



## Consider Your Students Before You Put Up a Classroom Christmas Tree

By Educator Barnes – December 4, 2019

I was in school during the time when we transitioned from referring to the break that ended the first semester from Christmas break to winter break. Winter break is more inclusive. It focuses on the season and not a holiday celebrated by some people. Teachers should keep this thought in mind before putting up a Christmas tree and Christmas decorations.

Classrooms across America are becoming more diverse. Diversity of students means diversity in celebrated holidays. Some students do not celebrate any holidays or even their birthday. In America, it is hard to escape Christmas. Before Halloween decorations are pulled off of the shelves, we are inundated with the upcoming holiday activities, Christmas advertisements, and the lineup of Hallmark's Christmas movies. If a child doesn't celebrate this holiday, the classroom should be one place where it is not shoved down the child's throat.

Even if a child does celebrate Christmas, it can still be problematic. Let's take a look back an incident with my son in first grade. My son, who is now a published author, did not like to write much in first grade. Before winter break, the writing skill was learning how to write a friendly letter. My son's teacher decided to have students practice this by writing to one of Santa's elves. This made my son mad. He already did not want to write, and he especially didn't want to write to an elf. He stood up in class and told the class Santa wasn't real, his elves weren't real, and he wasn't doing the assignment. I received a phone call about the incident. Some students in the class still believed in Santa Claus. His words were alarming to them. When I talked to my son, he said, "You said Jesus is the reason for the season, and Santa is not real." I told him that even though that is what we believe, he cannot disrupt the class. I explained the why behind the outburst, and his teacher gave him the option of writing his friendly letter to anyone.

My husband was raised in an Apostolic church, and I was raised in a Missionary Baptist church. Neither one of us grew up believing in Santa Claus. Christmas was celebrated as a religious holiday. Quite frankly, even though my father isn't as religious as my mom, he also had a problem with a fictional white man taking credit for putting gifts under the Christmas tree that he worked hard to pay for. Even though I celebrated Christmas, I was a child who was frustrated with some of the activities I was forced to do.

Another time I was frustrated was when I was a literacy coach. It was decided that during the last week of school, we would have a Polar Express day. Students and staff could wear pajamas and the entire school would watch *Polar Express* in their classrooms. I had never seen *Polar Express* and had no desire to see that film. Even though I didn't have a class as a coach, I had a K-2 STEM Challenge Club. The students wanted to watch the movie with me. To oblige my club students, I purchased pajamas to wear to school and hot cocoa and some snacks for the movie. It was the first time I had seen any part of the movie. I didn't watch the entire movie. Once the kids got settled in with their snacks, I turned off the lights and worked at my desk periodically glancing up to ensure no one was playing around on the carpet. I do know some students did not want to participate. Unfortunately, when these situations arise in

schools, those children are given an alternate activity as a solution; it isn't a good one. It reminds of when I was talking to an Indigenous friend who told me that another Indigenous person reported that her child had to eat lunch in isolation because he did not want to participate in the Thanksgiving lunch where classmates dressed up as pilgrims. Exclusion is not okay.

I also not going to lie. I have put up a Christmas tree in my classroom. I even played instrumental Christmas music. I don't anymore. Over the years, I have learned how this can be problematic, but I also believe we can find a happy medium.

Yes, some teachers celebrate many holidays in their classrooms at this time. I think this is a good idea. It also allows students to become familiar with different cultures; however, teachers still need to be cautious. If celebrating other holidays, it just a way for you to celebrate and promote Christmas, then don't celebrate or learn about any holidays. What is more powerful is highlighting what students in your class do with their families. That's my issue with multicultural education. It turns into acknowledging everyone but the students in the classroom seats. Being culturally responsive means the instruction is based on who is in those seats.

Teachers, before you put up that Christmas tree in your classroom, think about the why behind your need to put up the tree and decorations. Think about the students in your class. Will the Christmas tree include students or exclude them?