



By Larry and Sandy Feldman

From the outside, it looked like an ordinary classroom, but on the inside, extraordinary things were happening. Twelve third-graders, six Black and six White, giggled nervously as their adult facilitator urged them to “stretch out” on the classroom floor. The children were tentative—many of them had met just a few minutes before—but they followed

directions, extending their arms to the center, forming the spokes of a colorful wheel. As the facilitator leaned over the circle, she held sheets of black and white construction paper above the students’ hands and asked, “are there any black hands in this circle?...any white hands?” The children quickly recognized that no one’s skin was actually “black” or “white”—each hand was a unique variation of brown, tan, or pink. They were intrigued by the contrast between what they were seeing, and the language so commonly used to reference the color of skin. As the students talked about the exercise, a previously “taboo” subject became the center of an animated discussion.

Building on this experience, the children were each paired with a “buddy” whose skin color differed from their own. The facilitator asked the group to move to nearby tables, where they began to trace outlines of their own hands and the hands of their buddy. When they finished their tracings, the

boys and girls eagerly sorted through boxes of skin-tone crayons, trying to identify the shades that most closely resembled the sets of small hands before them. Friendly debates broke out: “I think my skin looks like butterscotch”... No, it’s more like root beer;” “Your hands look like vanilla...I think they’re cinnamon.” Once the children had agreed on just the “right” shades, they colored in the tracings and shared their work with the entire group. As they spoke, a warm camaraderie between buddies was readily apparent. The task of hand tracing, the experience of touch, and the lively discussion about skin color had helped to demystify “the other.” The children had begun a shared journey toward bridging the racial divide.

Helping Children Adopt A Fresh Perspective

The “skin color” exercise provides a snapshot of Calling All Colors, an innovative children’s diversity education program in Southwest Michigan. Originally developed at Coastal Carolina University as a once-a-year event, Calling All Colors has spread, in a variety of forms, to communities across the country. The Southwest Michigan program, introduced in the spring of 1999, began in an effort to promote positive contact between elementary school students from Benton Harbor, a community in which more than 90 percent of the residents are Black, and the neighboring towns of St. Joseph and Stevensville, in which more than 90 percent of the residents are White.

The Southwest Michigan Calling All Colors initiative began by following the

Calling All Colors



original once-a-year format, but soon evolved into a much larger and more complex program. Students now participate in Calling All Colors during three different elementary school grade levels (first, second or third, and fourth). At each of these levels, same-grade classrooms come together for two half-days, three weeks apart, and share carefully crafted activities designed to diminish anxiety, challenge stereotypes, and increase mutual understanding and respect. Trained adult facilitators create a safe environment in which children can meet, collaborate in small groups on shared projects, talk openly about racial differences and similarities (subjects often considered taboo in “mixed company”), and come to know one another as individuals, rather than stereotypes. Teachers expand on and enlarge the basic Calling All Colors experience by following up with pen pal letters, email exchanges, video calls, classroom visits, and other forms of on-going contact.

Calling All Colors participants not only experience one another in small mixed-race groups, they also experience one-on-one contact in their partnership with a “buddy” of a different race. This more intimate connection provides the opportunity to discover similarities and differences, and to develop camaraderie that is more personal. The same children who eyed each other warily as they disembarked from their school buses earlier in the day, often return from their small groups to the closing Calling All Colors assembly with their arms draped casually over the shoulders of their newfound “buddies.” The shift from guardedness to openness, from suspicion to candor, is evident in the following example:

One group of third-graders, six from Benton Harbor and six from St. Joseph, sat in a circle at the end of their time together and talked about their Calling All Colors experience. The group facilitator began by suggesting that this day was “probably different than what you are used to,” and that “when anyone is going into a new experience, we usually try to ‘get ready’ by imagining what it will be like.” She asked; “Was today just as you imagined it would be or was it different? Was there anything about today that surprised you?” After a few moments of quiet reflection, one Benton Harbor student pointed to his “buddy” from St. Joseph and said; “I was surprised he liked me.” Gesturing toward the remaining St. Joseph students, he added; “I was surprised they liked us.” This led to a chorus of similar responses from other children from both communities; each child had anticipated rejection. The children talked openly about their expectations, their relief at finding acceptance, and their excitement about the discovery of common interests, likes, and dislikes. It was clear that they were eagerly anticipating being with their new friends at the next Calling All Colors gathering.

