

Ben Porat Yosef Fourth-Graders Study Empathy

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Ben Porat Yosef fourth-graders Adina Aisenthal Berkovit and Ben Lasher sort coins while blindfolded, part of the class “differences” curriculum, while Julia Kohen looks on.

Is it possible to teach empathy? Can a teacher instill positive character traits along with reading and math skills? Jewish day-school educators continually seek effective approaches to this challenge.

At Ben Porat Yosef in Paramus, two initiatives recently were launched with the goal of fostering empathy for people who are different because of age or ability.

“I think modeling is the key,” said fourth-grade teacher Michal Kahan. “You can talk to children about disabilities, but if they don’t see how you deal with people who have those disabilities, they won’t know what to do.”

Using a social-studies curriculum she developed, Kahan introduced classroom discussions about physical, mental, emotional, or learning differences. After extensive role-playing and preparation, she then asked her pupils to identify and interview a person with a significant disability.

“At first, some of the children said they wouldn’t do the assignment, that it would make [their subjects] feel worse about being different,” said Kahan, herself the mother of a special-needs child. “I explained that people with disabilities really want others to understand them.”

With help from their parents, most of the children found relatives or family friends with disabilities, including cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, Alzheimer’s, and blindness. The

others consulted special-needs parents who are friends of Kahan. Interviews were almost all conducted by phone, often with input from the subject's parent or caregiver.

"It took courage to pick up the phone and do it," said the teacher. In class journals, children wrote that they had felt extremely nervous prior to the conversation, but once they engaged in the process they had rehearsed with their teacher, it went smoothly. "They saw by the end of the assignment that they were doing a great service to those they interviewed," Kahan said.

Fourth-graders' parents e-mailed Kahan afterward with positive feedback and follow-up ideas such as inviting guest speakers. One suggested a class viewing of "Praying with Lior," a documentary about a boy with Down syndrome preparing for his bar mitzvah. After watching it together, the class compiled a list of similarities and differences between Lior and themselves. They discovered that the list of similarities was longer, and wrote essays about these findings.

In addition, Kahan reinforced the lesson with an experiential simulation of hearing and vision impairment, muteness, and inability to use one's hands. For example, children in the "visually impaired" group were blindfolded and then sorted pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters entirely by feel.

At a school Thanksgiving feast several weeks later, the fourth-graders interacted with guests invited from CareOne, a nursing and rehabilitation facility in Teaneck. "I had prepared the children about the special needs of the elderly, and they did amazingly well," said Kahan. "They went right up to them and asked questions, and they were very warm and patient. Maybe it's partly that they're just good kids, but maybe it's partly because of what they learned from the unit."

To further develop the trait of empathy and introduce the concept of "chavruta" or partner learning, Rosh HaYeshiva Rabbi Tomer Ronen recently began pairing third- and fourth-graders with first- and second-graders to study the weekly Torah portion together.

"What emerged from that was the idea of the oldest children in the school being involved directly in support of the younger children," said Stanley Fischman, director of general studies at BPY, which was founded in 2001 and has 160 children in toddler to fourth-grade classes.

Fischman created the Eshed Society, a voluntary group open to fourth-graders. "Eshed" is an acronym for the Hebrew words "iggud shlosha devarim," or "society (for) three things," namely Torah, avoda (prayer), and gemilut chasadim (acts of kindness).

The Torah component involves the paired study partners. For avoda, society members pray together with first-graders in the mornings. For good deeds, volunteers give up recess to help younger grades in the lunchroom.

"When we came up with the acronym 'eshed,' we didn't realize it means 'waterfall,'" said Fischman. "But it's a perfect name; water flowing from higher ground to a lower plateau really describes what the children are doing."

The society's student steering committee, under Fischman's guidance, keeps track of who does what on a daily basis and brainstorms new ideas.

"They are living the notion of supporting others, and they will continue, with God's help, to do this as they advance through the grades," said Fischman. "As opposed to formal lessons in kindness and empathy, character traits are not as much taught as they are lived. The greater picture that emerges from what we have been working on this year is establishing the essential principles of living and learning at our school."