

Case 5.1: Generalizations on Display

Ms. Whitney, an eighth grade mathematics teacher, wandered the halls of Crestwood Elementary School, eagerly awaiting the end of her daughter Jessica's basketball practice. In order to pass the time she decided to look at the posters of student's work displayed outside one of the fifth grade classrooms. Based on what she saw in the posters' content, she figured that each student had chosen a country to study and then made a poster with photos and interesting information about it.

Ms. Whitney was taken aback when she saw this sentence on one of the posters: "People in Mexico are poor so they want to come to the United States." She was dismayed by the overgeneralization and the fact that it was displayed for everybody to read. As she scanned the other projects, she found herself equally dismayed by other generalizations she found. In addition to the misinformation, she noticed that some students were not consistent with their verb tenses, which resulted in inaccurate statements. One student, Michael, had chosen Japan for his project. He included a paragraph about World War II in the corner of the poster. One of his sentences read, "Japanese people in America are in special camps because Japan was at war with the United States." Ms. Whitney could not believe what she had just read. *How can this type of work be hung in the hallways for others to read?* she wondered.

Just then Ms. Whitney's daughter ran up to her and announced that she was finished with practice. Because Crestwood was in her daughter's district, but not the school her daughter attended, Ms. Whitney made a mental note of the name of the teacher, Ms. Lewis, whose class had made the posters. She decided to send Ms. Lewis an email expressing her concerns. Crestwood had a large population of recent immigrant students, so she felt especially obligated to speak up.

That night Ms. Whitney drafted an email and read it several times to ensure that she sounded constructive rather than critical. After sending the email, she wondered whether Ms. Lewis simply had not checked all of the projects before displaying them. She hoped the situation could be fixed easily.

The next morning, Ms. Whitney was pleased to see a response. After reading the email, however, she again felt dismayed. Ms. Lewis thanked Ms. Whitney for taking the time to contact her and said that the posters had been on display for several weeks. Nobody else had complained, she noted, and agreed that she should change the verb tense on the Japan poster before adding that, because the sentence was written under a section entitled World War II, "the reader really should assume it was meant to be past tense." She continued, "As for the generalizations, the students did their own research. These generalizations are not completely inaccurate. Perhaps because you teach at a junior high school, you have more of a critical eye than I do. These after all, are only fifth graders."

Ms. Whitney was not sure how to respond. She felt that Ms. Lewis had dismissed her concerns and worried that Ms. Lewis did not mention any plans to discuss the generalizations with her students. Still feeling concerned, Ms. Whitney drafted an email to the principal of Crestwood about the matter, but then decided not to send it, fearing that Ms. Lewis would get in trouble. *Maybe the posters will be removed soon, she thought, before any harm is done.*

The following week Jessica once again had basketball practice at Crestwood. After taking her to the gymnasium, Ms. Whitney wandered to the fifth grade hallway to see whether the posters were still displayed. To her disappointment, they remained on display, and no changes had been made to the Japan poster.

She noticed that Ms. Lewis was still in the classroom, so she introduced herself. Ms. Lewis, realizing that she had not edited the verb tense on the Japan poster, apologized and said that she had intended to do so but had forgotten. She then pointed to a pile of posters illustrating flowers that students had drawn in art class. "I was just about to replace the country posters with these," she explained. "They should be much less controversial for you." She added with a friendly laugh.

Ms. Whitney paused, wondering if she should laugh in polite response or express her frustrations about feeling dismissed or about the fact that Ms. Lewis students were learning and conveying misinformation. She also wondered whether any students or parents saw the posters and felt offended, or whether other staff noticed these issues.

She decided she should say something about her concerns. The question was, what should she say and how should she say it?