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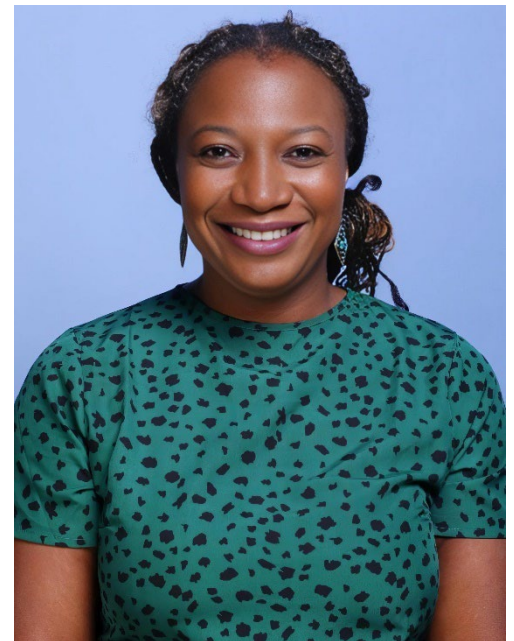
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Fostering Inclusive Spaces: The Power of Affinity Groups in Education

Iyabo Tinubu, Dean of Students, International School of Beijing

Affinity spaces have been around for a very long time. Pendharkar 2022 writes “Black teachers formed the first affinity groups in Georgia in 1878.” Affinity spaces as defined by Gee is “loosely organized social and cultural settings in which the work of teaching tends to be shared by many people, in many locations, who are connected by a shared interest or passion” (Gee, 2007).



After experiencing identity-cased harm throughout my teaching career, I reflected on how I can support BIPOC girls at my current school. I want to create a safe space where they can be with other students and adults that they feel comfortable with, have their identities affirmed, and celebrate and build their confidence. Such affinity spaces serve as more than just meeting grounds. These are sanctuaries where students from marginalized backgrounds can gather, be themselves, talk about their experiences, and lift each other up. Within these spaces, students find solace in shared experiences, gain validation for their identities, and forge bonds of solidarity that transcend outside the classroom walls.

Benefits of Affinity Groups

Affinity groups are safe spaces where members self-select by common identity and interest. For example, Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) affinity groups are safe spaces specifically designed for students who identify as such. These groups offer a supportive environment where members can discuss shared experiences, celebrate their cultural heritage, and address issues unique to their communities. A year and a half ago when I set up the affinity group, I had no idea of the level of impact it would make on the BIPOC girls who attended the group. I knew it was important to create the space and that it was needed but as time went by I thoroughly appreciated the community and friendships the girls were forming in this group. During one session, the students shared “we all belong to Girls Empowered.” The students are girls Grade 1 to 5, who come together on Wednesdays during lunchtime to eat, talk and engage in projects together.



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There are many benefits of forming an affinity group especially in a homogeneous school environment. In the affinity group that I facilitated, the common identity shared was gender and race. Regardless of the shared identity of the group, the following benefits generally apply:

Representation

BIPOC students are often minorities especially in international school environments, having a space with a teacher of color to support them and seeing people who look like us further affirms their identity. During a conversation about skin color and melanin, happily shared, “you have similar color skin like me.”

Validation

BIPOC students face microaggressions, stereotypes, and feelings of isolation in predominantly white spaces. I know when I was a child, I didn’t have the language or courage to articulate these experiences especially in my school with all white teachers. Affinity groups offer a space where their experiences are validated, celebrated, without judgment. Another girl shared how she was ridiculed when she joined the school because of her accent and didn’t have any friends and was happy because all the girls in the group were now her friends.

Empowerment and Support

Affinity groups allow BIPOC students a space to share their stories, express their concerns, and seek guidance from individuals who have navigated similar challenges. This support network fosters resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of agency among students. This empowerment also comes from the fact that they can just BE knowing that nobody is judging because they are already self-actualized. Furthermore, facilitating initiatives that can further build confidence feeds into the students’ academic and social progress.