Learning From Experience

At the heart of the Calling All Colors program is a series of meaningful shared activities. One activity often used at the beginning of the small group time is a name-learning circle game, in which each child says his or her name and favorite food. The group links the name with the food in a rhythmic clapping chant that eventually includes everyone in the circle (“Ice cream Larry, Pizza Patty, Spinach Sandy, etc”). In addition to helping the children learn each other’s names, the activity prompts beginning recognition of similarities that cross the racial divide (“Pizza is my favorite, too!”). Another activity,



often saved for the end of small-group time, is called “Diversity Beans.” The children select a treat from a brightly-colored array of jelly beans, and each offers his or her best guess about the flavor they have chosen. The beans that are provided are made in such a way that the color on the outside does not match the flavor on the inside (e.g., the yellow bean may be cherry, the red bean may be licorice). As the children simultaneously bite into the beans, there are giggles and exclamations of surprise. A lively discussion follows regarding jumping to conclusions and making judgments based on outward appearance—“Do we always know what’s on the inside by how things look on the outside?” “Can we always guess what our experience will be based on what we see?”

At times, the Calling All Colors process provides an opportunity for candid, constructive discussion of racial and ethnic stereotypes.

For example: As a group of third-graders reflected on a skin color activity they had just completed, their facilitator inquired: “What have you heard about people with different colored skin?” He emphasized that he was not asking about what they believed, just what they had heard. After some hesitation, the children began volunteering a variety of disturbing stereotypes: “I heard that White people are mean,” “I heard that Black people do bad things,” “I heard that White people smell bad,” “I heard that Black people are dumb.”

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As the children reacted to these jarring comments, the climate in the room shifted and there was rising tension. Some students became defensive, others accusatory; some fell silent. The facilitator reminded them that they were describing what they had heard, not necessarily what they believed. Leaning forward, he gently inquired: “What do you think about the things you’ve heard? Do you believe they’re true?” The children were quick to challenge the stereotypes, insisting that they did not believe what they had heard. Some referenced their experiences in the group that day – e.g., “Rachel’s White and she’s not mean,” “Jawon is Black and he’s not dumb.”

As the children expressed positive feelings about each other, the tension diminished. The facilitator then asked the group to work together on some constructive problem-solving: “When you hear people say hurtful things about others, what could you do? What could you say?” The students thought for a moment, then offered their ideas: “I would say ‘That’s not true,’ “I would say “That’s not nice, you might hurt someone’s feelings,” “I would say ‘You shouldn’t say things like that, it’s mean,” “I’d say ‘How would you like it if someone talked that way about you...or your family?’” By the end of the discussion, every child had offered suggestions about how to counter negative stereotypes. They had worked together, bringing the problem to light and brainstorming solutions. In the intensity of the process, the bonds between the children strengthened and a “we feeling” began to emerge among the members of the group.

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The Critical Role of Teachers and Facilitators

Teachers are a critically important part of Calling All Colors. Before bringing their classes to the first meeting, teachers participate in an in-service training session, led by the program director and a diversity consultant. The in-service focuses on the goals and objectives of the program, including how the time is structured, how to prepare students, and how to create meaningful follow-up discussions, class activities, and shared experiences. In addition to the initial training, the teachers meet with the program director for further discussion while the children are participating in the Calling All Colors modules. When the classes return to their own schools, the continuity that teachers provide greatly enhances the impact of the Calling All Colors curriculum. By following up with pen pal letters, e-mail exchanges, and video conferences, teachers reinforce and expand the experience, and the students’ continue developing relationships, throughout the year.

