

Educators as Bridge-Builders

Case Study

September 2024

Introduction

Pluralism can be hard to understand, much less imagine in practice. To start building the ecosystem's collective understanding of what pluralism looks like—knowing it can take nearly infinite forms—New Pluralists supported the development of [four case studies of pluralism in practice](#). These case studies will start to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and real-world applications, providing tangible examples of how people across the country are practicing a different way of being and making decisions together. These practical illustrations not only enrich our understanding of pluralism's nuances and challenges but also serve as valuable learning tools for individuals, community leaders, and organizations interested in practicing pluralism themselves.

One example of pluralism in practice is the work of [Making Caring Common](#), [Generation Citizen](#), and [Rural Assembly](#) as part of their joint project, [Respecting and Celebrating Educators as Community Bridge-Builders](#). This case study about their work draws on an interview with Milena Batanova, director of research and evaluation at Making Caring Common, and a focus group of four K-12 educators from Colorado, Iowa, Maryland, and Oklahoma who have functioned as bridge-builders in their own school communities (see appendix for full list of case study participants).¹

This case study is one of four exploring diverse practices, approaches, and ideologies in pluralism work. As you read, remember that these are real-world examples of organizations with different worldviews engaging in pluralistic efforts. The goal is not to agree with every perspective presented, but to appreciate the variety of ways and people involved in this work. This case study represents one approach to pluralism among many, highlighting the diversity inherent in the ecosystem.

FOUR CASE STUDIES

This case study is part of a broader evaluation to understand the current state of pluralism in the United States, including [evaluating the health and vibrancy of the pluralism ecosystem](#) and [assessing the status of key conditions that promote or inhibit pluralism](#).

It is one of four case studies produced to explore instances of pluralism in practice—what it looks like, what it accomplishes, and what we're learning about what works and what doesn't work in practicing pluralism. The four case studies are intended to represent diverse approaches to pluralism work. The audience for them is curious ecosystem actors who want to learn more about pluralism.

Pluralism is both a worldview and a practice. As a worldview, pluralism is the belief that the coexistence of diverse opinions, ways of life, and value systems enriches all members of a society and that all people deserve to be recognized, respected, accepted, and engaged based on their diversity. As a practice, pluralism invites us to work creatively and collaboratively with the diversity we encounter in life—across races, ethnicities, creeds, religions, political affiliations, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, individual experiences, beliefs, and actions.

¹ Making Caring Common, Generation Citizen, and Rural Assembly define bridging as the “intentional effort to understand people as individuals first and to build authentic connections across differences (which include, but are not limited to, differences by race, politics, and religion).” They state that “educators thus play a central role as community bridge-builders, which often includes creating spaces for people to listen to differing views and to strive for ‘constructive dialogue across schisms.’” Bridging is also a pluralism practice.

Context and Overview

Today, many educators across the country find it challenging to facilitate constructive dialogue in the classroom about social and political topics. Batanova said that limited support and guidance from school administrators and a shortage of easy-to-use tools and resources for educators have contributed to this challenge.

Additionally, according to [RAND](#), between 2021 and 2023, 18 states passed policies that limit educators' ability to discuss certain topics in the classroom, such as race and gender, and 65% of teachers who responded to the [2023 State of the American Teacher Survey](#) reported that they limit conversations about politics and social issues in the classroom.

Other factors that have contributed to the challenge of knowing how to facilitate constructive dialogue in the classroom include the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student development, the country's increasing racial and ethnic diversity, and state-specific politics. In explaining the effects of COVID-19 on students, focus group educator Elainia Ross-Jones said, *"Students are not coming to school with the same social skills that they had and with the same needs."* Focus group educator Dr. Marine Pepanyan adds that post-pandemic, the socio-emotional state of students has taken precedence over academics and it's much harder to engage students, let alone facilitate constructive dialogue between them or between students and teachers. Ross-Jones also talked about the effects of increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the US population on learning. She said, *"You're going to have clashes in cultures and subcultures and in the case of education from elementary to high school, there has to be a level of community and teamwork in order to get things done well."* Dr. Pepanyan said that having students who are English language learners also makes it difficult to facilitate constructive dialogue among students because these individuals do not have the same language skills to express themselves as their English-speaking peers.

