

The Cold Within

Overview

Students will begin by participating in an experiential game in which they explore the concepts of cooperation and competition. Students will then relate their performance in the game to the themes present in the poem, “The Cold Within,” allowing for discussion regarding bias, discrimination, societal selfishness, civic duty, and more.

Grades

8-11

Essential Questions

- What attributes does an active, engaged citizen encompass?
- What behaviors are present in society today that make for a positive or negative community experience?
- What role does intolerance, prejudice, racism, etc. play in our society? What responsibility do citizens have to challenge such negative societal aspects?
- How can we ensure that our community is comprised of good citizens?

Materials

- Small prizes, such as miniature candies
- “The Cold Within,” poem attached

Duration

30-45 minutes

Procedure

Working Together – or Working Against One Another

1. As students enter, have them form pairs and tell them that they are going to be playing a game. Explain that in this game, the goal is to win as many points as possible, since for every three points a student earns, they will receive a prize.
2. Instruct students to place their desks together and tell them that from this point on, they must be silent or they will be disqualified from the competition. Next, tell each student to place their elbow on the desk and clasp their partner’s hand. (Teachers should model this position, which is the same stance for taking before arm wrestling. If any student points this out, do not acknowledge the similarity or mention the words “arm wrestling.”) Share the following rules and instructions:
 - First, remember that you must remain silent or you will be disqualified. You cannot speak to your partner or anyone else.
 - Your goal is to win as many points as possible. You will receive a point each time the back of your partner’s hand touches the desk; likewise, your partner will win a point each time the back of your hand touches the desk. For every three points you get, you will win a prize (i.e. a chocolate.)
 - Once the competition begins, you must continue to be silent, your hands must remain clasped at all times, and your elbows must remain on the desk. Failure to follow these rules will result in a disqualification. You will have 15 seconds to earn as many points as possible.
 - Each of you is responsible for counting your own points, so each time you get the back of your partner’s hand to touch the desk, keep count of your number out loud.
 - While the goal is to get your partner’s hand to touch the desk, make sure you do not harm your partner’s hand.

If students do not have any questions, instruct them to begin and time 15 seconds on the clock. (Teachers can choose to extend this time if they see fit, but only a short amount of time is needed for the essence of the activity to be later conveyed.)

3. Once time is up, have students report their score to the class. Discuss:
 - How did you manage to earn so many points?
 - Have students scoring the highest respond to this question. Ideally, at least one pair of students will have had the foresight to recognize that the way to earn the most points is to not struggle with one another, but rather to cooperate. If students allow one another to touch their hand to the desk quickly and effortlessly, more points can be earned. If no partnership realized this, ask students if they now have any ideas on how they could have earned more points (teachers should try to facilitate the realization coming from students.)
 - How many people thought this was a competition? Why do we automatically assume the way to win is to work against one another?
 - The “trick” to the game is to not resist and peacefully allow each hand touch as many times as possible, either going back and forth, or by having one person’s hand tap the table over and over and then dividing the prize. Yet, for many of us, this response didn’t come naturally. Why do you think this is?
 - Why did some of us automatically look out for ourselves, thinking of the prize we can win, rather than also thinking of our partner? (Discuss with students how while they were somewhat set up to have the response they had, it is worth talking about some people’s natural inclination towards competition or self-preservation.)
 - (Write the word cooperation on the board.) What does this word mean to you? (Allow students to call out responses.) How could cooperation have helped you in this exercise? (Write the word sacrifice on the board and again ask students to call out responses to what the word means to them.) How might sacrifice have played a part in this activity?
 - Why is it important to be cooperative with classmates? (Facilitate a discussion of how as illustrated in this exercise, cooperation can make things easier and can ensure success for everyone. Teachers can also use this as an opportunity to discuss the importance of cooperating with everyone, not just classmates who are friends. Sometimes, students will resist being partnered up with people they don’t consider themselves close to; discuss how mutual respect and willingness to cooperate with everyone is important to being successful in the classroom, and in the “real world.”)
 - Why, as a citizen of this classroom and of our community, is it important to be willing to sacrifice for others?
 - What other examples in society can you relate to this exercise (meaning, examples of when people lose because they don’t work in cooperation, or are only focused on their own interests)?

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4. Hand out the attached poem, “The Cold Within.” Either in partners, small groups, or as a class, read the poem and discuss:
 - After reading this poem, what word or phrase would you use to describe it? What is your initial reaction?
 - How would you describe each of the characters mentioned in the poem and why?
 - Why did none of the characters share their wood?
 - What role did prejudice, discrimination, bias, etc. play in this poem? (Teachers can focus this discussion and use this poem to teach about pressing issues such as discrimination, racism, prejudice, bias, etc. Discuss with students how one of the great challenges to humanity is acknowledging and overcoming a natural tendency to think less of and discriminate against people who are different from us - be it physically, racially, religiously, ideologically, etc.)
 - What message is the poet trying to convey?
 - How might the fate of this group have turned out differently?
 - If you could offer advice or words of wisdom to any of the characters in this poem, what would you say?

- The poet says that the characters “died from the cold within.” What does he mean?
 - How do the ideas conveyed in this poem relate to society today? Is there any connection between the poem and experiences you have had or witnessed? Explain.
 - If you had to create an alternate title for this poem, what would you title it?
 - How does this poem relate to the activity we did earlier?
 - How do people such as those in the poem affect a community?
 - In your opinion, what are each person’s responsibilities to other members of society? How did the characters in this poem hold up against what you feel those responsibilities are?
 - Would you want to be part of a community containing characters such as those represented in the poem? Why or why not?
 - How can we ensure that our community is comprised of good citizens?
5. As a culminating activity, have students write a poem in response to “The Cold Within.”

The Cold Within

Six humans trapped by circumstances,
in bleak and bitter cold.
Each one possessed a stick of wood,
or so the story told.

Their dying fire in need of logs,
the first man held his back,
for, of the faces around the fire,
he noticed one man black.

The next man looking across the way,
saw one not of his church,
and couldn't bring himself
to give the fire his stick of birch.

The third one sat in tattered clothes
he gave his coat a hitch.
Why should his log be put to use,
to warm the idle rich?

The rich man just sat back
and thought of the wealth he had in store,
and how to keep what he had earned
from the lazy, shiftless poor.

The black man's face bespoke revenge
as the fire passed from his sight,
for all he saw in his stick of wood,
was a chance to spite the white.

The last man of this forlorn group
did naught except for gain,
giving only to those who gave,
was how he played the game.

Their logs held tight in death's still hand,
was proof of human sin.
They didn't die from the cold without,
they died from the cold within.

by James Patrick Kinney