

## Creating Space for Student Voice After the Election

Catherine McNeela  
Furman University  
cmcneela09@gmail.com

The day after the election, I grew anxious of how my cooperating teacher and students would react. Knowing that the majority of my students are Hispanic and African American, I worried that my students were not going to be their usual happy selves that morning.

When I entered the silent classroom, I immediately felt a sense of despair. As my teacher approached me with a forced smile, I could tell she had been crying. Moments later, I found myself embraced by my third graders hugging me while crying nervously. They held me so tightly that I felt my insides squish together. Sadly, these hugs represented their fear of their unknown futures, as well as mine. As an Asian-American adopted as a baby from South Korea, my students worried that I was going to be deported because of my ethnicity.

The students shared their fears that their families would be deported or the newly elected President was going to personally come to their homes and kick them out. One African American boy stated that Mr. Donald Trump bullied him, “He does not like me based on the color of our skin and where we come from.” Following his emotional response, he proceeded to ask me, “Have you been bullied by Mr. Trump?” The question took me by surprise and I was unsure how to respond. I looked at him, rather perplexed, because I honestly did not know what I to say. Suddenly, I lost all my professional bearings as my emotions overcame me. Seeing that I was visibly upset the boy then said, “Ms. McNeela, I love the person that you are and I will not let anything happen to you.”

With emotions high, we spent the day building relationships and discussing how to move forward from the recent election to become better citizens. We discussed bullying, self-identity, and how to be a role model for younger generations. One question a student asked that was difficult to answer was, “How can I love myself when no one else loves me?” From that statement, many of their predilections led to the thought of racism because they were fearful of the fact that their identity was either African American, or

November 2017 Volume 6, Number 2

Hispanic. Through literature we did Read Alouds with *The Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Pena and *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera Williams. Using the texts as a guided reading tool and open class discussion, we geared the conversations toward the importance of loving yourself, others, and multiculturalism.

I learned valuable lessons about how to handle difficult situations in the classroom by creating space for students' voices. Moving forward as a future educator, I have become more aware of the importance of bringing the topic of multiculturalism into the classroom by having students express their thoughts and by gearing their academics toward current events, their culture, and topics they can relate to. This experience opened my eyes to the importance of creating a space for my students to express their voices not only regarding current events, but also where they feel safe within themselves to address important issues inside and outside of the classroom.