

## This week's issue:

# SHOULD SCHOOL BE A PLACE FOR DEBATE?

In room 207, Mr. Smith is teaching his students about the civil rights movement. He asks the students questions such as, "Who were the freedom riders?" or "What year was the Montgomery bus boycott?" It is easy for students to find the answers in their textbooks. Mr. Smith tells the students whether they are right or wrong. On Friday, they will have a quiz about these facts.

In room 209, Ms. Miles is also teaching about the civil rights movement. She asks her students, "Is peaceful protest the best way to make things change for the better?" The students have a **debate**. Some think Martin Luther King Jr. was right to tell protesters to avoid violence. Others believe that sometimes violence is necessary when people will not listen to reason. They ask Ms. Miles for the right answer, but she says there is no right answer.

Some people believe that kids in school should only learn about facts. These people think students should get information from their textbooks or teachers and memorize it. That way, some argue, all students will learn the same things and they will all be able to do well on tests.

Other people think debates can be hard because there are no right answers. Sometimes everybody learns different things from a debate. This makes it hard for teachers to give a test to find out what students have learned. Debates also take a lot of time. Teachers who have debates may not be able to cover as many topics in class. Then, students may not learn all of the facts in the textbook.

However, debates may help students understand why the facts they learn in school are important. We live in a democracy, where everyone needs to know how to form and **justify** opinions in order to work together to make decisions. Young people will not always have a teacher or a textbook to give the right answers, so students need to learn to think for themselves. Each person has a unique **perspective** defined by his or her knowledge, experience, and attitudes. Even teachers and textbook authors have their own perspectives. Through a classroom debate, students hear their classmates' opinions. Students justify their opinions with evidence from texts and from their own experiences. Sometimes, hearing from classmates who disagree with them makes students learn about their own **biases** and understand a problem in a new way. Hearing classmates' perspectives during a debate can help students understand the complexity of many important issues. Whether it is better to have teachers teach from the text or to have students engage in debates is a continuing **controversy** in education.

What do you think? Should students learn only facts in school? Or should debates be an important part of their education?



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controversy | justify | perspective | bias | debate

## USE THE FOCUS WORDS \*and alternate parts of speech

**debate** (*noun*) a discussion of a problem where different sides are presented

➡ **Sample Sentence:** In Ms. Miles' classroom, students had a **debate** about whether junk food should be sold in schools.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Can you think of a **debate** that caused you to change your mind? What was it about?

**\*debate** (*verb*) to argue about an issue; to consider different options in order to make a decision

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Cecelia **debated** whether to drive or take the bus to the concert.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Have you ever **debated** cutting your hair short or growing it long? What was your decision?

**controversy** (*noun*) major disagreement or dispute among many people

➡ **Sample Sentence:** The biggest **controversy** in the sixth grade last year was whether or not students would be required to wear school uniforms.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Why is there so much **controversy** surrounding school uniforms?

**perspective** (*noun*) point of view, way of looking at things

➡ **Sample Sentence:** All of my friends have a unique **perspective** about which teacher is the best.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** What's your **perspective** on whether or not people should be able to keep wild animals as pets?

**justify** (*verb*) to defend, explain, or show to be right

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Carl **justified** his decision to punch Roger by explaining that Roger punched him first.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Do you think people are **justified** in using violence after others use violence against them first?

**bias** (*noun*) the belief that some people or ideas are better than others, prejudice

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Jonas' **bias** against school uniforms comes from his experience in a very strict private school.

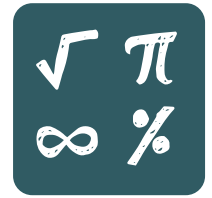
🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Do you expect history books to have **bias**? Why or why not?

**\*bias** (*verb*) to strongly influence someone for or against something

➡ **Sample Sentence:** Raphael didn't want to **bias** his friends against the band, so he decided not to mention that they don't write any of their songs.

🗣️ **Turn and Talk:** Does hearing about musicians' bad behavior **bias** you against their music? Explain.

