f-word' and 'gay boy,' like anything under the sun that you could think of," says Samuels, who's now 20. Sometimes his classmates would mumble things under their breath. Other times it would be out loud as he walked through the halls. His instinct was to keep moving. "I just ignored it," he says. He dreaded going to school and began to withdraw. "I didn't want to have to deal with people and have to see my oppressors. Just being in that environment, it was very, very difficult." Samuels says he

never reported any of the incidents. But he says the biggest reason students don't report incidents to school authorities is fear. "The perpetrator is definitely going to know that you reported it and they're going to come and find you, or they are going to keep on bullying you." ([CBC News](#))