



Addressing Tragedy and Controversial Current Events in the Classroom

By Educator Barnes – February 6, 2020

Schools are not inside of a vacuum. They are within our community and our students aren't shielded from events publicized in the media. Teachers have two choices. They can ignore what is happening in the world, or they can incorporate those events into their lesson plans. However, incorporating controversial events or tragedies can be a daunting task for teachers, but it does not have to be.

Before any topic can be discussed in a classroom, a teacher has to establish his or her classroom as a safe space. Our students have unique experiences and beliefs they will bring into the classroom, and they must feel they can share those opinions without the teacher allowing other classmates to attack them or say harmful words. Without creating a safe space, students won't voice an opinion, or they'll share a highly edited opinion. Once the foundation of a safe space is built, a teacher can dive into any topic.

One tragedy addressed in classrooms recently was the death of basketball player Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna Bryant, as well as seven others: Payton Chester, Sarah Chester, Alyssa Altobelli, Keri Altobelli, John Altobelli, Christina Mauser, and Ara Zobayan. They died tragically in a helicopter accident on Sunday, January 26, 2020. Whether you are a Laker's fan or not, most people would agree Kobe was one of the greatest basketball players. How does a teacher teach when some students enter the classroom saddened that a player they looked up to is gone too soon?

First, name what happened. This could come from the teacher or on the morning announcements. Some schools started the school day following this tragedy with a moment of silence for the nine lives lost. Also, teachers should acknowledge students' pain. If a student has recently lost someone, this could be triggering. Students might need to take a break. Academics are important; however, school staff must get better at addressing the needs of the whole child. The other approach some teachers took was to make Kobe front and center. On November 29, 2015, Bryant's poem "Dear Basketball" was published online. After his passing, his poem was shared across social media and inside of classrooms. Students were able to read his words, discuss the content of the poem, and his brief time on the earth. Discussing tragedies help student process these events. Not all students have someone at home who will discuss these topics.

Discussing tragedies in class can be just as hard as discussing controversial current events. The Superbowl was a prime example of several controversial issues. There were debates online about the performance of Latinas Jennifer Lopez (JLo) and Shakira. People questioned if their performance was too racy for primetime television when children would be awake to watch. Outside of the clothing the ladies were wearing, and the stripper pole JLo used, there was conversation about the political statement included during the half-time show which alluded to immigrant children being kept in cages by the government. Before you could even get to that controversy, Native Americans protested loud and clear that they are not a mascot. The football fans wearing headdresses and war paint, the name of Kansas City's team, and the tomahawk toss was offensive to Native Americans. Native American journalist Vincent

Schilling, who referred to the Superbowl as both the Appropriation Bowl and the Genocide Bowl said, "Hundreds of millions of people are going to see what I consider disrespect and disregard for Native culture." Any off those topics tied to the Superbowl would be an option to discuss in the classroom.

Teachers need to have a plan. Teachers should also think about how they will discuss topics. If a teacher does not have a plan, the discussion could get out of control. Jennifer Gonzalez provided ways to tackle a topic such as gallery walks, pinwheel discussion, Socratic seminar, and snowball discussion. The discussion could carry over into writing such as completing a persuasive essay.

Controversial current events and tragedies get students' attention. It gets them talking and learning. Most importantly, we are helping students develop skills they need in the future. They need to know how to appropriately disagree with someone, how to consider another viewpoint, and how to show empathy. Teachers should not shy away from these topics. In reality, students are going to talk about them whether it is allowed or not, so why not make it a teachable moment?