Group facilitators also receive training prior to working directly with their groups. They learn strategies for organizing activities, techniques for stimulating discussion, and skills for dealing with potential problems or conflicts. In addition, at the end of each Calling All Colors session, facilitators gather to process the day. They share positive moments, describe

effective interventions, and brainstorm ways to overcome difficulties. Over time, group leaders come to know and trust each other, and offer valuable suggestions for program modification and refinement.

A Growing Success

In the first year of the Southwest Michigan Calling All Colors program, there were 120 student participants. By the second year, the number had risen to 250, and by the third year, there were close to 600 students in the program. Over time, the numbers have continued to grow; currently, more than 1,000 students each year participate in Calling All Colors. By the time they complete elementary school, children have participated in Calling All Colors during three different grade levels—first grade, second or third grade, and fourth grade. The cumulative effect is powerful.

A Positive Ripple Effect: Healing the Broader Community

Calling All Colors produces a variety of ripple effects in the broader community. As student participants talk enthusiastically about their experiences in the program, benefits extend to friends, neighbors, and family members. Stereotypes are challenged as they share stories, and “buddies” encounter each other at athletic events, shopping malls, or the regional YMCA. The children provide positive models for everyone in the community, children, and adults alike.

The impact of Calling All Colors has expanded as community organizations have periodically formed partnerships with the program in order to advance shared goals. The local children’s museum, *Curious Kids*, invited Calling All Colors participants to brainstorm with their staff about possible ideas for a new exhibit on skin color. Following a morning of Calling All Colors activities focused on the role of melanin in determining skin color, the children went with their buddies to the museum, eager to be helpful.

With much enthusiasm, they volunteered a host of creative ideas and museum staff drew liberally from their input. Two fourth-grade buddies suggested; “why don’t you make two models of the human body, one with white skin and one with brown skin, and have the models open up so everyone can see that even though they’re different on the outside, they’re the same on the inside?” The students’ idea became the wellspring for a new exhibit, *“Inside Out—The Skin We’re In,”* the first children’s museum exhibit in the country to focus specifically on skin color.

In addition to the benefits provided to local children, families, schools, and community organizations, the Southwest Michigan Calling All Colors program has become a resource for communities in other parts of the country. In August 2007, four representatives of the program, the director, a group facilitator, and the authors, who are Calling All Colors consultants and board members, were invited to Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff to introduce the Calling All Colors experience to a local community group. Faculty members from the Martin-Springer Institute assembled a diverse group of community leaders who had expressed concerns about the divisions in their area and interest in what might be working in other parts of the country. The predominant racial/ethnic groups in the Flagstaff community



are different from those in Southwest Michigan (Mexican-American, Native American, and White populations rather than predominantly Black and White) but the problems are strikingly similar—rigid separation, economic inequality, alienation, and mistrust. In an intensive two-day workshop, the principles and techniques of the Calling All Colors approach were presented and discussed, and efforts were made to tailor the program to meet the needs of the local community. As the workshop concluded, the Flagstaff organizers were energized, and speaking with much excitement about the potential impact of Calling All Colors in their part of the country. The initial groundwork was established, and a new initiative was launched.

An Example of Positive Intergroup Contact

Calling All Colors offers a dramatic example of the benefits of “intergroup contact” (Allport, 1954). When children from different racial groups come together in positive ways, collaborate on shared projects, and develop personal connections with one another, important changes take place (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Anxiety about interacting with people who appear to be different from oneself diminishes. Stereotypes and prejudices are reduced. The unknown, and often feared, other becomes an individual with whom one has worked on meaningful activities. Children discover that, despite their differences, they have a great deal in common. As they discuss similar interests and preferences (food, music, hobbies, etc), and similar life experiences (e.g., “I’m the oldest one in my family, too,” “I know what you mean, I hated it when I had to move to a new school,”) they come to know each other in an increasingly personal way. Over time, the racial divide does not seem quite so wide, and the possibility of a truly integrated community does not seem so far away. ■

References:

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