Bell (2015) writes “schools, like other institutions, are spaces in which those outside the dominant culture can feel disregarded, whether the disregard is intentional or not. When establishing the affinity group, my intention was deliberate: to empower students with agency in shaping the group according to their desires. It was imperative that the group centered around them, their identities and their needs.



“Our BIPOC affinity group serves as a platform for amplifying student voice. By providing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles, organize events, and advocate for change, the group empowers participants to become agents of positive social transformation.”

Launching our BIPOC Affinity Group

I began starting my group by proposing it to the leadership team, who were in full support of setting up the initiative. I expressed that the group needs to be facilitated not only by a teacher who shared the identity of the students, but also that it was imperative that the person takes as Talusan (2022) states, an “identity conscious approach that emphasizes that differences matter.” Doing identity work as an educator before embarking on creating an affinity group ensures that it is led by someone who recognizes that our identity informs and impacts how we act and see the world. I must emphasize that this is ongoing work.

I consulted teachers and the school counselor to identify female BIPOC students who may benefit from additional support with building friendships and a sense of belonging. After receiving recommendations, I personally spoke with the girls to gauge their interest and ensure their participation was voluntary. Once the girls expressed interest, I extended formal invitations to their families, providing them with the opportunity to ask questions and decline if necessary. Finally, I coordinated a time and day that accommodated the girls’ schedules for our meetings.

Our BIPOC affinity group serves as a platform for amplifying student voice. By providing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles, organize events, and advocate for change, the group empowers participants to become agents of positive social transformation. At the beginning of the year, it is very important to hear from the students what they want to gain out of the group. As a result, we created a group agreement so that everyone felt safe to participate. Our students selected the group name Girls’ Empowered. We went on to co-construct ideas for events and trips based on group member input. As a result, the students knew it was a space for them and they voluntarily took ownership in its activity.

Considerations in Managing Affinity Groups

There is no one way to set up an affinity group, however there are some recommended considerations based on our experience:

- ✓ Engage with members of the community (including teachers, and counselors) to identify the specific needs of the students.
- ✓ Reach out directly to the students to gauge their interest and willingness to participate in the group.
- ✓ Communicate with families to provide detailed information about the group, inviting them to ask questions and express any concerns they may have.
- ✓ With the group, establish group norms once the members are organized, ensuring that they have a say in defining expectations and goals.
- ✓ Utilize feedback gathered from students to organize events and outings that cater to their interests, providing opportunities for support and empowerment.
- ✓ Create opportunities for students to explore, celebrate, and affirm their identities within the group setting.
- ✓ Provide opportunities to gather feedback from both students and teachers to continuously improve the facilitation and effectiveness of the group.

Affirming identity is an ongoing journey that takes constant reflection and evaluation. Talusan (2024) offers a reflection tool in her book as a starting point. In Klienrock (2021) and Ahmed (2018), there are several engagements to explore and celebrate identity such as identity flower, identity map and bio map all of which I have used with my students. Learning for Justice (Bell, 2015) is an incredible resource with lesson plans such as [Discovering My Identity](#).

Conclusion

In conclusion, BIPOC affinity groups are a powerful opportunity for creating inclusive educational spaces where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered. By providing a platform for cultural celebration, dialogue, and activism, these groups help foster empathy, understanding, and equity within schools. As educators, it is our responsibility to recognize the importance of BIPOC affinity groups and actively support their establishment and growth. Together, we can work towards building a more just and inclusive educational system for all.



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lyabo Tinubu is a seasoned educator with over 12 years of experience, spanning various educational settings across the globe. From state schools in inner London, UK, to international schools in China, Singapore, and Germany. She has honed her skills in fostering inclusive learning environments and prioritizing a holistic and humanizing approach to education. She has taught in various year/grade levels across primary with experience teaching English as an Additional Language and Library Teacher. With a deep commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ), lyabo is a member of the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC), working to advocate and amplify voices of teachers of color. As an ASCD Emerging Leader, an AIELOC Aspiring Leader of Color, and as a Worthy Educator Leader, she is dedicated to driving positive change in education.



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