Another focus group educator, Lee Sturm-Guidry, talked about the May 2021 [critical race theory ban in Oklahoma](#) and how this policy has made it hard for teachers to talk about certain topics, such as race, in the classroom. Sturm-Guidry described the tension they balance in teaching: *"It's been an adjustment for me to balance how I do not lose my teaching certificate but also making sure my students are prepared academically through the [state] standards while also understanding they need to know history and there is no way of getting around certain things."* These factors have contributed to the challenges that many educators face today in knowing how to facilitate constructive dialogue in the classroom and thinking through effective techniques to make these conversations more possible.

As part of the Respecting and Celebrating Educators as Community Bridge-Builders project, Making Caring Common, Generation Citizen, and Rural Assembly collaborated in the following ways to better understand these challenges and lessons learned about what it takes to do bridging work in the classroom:

- **To kickstart the project, the organizations facilitated three preliminary focus groups with educators from across the country in 2023.**² The purpose of these focus groups was to supplement the limited literature that exists about how teachers navigate conversations about social issues in the classroom.
- **The organizations convened six additional focus groups as part of a Community of Practice of educators, which provided additional space for educators to share deeper stories and lessons learned.**³

² These educators are connected to Generation Citizen and Making Caring Common's existing networks, including Generation Citizen's Teacher Leadership Board and Making Caring Common's Caring Schools Network.

³ Rural Assembly also conducted two focus groups with nine rural educators to ensure that rural educators' voices are specifically heard and published an article here <https://dailyyonder.com/rural-educators-look-to-address-social-issues-in-the-classroom-face-challenges-in-implementation/2024/06/17/> summarizing the key takeaways.

- Based on nine focus groups in total, Making Caring Common, Generation Citizen, and Rural Assembly published a [toolkit](#) for educators, which provides a framework for bridge-building and strategies for engaging in bridge-building work with students, caregivers, and school administrators.
- Generation Citizen and Making Caring Common facilitated a public [panel discussion](#) of educators sharing their experiences with navigating social issues.

The following case study provides reflections from four educator bridge-builders about their approaches to bridging, impact to date, and **what they are learning along the way**.

Approach

Focus group educators highlighted several bridge-building approaches that have been helpful for facilitating constructive dialogue in the classroom.

Invest in student relationships early on to make them feel seen and heard. All educators explained that having a strong educator-student relationship unlocks better student engagement in the classroom, which is the first hurdle to overcome for fostering positive intergroup relations. Focus group educator Sharon Lafer talked about using a written checklist of important activities that educators should do to build strong relationships with their students. This checklist includes things like knowing how to pronounce students' names correctly and recognizing the non-academic strengths that students bring to the classroom. She said, *"If you are not focusing up front on making kids feel seen and heard ... they are not going to learn social studies or algebra from you."* She continued by saying that the *"more you know your students, the more you understand who they are and what they are coming in with. That's going to mitigate 90% of the issues."* In her supporting role for multi-language learners, she also talked about **priming newer educators with the idea that the more educators know their students, the more effective they will be**. She described telling newer educators, *"If you knew a little bit more about your kids or understood where they are coming from, can you imagine how much greater mastery of the standards [they would have]!"*

Connect teaching to the personal experience of students. When teaching, Dr. Pepanyan also talked about **connecting whatever is being learned or discussed in the classroom to students' lives outside of the classroom**. Sturm-Guidry added that this strategy has been effective when they teach music class and bring in contemporary musicians in addition to classical musicians. Ross-Jones does this in her classroom as well, describing the work as helping students see the topic of conversation as a window, mirror, or door. In describing this metaphor, she said, *"Students need to be able to see themselves in the work as mirrors, but they also need windows into the outside world and doors that open opportunities."*

