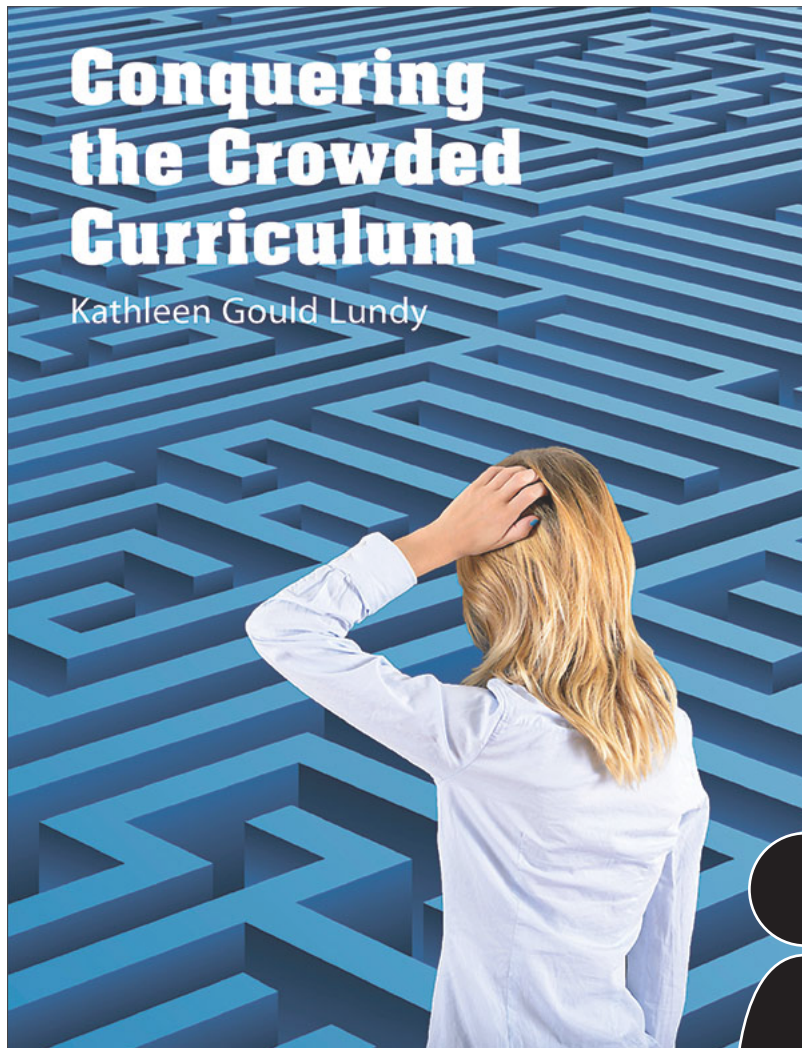


Identity Games

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Games That Promote Identity

Researchers Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style have helped me realize that teachers and students need to talk about who they are, get to know one another, and acknowledge “the textbooks of their lives.” Storytelling allows us to get to know one another, to have informed conversations about who we are, where we are from, and what we want to achieve individually as well as collectively.

The following exercises encourage students to spend time getting to know one another — finding out each other’s names, learning about where everyone comes from, and having a chance to play games so that there is laughter, engagement, and activity. Name games are an important way to begin. They allow students not only to learn each other’s names but also how to pronounce the names, remember them, and build a kind of collective awareness of the classroom community.

Say Your Name

Students stand in a circle. Each says his or her name, one after the other. When students do it again, the teacher asks them to say their name loudly, then in whispers right after. Then, when a student says her or his name, everyone repeats the name. In this way, the student helps the class learn how to pronounce the name correctly.

Ball Throw

This game is played when the students already know one another’s names.

Have students walk to the empty spaces in the room. Throw a ball up in the air and call a student’s name. That student tries to catch it. Once the student has it, he or she calls another person’s name. The game continues until all names have been called.

The Seat on My Right Is Free

Have the students sit in a circle on chairs. Make sure that there is one empty chair. The person to the left of the empty chair says: “The seat on my right is free. I would like to invite [someone in the class] to sit beside me.” The person who is invited crosses the circle, which frees up a chair. The game continues with the person to the left of the empty chair repeating: “The seat on my right is free. I would like to invite _____ to sit beside me.” Make these two rules: everyone is to receive an invitation, and no person can be invited more than once.

