

Case 6.3: Diverse Friends Day

When Mr. Carbondale started teaching at Lozen School more than twenty years ago, the students, like the teachers and administrators, were almost all white. This began to change ten years ago when gentrification started driving more families of color out of the city to seek affordable housing. Now more than 40 percent of the student body was comprised of students of color. Mr. Carbondale was happy to see the racial demographics of the student body changing.

Mr. Carbondale often volunteered to represent his school at the day-long “Inclusive Excellence” conference hosted each year by his district. At the most recent of these conferences, he found one idea most intriguing: Diverse Friends Day. Students were encouraged to spend one day interacting with classmates with whom they normally wouldn’t interact. They would eat lunch at a new table, sit by different people during class, and challenge themselves to shake up their social groups in other ways. The goal was to encourage greater intergroup interaction, especially across race.

The following Monday Mr. Carbondale secured permission from his principal to organize Diverse Friends Day. A day was selected just one month away.

Mr. Carbondale couldn’t wait to share the news about the event with his students. Having just read a series of Langston Hughes poems, they had spent several class periods in spirited discussions about race relations. He expected some resistance. These were young people, after all, whose identities were influenced mostly by their social groups. But they also were curious about social groups to which they did not belong. Mr. Carbondale hoped this curiosity would override their anxieties about stepping out of their comfort zones.

As he had guessed, when Mr. Carbondale told students about Diverse Friends Day, a few protested, while others seemed excited. He noted, though, that Pam and Tariq, the two African American students in his class, and Julio, one of three Mexican American students in his class, remained silent. Not wanting to put them on the spot, he decided to reach out to them after class.

Once class ended, Mr. Carbondale pulled them aside and asked their thoughts on Diverse Friends Day. “I know you mean well, but that program is racist,” Pam shared.

Shocked, Mr. Carbondale asked her to elaborate.

“I don’t know about ‘racist,’” Tariq interjected, “but I don’t want to do it.”

“I think it sounds kind of fun,” Julio said, “but a lot of the white people in this school don’t like us and call us names. I don’t want to be forced to hang out with people who do that.

“Why do you think it’s racist?” Mr. Carbondale asked Pam, noticing the tension on her face.

“There’s a lot of racism in this school. Lunch is the only time I can relax, when I can be with my friends. I think Diverse Friends Day is for white people.”

Unsettled and unsure what to say next, Mr. Carbondale thanked the students for their candor. As they left he added, “I promise I’ll think about what you shared.”

Questions

1. What do you think Pam meant when she said, “I think Diverse Friends Day is for white people”? Can you think of other “diversity” programs in schools that might elicit similar reactions from some students of color?

2. How might Lozen School address the institutional culture of the school, as well as the racial inequities being experienced by students, rather than focusing just on race relations and celebrating diversity?
3. Pam told Mr. Carbondale that lunch is the only time during school when she can relax without feeling judged. Other than students of color, what sorts of students might share that experience with Pam?