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## DO THE MATH

**Option 1:** In the Urban **Debate** League, students from city schools **debate** controversial issues. A skillful debater can **justify** more than one **perspective**. For example, a debater might start by arguing that her school should have a dress code. Then, she can change positions and argue that her school should not have a dress code. The debater puts personal **biases** aside.

A total of 56 students participated in the Urban **Debate** League championships. They were:

- ▶ 10 ninth graders
- ▶ 14 tenth graders
- ▶ 20 eleventh graders
- ▶ 12 twelfth graders

What percentage of the students were in tenth grade?

- A. 14%
- B. 25%
- C. 55%
- D. 75%

**Option 2:** Urban Debaters **debate** controversial issues in teams of two. In each **debate**, a team either argues from an affirmative or negative **perspective**. Teams must be affirmative in some **debates**, and negative in others. Even if a debater is **biased** toward one opinion, she must skillfully argue both sides. Judges choose the winning team based on how well team members **justify** each **perspective**.

In a **debate** round, each of the 4 debaters talks 3 times: an 8-minute speech, a 5-minute response, and a 6-minute question period. Gabriel is organizing a school **debate**. He wants to know how many whole **debate** rounds can happen in 4 hours if everybody uses all their time. Write an inequality that would help him figure this out. You can let  $r$  = the number of **debate** rounds.



**Discussion Question:** High school debaters tend to get good grades and go to college. Some people say this **justifies** using **debate** in the classroom. Others have a different, controversial **perspective**. They say that kids join **debate** teams because they are already smart and motivated. They say **debate** won't help regular kids. What do you think?

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## THINK SCIENTIFICALLY

Ms. Lexie Kahn and Mr. Paul E. Seemy are two science teachers who work together. Being science teachers, they encourage their students to be curious and ask a lot of questions. Some of their students like to ask questions about national **controversies**. Others ask questions about experiences that have made them wonder about something.

Ms. Kahn and Mr. Seemy themselves often have different **perspectives**, and they like to **debate** each other. They try not to let personal **biases** get in the way of exchanging ideas, so they use evidence to **justify** their opinions.

Both teachers believe that **debating** develops intelligence just as physical exercise develops muscles. They think that you become smarter by working through challenging problems. Some of their students agree with this, but others do not. The doubtful students seem to believe that people have a fixed amount of intelligence that stays the same no matter what.

Mr. Seemy's student Joon found this topic very interesting, so he decided to survey the students at his school.

Joon wants to find out:

What mindset have middle school students developed about whether or not intelligence grows?

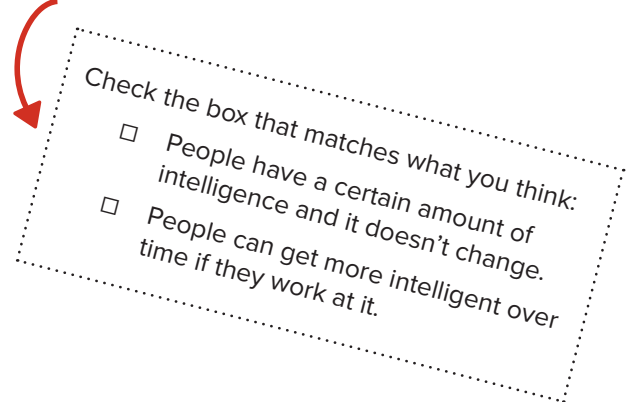
### Procedure:

1. Distribute surveys to all students at school.
2. Ask students to place completed surveys in a box in the library labeled "completed surveys."
3. Tally the survey results.

### Data:

	Fixed Mindset (intelligence does not change)	Growth Mindset (intelligence can change with effort)
Sixth Grade	122	75
Seventh Grade	99	110
Eighth Grade	80	78

Joon designed a survey with one item.



What do the data from Joon's survey tell you?

How would you answer Joon's survey? Why?

Do you think that Joon's survey provides enough information to determine a student's mindset? Why or why not?

Stanford University professor Dr. Carol Dweck reports from her research that people with a "growth mindset" live less stressful and more successful lives. Discuss this idea with your class.