Name Switch Now

Students stand in a circle. One person is “It.” “It” establishes eye contact with someone across the circle and then says his or her own name and the name of the other person. “It” begins to walk towards this person, who establishes eye contact with another, says his or her own name and the name of the other, and begins walking towards that person. They switch places. The game should be played quickly, and everyone should have a turn. Encourage students to “give each other their eyes” as they say their names and somebody else’s.

Name Call Ball Toss

Students stand in a circle. To begin, a ball is given to one player, who calls his or her name and tosses the ball to someone else in the circle. The ball continues to be passed, ensuring that all become familiar with the names in the group.

The activity is repeated. This time, students begin with their hands folded in front of them; after tossing the ball to someone else in the circle, students place their hands behind their backs. In this way, each person passes and receives the ball once.

The activity is repeated again. Draw the students' attention to the pattern that has been established.

Extensions

- Challenge the students to complete the activity within a time limit.
- Students pass the ball in the same pattern. Names are not called.
- The pattern of passing the ball is reversed. The ball is passed from the last person to the first person.
- Two balls are passed, one using the original pattern and one using the reverse pattern.
- Up to five additional balls are added.

Ball Game with Words and Phrases

Students choose a slip of paper from an envelope that contains a word or phrase from a text they have been studying. The word or phrase that they select will be their personal word or phrase and they need to "own" it and memorize it.

Students stand in a circle. One person is handed a ball and tosses it to someone else in the circle. That person calls out the "owned" word or phrase. The game continues until everyone has had a chance to receive the ball, say aloud the chosen word, and throw the ball to someone else.

The activity is repeated, and students are asked to add an emotional dimension to the word or phrase.

Extension

Students work in groups of three to five. They create a short scene in which everyone says his or her word or phrase from the ball exercise. They decide on the order of lines and create appropriate gestures and emotions to enhance the meaning behind the words. Various interpretations of the lines are encouraged and expected.

My Name Has Meaning

Behind every name is a story. To begin, students can turn to one or two classmates to tell a story about their name. The following questions can be used to guide the discussion:

- Why did their parents choose to give them this name?
- What does their name mean?
- Do they have a nickname?
- Do they like their name? Why or why not?
- Do they know their name in other another language? If so, what is it?
- If they had a chance to choose another name, what would that be? Why?
- Do they have more than one name? If so, are they willing to share their other given names with the class? What are the names?

Students may decide to convert their oral name stories into writing in order to share them with others. Suggest that each student add a picture or a name crest to the piece of writing. The name stories could be collated into a take-home book called “Our Name Stories” and then shared with students’ families.

Sharing Name Stories

I once delivered a workshop on name stories with a large group of secondary and elementary school students in a location close to my university. The secondary school students came from four high schools where there was a fair amount of rivalry and considerable tension among the school student populations.

One of the secondary school students pulled me aside before the workshop. He said that I needed to know that the students would not work together across school boundaries. “It’s just too dangerous,” he told me. There were 16 secondary students and 24 Grade 4 students from six of the feeder schools. I weighed what this student said to me and then took a chance.

I divided the groups into four so that schools were mixed — boys and girls, elementary and secondary — a random jumble of bodies in a cafeteria on a muggy May morning. I asked the secondary school students to interview the elementary school students about their names. The sweetness of the stories just melted the secondary school students’ hearts so that when it came time to tell their name stories, they did so with a fair amount of generosity and openness. One boy spoke about how his father had been shot to death when his mother was pregnant with him so that he now bears his father’s name. I could tell that this story affected everyone in the room.

At the end of the workshop, the same student who had approached me at the beginning came to thank me for the experience. He said he had never participated in a cross-grade, cross-panel workshop before.

“You know,” he said. “I was thinking that if we had had this kind of experience when we were in elementary school, we would not have the kinds of tensions that we have now. The rivalry is really scary, and we have to keep to ourselves. Today I learned something about a guy across the territory and it really has affected me, changed me. So thank you for having us share our name stories.”