Embrace multiple truths and get curious about alternate viewpoints. Ross-Jones talked about sharing five core characteristics about herself at the beginning of every school year to **communicate the fullness of her humanity to her students and asking her students** to do the same with her. She described facilitating team and trust-building exercises to **create unity in the classroom** rather than an "us versus them" mentality. She also uses a framework to set norms and expectations around harder conversations, something she calls the "ABCs" of constructive conversation. This framework asks students to actively listen before speaking, be mindful of their own bias, and challenge themselves and others equally. To exemplify how she uses this framework in real time, she explained that when classroom conversations become intense, she intercepts and asks students to challenge themselves as they are challenging others by **allowing the possibility of multiple truths and perspectives**. Dr. Pepanyan provided another example of how students can challenge their own viewpoints. She teaches her

students to analyze reliable, peer-reviewed sources that support different viewpoints, paying special attention to sources with ideas that are different from theirs. This practice of looking for evidence with alternate viewpoints asks students to approach research with curiosity and willingness to learn and to be open to the possibility of changing their minds. She said, *“Maybe you already want something to be proved and you are looking for that specific thing ... but [instead] let’s see what’s in there and then filter.”*

Early exposure to diversity enables collaboration across differences. Dr. Pepanyan talked about the importance of **exposing students to different school environments** to foster positive relationships in the classroom. To illustrate this, she described the work that she did with the Language Academy program at her school. She explained that this program is designed to help multilingual students who are new to the school slowly become integrated by keeping these students together and taking classes separately from most students. Instead, Dr. Pepanyan advocated for keeping these students together only for the first trimester and integrated with other students for the rest of the year. The 2024–2025 school year will be the first year of this new policy, and Dr. Pepanyan is hopeful that quicker integration will have positive effects on new multilingual students, such as an increased ability to understand and collaborate with a wide spectrum of students. Ross-Jones also discussed **teaching her students to work together** to solve social problems. She said, *“It takes all minds when it comes to solving mathematical problems, and especially when you get into things like social security, and cryptology and AI [artificial intelligence], it’s going to take all of us, so using these criteri[a] to ensure that everyone is included [in solving social problems] is no longer a luxury.”* Batanova added that part of the work is **building commonalities between students**—if students can’t see how they are similar, it’s harder to understand students from whom they differ.

Teach students important life principles to foster better intergroup dynamics and collaboration. In her classroom, Ross-Jones teaches the idea of “illusion of objectivity.” She said that historically, science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields have been thought of as objective when implicit bias has been built into studies and ways of thinking that influence the way students and teachers view mathematics today. She also acknowledges and teaches the harm that STEM fields have historically done to Black and Indigenous students and other students of color. She said, *“Racism was definitely propelled by STEM and mathematics in creating these very rigorous standards for what is and isn’t human based on mathematics and biology, so we can’t say that we’re objective in mathematics, that’s just wrong.”* She teaches students to view mathematics from a multicultural and multiperspective lens. She said: *“The Mayans were excellent, the Ethiopians and the Egyptians were excellent, the Chinese, the Greeks. Everyone had their own mathematical standard, their base numeral system and when you look at it from that approach you learn that all nations have contributed to what we know as modern-day mathematics.”*

Impact

Since the toolkit has recently been released and the three host organizations don't have funding to track the toolkit's use and effectiveness, impact stories of bridge-building work were limited. However, we were able to surface the following insights about the impact of bridge-building work as told by the focus group educators:

- During Community of Practice conversations, Batanova shared that educators talked about the goal of their bridge-building work as providing students with the skills they need to succeed as global citizens. Educators want their students to have **empathy for others and informed perspectives, as well as to know how to resolve conflicts in healthy ways**. To illustrate this, Ross-Jones shared a story of how she navigated a challenging interaction with one of her students, which also allowed her to model the kind of behavior that she hopes her students can employ in the future. In her teaching, Ross-Jones mixes color theory with whatever subject she's teaching. One day, she instructed a student to read a word that was colored green. When she realized that the student was colorblind, she apologized, **taking responsibility for the assumption** that all students can see color and are equally abled in this way. Being accountable for harm done creates trust with students and helps students feel seen and heard, which enables their empathy ability for others.
- Lafer described a new supplement made to their district's 2024–2025 teacher evaluation rubric. In part through her bridge-building work, the director of the Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Education department recently **added success indicators to the teacher evaluation rubric focused on better understanding the identity of multilingual learners so that educators can better know how to support them**. For example, the teacher rubric includes the criteria that educators *"know every student's name, strength, and need in such a way that appropriate academic and linguistic scaffolds are provided while holding high expectations for all students to reach grade-level expectations"* and *"utilize students' cultural identities and educational backgrounds to increase content area comprehension and learning."* This supplement enables educators to receive specific feedback on how their instruction supports multilingual learners in the classroom. It also enables educators to view multilingual learners as contributing members to the classroom and engage multilingual learners more deeply during instruction. Lafer hopes the rubric supplement will motivate more educators to understand their students and see students' strengths in the classroom.

