

How Racism is Embodied curriculum: Ism/health empathy poem

The purpose of this exercise is to get students thinking about a time that they have felt isolated or discriminated against and how they think it might have affected their health. The intention is that it will help elicit empathy about discrimination/racism as the rest of our curriculum moves into the discussion of how racism literally affects one's biology (see Resources for *How racism is embodied* link).

This exercise takes about 45-60 minutes depending on depth of discussion at end.

Part 1: What are some examples of isms? (2 min)

Part 2: Individual "free write" about ism/isolation (8-10 min)

- a) Think about a time that you were in an ism situation. How did it affect your health?
- b) Take out a piece of paper and free write about the situation. The sentences do not have to be complete and don't worry about the grammar. This is about getting thoughts down on paper.
- c) Now read over what you wrote and circle your two (or three favorite lines - depends on size of group)
- d) Write each sentence on a separate piece of paper.

Part 3: Group Poem: (10-15 min)

Divide up into groups of five and place all of the pieces of paper so that you can read each sentence. Turn those sentences into a poem¹. You can do some minor editing to the sentences. (It is helpful to give each group a blank piece of paper and some tape once the sentences are ordered)

Part 4: Group: Read the poem: (15 min)

Once you have the poem put together you are going to have one person read the poem while the rest of the group acts out the poem. (The poems are quite beautiful)

Part 5: Discussion (10-15 min)

- a) Class review of some common themes that came out of the poem, etc.
- b) Review the five aspects of stress (Sapolsky, 2004²) and see what came up in the poems
 - 1) Lack of predictability
 - 2) Lack of control
 - 3) Lack of outlets for frustration
 - 4) The interpretation of the stressor
 - 5) Lack of social support
- c) Empathy. What if someone feels like this all the time because of an ism?

¹ Many thanks to Power of Hope (www.powerofhope.org) who gave us the idea for the poem

² Sapolsky, Social Status and health in humans and other animals. *Annu Rev. Anthropol.* 2004; 33: 393-418