

Case 5.3: Teaching Thanksgiving

Ms. Porter raised her hand nervously. It was the beginning of her school's staff meeting and her principal, Ms. Chang, had asked if anybody wanted to add new items to the agenda. "I'd like to talk about how we plan to teach about the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday," Ms. Porter said.

Several colleagues responded.

"I don't plan to talk about it at all. Thanksgiving seems to be more about consumerism than spending time with family," Mr. Espinosa said.

Ms. Tilson commented, "I focus on food. Students are really engaged when we talk about food. We'll talk about how the Pilgrims and Indians shared a feast, and since some of our students are immigrants, we can use it as an opportunity to learn about traditional foods."

"I focus on the *Thanks* in Thanksgiving," Mr. Webster added. "We all have so much to be thankful for. I like to focus on the positive."

Ms. Chang replied, "Seems we have a variety of ways to honor the holiday. I don't think we need any more conversation on this unless you have questions."

Ms. Porter mind was most concerned with what her colleagues were not intending to talk about. She anxiously wondered how she could emphasize the importance of discussing American Indian perspectives with students without offending her colleagues. "Well," she said, "I'm concerned with how we are perpetuating myths about the first Thanksgiving. I'm concerned we are not acknowledging that some Indigenous people observe this day as a day of mourning, not as a celebration. This is a great opportunity to promote dialogue within the school community about popular customs that might alienate some students and families, such as pretending to be Pilgrims and Indians."

As she heard these words coming out of her mouth, Ms. Porter felt a wave of relief and regret. She was bothered by the way many of her colleagues had addressed Thanksgiving in previous years but never felt comfortable speaking up.

"We have so many needs in our school. I don't think we should micromanage how people teach Thanksgiving. We don't even have any Indians in our school," Ms. Tilson said.

Ms. Chang, sensing tension in the room, replied, "You all have great points. Thank you for sharing them. It seems this is a larger topic than we have time to discuss now. Maybe those of you who are interested in exploring it further can create a presentation for one of our professional development days in the spring." With that comment, she moved to the next item on the agenda.

Ms. Porter looked around the room, frustrated that nobody else spoke up or supported her for speaking up. She knew everyone felt overwhelmed with work as holiday breaks. She doubted anyone would volunteer to develop a presentation after the holidays passed.

"There goes another year," she thought to herself.

Questions

1. Identify the ways in which whiteness is centered in this conversation between educators.
2. To what extent do teachers have an obligation to incorporate multiple perspectives when discussing holidays? How much is this dependent on which identity groups are represented in the student population?
3. Would you still teach Thanksgiving? If so, how would you decenter whiteness?