

Never Make Generalizations About The Class or Parents

Generalization is the process of extending the characteristics of an individual or small group to a larger group. In education, generalizations can be useful. However, when done incorrectly, generalizations can have harmful effect on students and the culture of a classroom and a school. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how too and how not to use generalizations.

Sample Teacher Statement:

“My students do not understand basic multiplication. It is impossible to teach them Algebra II when they do not know basic multiplication.”

Problem with Statement:

- 1) **Students are not monolithic in nature.** A common mistake in education is the decision (whether knowingly or unknowingly) to group large numbers of student or an entire class together into one learning level without prior thought or supporting evidence. If the teacher in the above sample statement were to assess his/or her students multiplication proficiency, they might discover that 7 students are entirely fluent in their times tables, 7 students know the basic times tables, 4 students know their times tables with prompting, and 3 students do not know the times tables at all. Sometimes students know more than we assume, sometimes they know less.
- 2) **Never assume you know the deficiency affecting student understanding. Instead, actually know it!** In the sample teacher statement above, the teacher assumes a student's lack of success in Algebra II is the byproduct of lack of basic proficiency in multiplication. While lack of multiplication may be a challenge, it might not be the whole reason a student is struggling in Algebra II. The student may in fact be great at multiplying but instead he or she may struggle comprehending word problems in a manner needed to solve algebra II problems. Teacher must be able to scaffold the learning process to discover a student's areas of strengths and the area where they need the most support.
- 3) **Challenge does not justify lowering expectations:** Multiplication is a skill taught in third grade. My student is in 8th grade and *still* doesn't know how his basic times tables. Does this mean the school should place the student in a special education class or lower their grade to third grade? Absolutely not! Lowering students' grade level rarely works as a remedial tool for success. What does work? 1) *Providing student accommodations:* Perhaps a student might benefit from a multiplication chart on their desk until they remember how to multiply. 2) *Greater teacher scaffolding of problems:* When teachers break problems into smaller “chunkable” steps, this provides the student and the teacher the ability to isolate challenge points in a student's learning. 3) *Create Differentiated Learning Groups:* Provide students work on their level *coupled* with the main on-grade-level subject matter. 4) *Partner learning:* Team students up with peers to promote collaboration. 5) tutoring or small group remedial work when available.

Let's rephrase the original teacher statement: *“I currently have 20% of the class who need a times table chart to complete their Algebra II problems. Another 30% is still developing in their memorization of their times tables with. I have assigned 50% of my class times table practice problems to work on at home and I am allowing them to use the times table chart as an accommodation for their next math test.* Why is this a better rephrasing? _____

Sample Teacher Statement:

“The parents are complaining that I am assigning too much homework”

Problem with Statement:

- 1) Parents are not a monolithic group. As students are not a monolithic group, so too with parents. Just because three loud, and boisterous parents have emailed you to complain about the quantity of homework, that does not all parents feel the same way. It is possible a parent will tell you, “all the parents in the what's app group are complaining about the amount of homework.” Your response as follows: Every student comes to our school with a unique set of strengths, academic levels, learning styles, and needs. As such, we strive to work with every family/student individually to meet their needs. Neither you nor I can speak for all parents in the class but I'm excited to learn how I can support your child.” With this particular parent, if you and/or the administration analysis the needs of their child and recognizes that the right course of action is to make an accommodation for their child, we should/could do so. *Better to set the bar/expectation high for all students and to accommodate for some when needed than to set the bar low for all students and to build a school of underachieving (G-d forbid)*

Let's rephrase the original statement: "Jason, Moshe, and Yoni's mom all messaged me that there is too much homework for their child. I have expressed to them their children's academic level and the need to complete assignments to approach grade level. After speaking over the phone with Jason and Moshe's mom, they have greater clarity on why we are assigning homework. I have agreed to provide their kids an extra day to complete the tasks as an accommodation. The conversation with Yoni's mom was very challenging. I have invited her in for a parent conference to meet with myself and administration to discuss solutions. During the meeting will be discussing his missed assignments in class. I would love to make accommodations and to develop solutions for Yoni, but I want us all to be on the same page beforehand."

Tips for prevent generalizations

- 1) *Speak in specific language:* Use specific student or parents' names when discussing challenges/solutions
- 2) *Stay away from assumptions* Great idea on your writing. So excited to see this.
- 3) *Differentiate Instruction*
- 4) *Make accommodations for students/parents/families when needed.*
- 5) *Be solutions oriented.*
- 6) *Be an "I can" person vs "I can't"*