Learnings

Batanova and focus group educators shared the following four learnings about bridge-building work to date:⁴

- 1 Bridge-building work is a skill set that fosters a positive classroom dynamic and deepens relationships, which are needed for effective classroom instruction.** Educators navigate diverse opinions and experiences every day, and bridge-building work gives educators the tools necessary to navigate these experiences. The interconnectedness of the two makes bridge-building work an important part of classroom instruction and students' ability to learn from others.
- 2 A strong and pluralistic school culture is the heart of good bridge-building.** Batanova and her colleagues heard from educators that the discussion of controversial topics in the classroom tends to be avoided or shut down when school communities are more diverse (e.g., differences in religious backgrounds, life experiences) or when school leadership is under political pressure to avoid certain

⁴ Some of these learnings also came out of work that came through the development of the toolkit referenced on page 3.

controversial topics (e.g., abortion). As such, Batanova said that the success of bridge-building work may be more connected to having a strong school culture that welcomes open and honest conversations, even unpopular opinions. The Harvard Graduate School of Education defines a good school culture by the frequency and kinds of interactions between people in a school and other elements, such as shared fundamental beliefs and assumptions, values, and norms.⁵ As such, bridge-building work can be supported through investments in school culture.

3 **Bridge-building strategies need to take into account the fullness of people's life experiences.**

Strategies focused solely on people's identities and characteristics—their race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation—can emphasize people's differences over their commonalities. Batanova said that while identity-based bridge-building practices are important, *"we [also] know that a lot of the polarization we're seeing is too tightly tethered to personal identities and beliefs. So, if we're continuing to highlight and really focus on different identities rather than our commonalities or, at least, shared causes and values, I do wonder sometimes if we're reinforcing the problem versus trying to fix it."* Effective bridge-building work needs to include strategies that seek to understand the fullness of people's life experiences to prevent oversimplification of people's interpretations of others.

4 **Educators face many challenges in their bridge-building work.** Batanova shared that educators struggle with:

- Feeling unsupported by school leadership, especially when educators experience or are afraid of backlash from parents around topics discussed in the classroom
- Knowing how much educators can share about themselves in the classroom to build strong relationships with students
- Balancing free expression and civil dialogue, and what to do when free expression (e.g., derogatory remarks) gets in the way of fostering positive dialogue in the classroom
- Challenging student assumptions without offending or causing them harm (the issue of harm vs. safety came up separately from the tension of balancing free expression and civility)



Want to learn more about the toolkit that Making Caring Common, Generation Citizen, and Rural Assembly created as part of the Respecting and Celebrating Educators as Community Bridge-Builders? Visit the Making Caring Common website at [Navigating Social Issues in the Classroom: A Toolkit for Educators as Community Bridge-Builders — Making Caring Common \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.makingcaringcommon.org/ideas/usable-knowledge/18/07/what-makes-good-school-culture).

⁵ "What Makes a Good School Culture?" Harvard Graduate School of Education, published July 23, 2018, <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ideas/usable-knowledge/18/07/what-makes-good-school-culture>.

Appendix

INTERVIEWEE:

- Milena Batanova, director of research and evaluation at Making Caring Common

FOCUS GROUP EDUCATORS:

- Sharon Lafer, culturally and linguistically diverse education teacher on special assignment for Jefferson County Public Schools in Golden, Colorado
- Dr. Marine Pepanyan, multi-language learner educator at Storm Lake High School in Storm Lake, Iowa
- Elainia Ross-Jones, statistics educator at City Neighbors High School in Baltimore, Maryland
- Lee Sturm-Guidry, social studies educator at Harding Fine Arts Academy in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma