

# **Our Differences Can Change the World**

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## **Introduction**

I am a first-grade teacher in a Title I school in the rural Delaware area of the Appoquinimink School District. The grades range from Kindergarten to fifth grade with an average enrollment of 406 students. 62% of our students are Caucasian, 19.5% of students are African American, 11.1% are Hispanic, 4.2% are of at least two races and 2.7% of our students are Asian. Though my school reflects some variation of diversity among our students, the majority of students are Caucasian. Through my experiences in the building and within the area, I have noticed a need for discussion among students and staff alike around diversity and multiculturalism. Many of the topics that are taught in the first-grade curriculum do not incorporate opportunities for students to acknowledge differences within people and learn how to accept and respect them.

## **Rationale**

When I think of how to take this topic and begin a conversation about multiculturalism that is impactful yet developmentally appropriate, I think of the word REPRESENTATION. When I say representation, I am thinking of exposure to children's literature/experiences that offer multicultural characters and lifestyles. Not only is the representation of all students in literature beneficial to all students, it also informally introduces the idea that being white is not the assumed default identity, but is equally "different" as being of any other race. The objective of this unit is to take the standards and essential questions that are currently in Appoquinimink School District's first grade ELA LFS map and create opportunities for students to gain exposure to multiculturally-inclusive mentor texts that inspire conversations about differences and celebrate them, while incorporating writing activities that provoke thoughtful dialogue among students.

Representation and respect of all cultures and ethnicities plays such a dynamic role in student achievement. I am writing this unit to help other educators take a step back and think about the history of our country, where we come from as a nation, and where we want to go in the future. In order to think about what we want multicultural inclusion to look like in the future, in classrooms and in society, we have to have the difficult conversations, break down our own explicit and implicit biases and allow ourselves to be vulnerable to effect change. As educators, we have so much power to change the schema of this topic, as we play a major role in the way these ideas are presented and discussed in

the classroom. Multicultural inclusivity is something that we are working toward achieving, not only in classrooms, but in society as well. Ultimately, we have the power to change the way society views race in our country, but it begins with us, as educators.

When we place a negative stigma around asking questions about race and racism, or making race or cultural awareness something that should never be discussed, we give the illusion that it is something that isn't important. We also leave students to develop their own opinion on these topics which are usually based on the views they consume in the media, society and their own family's biases. Developing a classroom culture and environment that brings this topic to light in an inclusive and exciting manner will enable students to take pride in their cultural differences and be willing to accept, celebrate and discuss the differences of others. Ensuring that as a teacher, you have built a safe classroom environment that allows students to be vulnerable and respectful regarding this topic is crucial.

I will be using Appoquinimink School District's current First Grade ELA Unit 3 Fiction LFS map to focus the lessons and activities in this unit. The following Common Core State Standards are addressed in this unit:

- RL.1.1: Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.
- RL. 1.2: Retell stories including key details and demonstrate an understanding of their central message or lesson
- RL.1.3: Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story using key details.
- RL.1.9: Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.

### **Objectives**

The objective of this unit is to teach the first grade ELA standards while having meaningful dialogue surrounding the topic of multiculturalism and respect for differences among people. Students will gain exposure to culturally rich and inclusive mentor texts that may yield conversation around the topic of fair/equal treatment depending on culture and/or race and representation of different cultures through stories about those character's lives.

The unit will begin with a discussion around the differences between two people and how those differences play a major role in why these two people are friends. This conversation and activity will allow students to begin thinking about the people they are

closest to whether it be their friends or family members, and how they are different from those people. Once they have considered those differences, they will be asked to think about how those differences are beneficial to their relationship with that person.

The next activity will have students compare characters in two different stories. The characters in those stories are going to have similarities so students will be given the opportunity to discuss and compare/contrast the main characters in those stories.

Though these classroom activities do not lend themselves to an immediate focus on race and cultural diversity, the main goal of this unit with the primary grades is to introduce different types of characters, what their lives look like, and exposure/representation of these daily lives in order to provide all students with a look into a life that may be similar or different from their own.

### **Enduring Understandings**

- Students will compare/contrast two characters in the same story.
- Students will compare/contrast two characters in different stories.
- Students will have conversations surrounding differences between themselves and others in whole group, small group and paired settings.
- Students will gain insight regarding how their differences make them unique and special.

### **Essential Questions**

- How can I compare two characters and their experiences in a story?
- How can I compare the adventures of characters in different stories?
- How do my differences make my relationships stronger?

### **Background Information/Content**

Having a conversation around how to take the topic surrounding the deep racial history of America and applying it to a first-grade curriculum proved to be a difficult task. I think that most of the learning that I have done is mainly beneficial to the teacher of any grade level, to take a step back and consider the fact that they may have implicit biases and how to become aware of those biases and consider how they affect their classroom environment and students. I hope that other educators can gain a perspective of where they are coming from in their own personal racial identity and take that information to begin building their anti-racist classroom.

## **Building a Positive Racial Identity**

One of the guiding principles of “Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education” is creating a positive racial identity. When thinking about beginning the personal journey to building an anti-racist classroom, we must consider our own racial identity. Ali Michael talks about how he struggled with building his own positive racial identity because he was white and he thought that his whiteness did not lend itself to him being able to discuss race and have a racial identity. He continues by telling a story regarding his experience in school in southern United States where many people who were proud to identify as white were White Supremacists which he did not want to be part of. He quickly learned that there is more than one way to identify as white, and that he chose to identify as an antiracist white person. We have to get away from thinking that being white is a negative in the conversation of race in America and think about it positively. Tatum suggests that in order for white people to be able to take part in antiracism, they have to be able to identify as White in a way that is not psychologically harmful.<sup>1</sup> Having a strong, positive racial identity, for white people, means that you have an understanding of what it means to be white in today’s society, acknowledging one’s racial privilege and the history of racial oppression in the United States. Michael suggests that having a positive white racial identity requires the ability to see how one can be simultaneously part of the problem and part of the solution.<sup>2</sup> The first step in building an antiracist classroom is coming to terms with your own racial identity and find out where you stand on this topic. Part of building an anti-racist classroom and realizing your own racial identity is a journey, not a destination. Unpacking your own racial identity can be a process that can take a lifetime as you gain more information about yourself and incorporate it into your everyday life.

Michael suggests that after developing a positive racial identity, one must learn what it means to be racially competent. He defines racial competence as “having the skills and confidence to engage in healthy and reciprocal cross-racial relationships; to recognize and honor difference without judgement;...to cultivate support mechanisms for continuing to be involved in antiracist practice even when it is discouraging or conflictual; to speak one’s mind and be open to feedback on one’s ideas;...and to raise race questions about oneself and ones practice.”<sup>3</sup> Racial competence is the next step

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<sup>1</sup> Michael, Ali. *Raising Race Questions*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 2015. 4

<sup>2</sup> Michael, Ali. *Raising Race Questions*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 2015. 4

<sup>3</sup> Michael, Ali. *Raising Race Questions*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 2015. 5

in developing an anti-racist classroom. One must feel comfortable enough to have the difficult conversations and raise questions to better understand race and ultimately, better serve one's students. Many people believe that we have these conversations about race in order for us to have these direct conversations in our classroom with our students, however, this discussion and self-discovery process is the behind-the-scenes work as a teacher looking to better serve all students that enter their classroom. This work is for the educator to take a look inside themselves to become aware of their personal implicit biases.

### **Not Too Young to Learn**

As previously stated, trying to figure out how to take the learning that I've done regarding the racist history of the United States and applying it to my first-grade curriculum was a daunting task. Are there standards that say when it is developmentally appropriate to discuss the topic of race in the classroom? I struggled with finding facts, statistics and information regarding this topic, as I know that many parents, as well as other educators may feel like this subject matter is not developmentally appropriate for my 6 and 7-year-old students. After thinking about my experience in the classroom regarding hearing students say words or phrases that they may have heard at home without having a true understanding of the meaning, or calling someone else's culture 'weird' or having students feel nervous about the fact that they are curious about my hair, I thought that this conversation needs to be had at these early ages.

When we are told that race is something that is forbidden to discuss, we subconsciously give students the idea that it is an unimportant matter that you do not need to know much about because it is 'rude' to discuss. What many don't realize is how detrimental this is to our natural way of learning as human beings. How else are we to become comfortable to ask questions, discuss differences, and have a positive opinion about them when our country has come from such a dark place when it comes to the aspect of race? Allowing students to feel comfortable in asking questions, learning and having an open, honest, and respectful conversations around race will help their brains go from a fixed mindset about this subject matter to a growth mindset of the subject. Our goal as educators should be to grow the minds of our students in any and every way possible, and one of the most important ways for us to accomplish this task to give them the power to have these conversations, ask the difficult questions and develop an understanding of the world around them.

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This can be a scary thought to do at such a young age, since many adults struggle in this area, however, if we start the conversations with young students before they are exposed to the opinions of those around them, we give them the power of knowledge and understanding, which hopefully changes the way they view the world as they grow older.

In *Unlearning Discrimination in Early Years*, author, Babette Brown suggests that many of children's perceptions of people who are different from themselves are based on negative stereotypes that will remain if positive steps are not taken to counter this learning.<sup>4</sup> This idea alone inspired the concept of this unit. This unit will begin the conversation about those who are different. Though the unit does not delve deep into the direct conversation of race specifically, it provides them the opportunity to think about and celebrate differences before the negative stereotypes about differences and similarities between themselves and those of another culture can set in. Students will be given the opportunity to reflect on differences and similarities between themselves and their peers as well as how they compare to characters in stories that may look or live differently than they do. Having these conversations with students in first grade will be a first step into countering the negative stereotypes that they may have already developed from home. My personal goal for this unit is to have students build their own thoughts and opinion regarding stereotypes that they hear. I want them to have the exposure, even if it is just in a picture book, to those who are of another culture and/or live in a different environment.

She also mentions that between the ages of three and six, most children have developed a deeper understanding of themselves and their world. It is then where you begin to see children teasing/refusing to play with children who have a darker skin color than them, who speak different languages, who dress differently, or those who have physical disabilities.<sup>5</sup> With this being said, I believe that first grade is the perfect time to have these conversations with children, if not too late. They begin to express these negative stereotypes that they've learned from discriminatory actions and stereotypes they see and hear, as well as the way adults respond to their observations and questions about differences in skin color and physical features.<sup>6</sup> We need to be

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998. 23

<sup>5</sup> Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998. 14

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998. 21

part of the conversation that helps them to unlearn these stereotypes that they don't even understand before they take root and become adults with implicit biases that they struggle to admit to.

### **Multicultural Education Does Not Mean Anti-Racist**

Often times, the terms multicultural inclusivity and building an anti-racist classroom can seem to be used interchangeably. Multicultural education is only a piece of developing an anti-racist classroom. Depending on the way it is presented, multicultural education alone can lead to developing cultural stereotypes and giving students the idea that their culture is the norm or superior to the other cultures that they are learning about. Babette Brown mentions "Simply learning about cultures and appreciating cultural differences, the way other people do things and the way 'they' celebrate 'their' festivals has little impact on the negative attitudes children already hold towards adults and children from these cultures."<sup>7</sup>

Multicultural education can be an important factor in building one's anti-racist classroom, however, there needs to be an anti-discriminatory approach along with it. Brown suggests that introducing multicultural education to young children with an anti-discriminatory approach can encourage children to draw on their own experiences, to appreciate the way their differences, and to view them positively.<sup>8</sup> The fact that students will be able to "link their own experiences to other situations and inequalities is likely to be more effective than simply telling them about 'other' cultures."<sup>9</sup>

### **Classroom Activities-Books**

#### **Cookie and Milk: A Scientifically Stuntastic Sisterhood<sup>10</sup>**

"Cookie and Milk: A Scientifically Stuntastic Sisterhood" by Michele McAvoy is about two friends who have completely different interests, but their differences take them on adventures that make them even better friends in the end.

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998. 43

<sup>8</sup> Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998. 45

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998. 45

<sup>10</sup> McAvoy, Michele. *Cookie and Milk: A Scientifically Stunt-Tastic Sisterhood*. Dearborn, MI: Cardinal Rules Press, 2019.

### **Those Shoes<sup>11</sup>**

“Those Shoes” by Maribeth Boelts is about a young boy who works hard to find the special shoes that he wants, only to discover that they are too small for him to wear. He meets a friend who is in need and their new friendship leads him to make a difficult decision.

### **The Last Stop on Market Street<sup>12</sup>**

“The Last Stop on Market Street” by Matt de la Pena is about a young boy named CJ who asks his grandmother why they do not have all of the things that other people have (ex. Car and iPod). In the end, CJ learns to be content with all that he has.

## **Classroom Activities-Lessons**

### **Lesson 1**

The materials needed for this lesson are chart paper, “Cookie and Milk: A Scientifically Stuntastic Sisterhood” by Michele McAvoy, 2 packs of mini marshmallows, and 200 toothpicks. To begin this lesson, I will start by telling students that we will be playing a game. I will state criteria, and if the students meet those criteria, they will stand. If they do not meet that criteria, they should remain seated. Some criteria statement examples are as follows:

- Stand up if you have black hair
- Stand up if you are 6 years old
- Stand up if you wear glasses
- Stand up if you are in first grade
- Stand up if you have blue eyes

After playing, I will ask students to think of any other criteria statements that were not addressed. Why is it important to share these differences? What does it tell us about each other? Write down the word *diversity* on the board and work with students to come up with a definition that means ‘being different from each other’. <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Boelts, Maribeth. *Those Shoes*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> De La Pena, Matt. *Last Stop on Market Street*. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Price, Karla. “It's Okay to Be Different: Teaching Diversity with Todd.” *Readworks.org. International Literacy Association, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.*



Next, I will explain to the students that we will be reading a book about two close friends who are very *diverse* or different from each other and see how those differences lead them on adventures in the story. Read “Cookie and Milk: A Scientifically Stuntastic Sisterhood” by Michele McAvoy. As you read, ask questions that guide students to understanding how the characters felt throughout main events in the story such as “How do you think Cookie felt when Milk knocked her down?” Allow students the opportunity to make connections with the characters by embedding turn and talks throughout the story for students to share predictions. Allowing students to make connections with the character’s feelings and experiences within the text will develop a deeper understanding of key details in the text.

After reading, discuss the differences between Cookie and Milk as characters. As a whole group, create a chart that shows those differences and discuss how those differences help to make them even better friends.

Next, I will tell students that they are going to be given marshmallows and toothpicks and their goal is to build a tower with those materials, but there is a catch. Only one-half of the students will receive the marshmallows and the other half of the class will get toothpicks. The goal is that the students must build a structure using marshmallows and toothpicks, but the person holding either the marshmallows or toothpicks may only touch the object they were given by the teacher. Have children problem solve and work together to meet their goal.

After completing the activity, bring students back together to discuss how their differences in materials allowed them to work together to meet a common goal. Be sure that students leave the discussion with the understanding that each person was important and needed to contribute to the process of building the structure in order to ensure that

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<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/okay-different-teaching-diversity-890.html?tab=4>.

they followed all of the rules for the activity and were successful in the end. Partner 1 should have only touched the marshmallows. Partner 2 should have only touched the toothpicks. Ask students the following questions to facilitate this whole group discussion:

- “What were the challenges faced when trying to build your structure?”
- “Did anyone try to complete the activity independently?”
- “Was it easier or harder to complete the activity when attempting to do it without your partner?”
- “What did your process look like?”
- “How did your differences in materials help you achieve your goal?”

Students should gain the understanding that though their materials were different from each other, it was necessary for both partners to work together in order to build their structure and meet the common goal.

## Lesson 2

The materials needed for this lesson are chart paper and a class set of graphic organizers (Venn Diagram or a T-Chart). Begin the lesson by having students turn and talk about the word *diversity* from the previous day’s lesson. Recall the differences between Cookie and Milk from the story and how their differences made their friendship stronger. Create a list of differences and similarities of the students in the room, with student assistance and talk about how these similarities and differences are beneficial to our classroom community. Examples of how their similarities and differences are beneficial to the classroom community could be:

- We can learn about the way certain cultures celebrate holidays and encourage them to share about it when they are celebrating
- We can learn to respectfully ask questions that we may have about differences
- Bond with those who we thought were different because they look different from us, but we learn that their daily life is more similar than we thought

Place students in groups and have them each identify one thing that is different/unique about them from the rest of the group and write it on a piece of paper. Come together as a class and create a display/anchor chart that shows each child’s difference in the class. Discuss how each child’s difference makes our classroom community stronger.

Next, students will complete a graphic organizer (Venn diagram or T-Chart) that compares themselves to a friend or person of their choice (family member). This graphic

organizer will show how their differences and similarities help to make their friendship/relationship stronger.

### Lesson 3

Materials that are needed for this lesson are chart paper and a copy of “Those Shoes”, by Maribeth Boelts. Begin the lesson by explaining to students that we will be reading two stories over the next few days and as we read these stories, we are going to think about how the main characters, their lives, and their experiences are similar and different. Read “Those Shoes” by Maribeth Boelts. . As you read, ask questions that guide students to understanding how the characters felt throughout main events in the story such as “Do you think that Jeremy wanted to give Antonio his shoes? How would you feel if you were Jeremy? “Allow students the opportunity to make connections with the characters by embedding turn and talks throughout the story for students to share predictions. Allowing students to make connections with the character’s feelings and experiences within the text will develop a deeper understanding of key details in the text.

As a whole group, on chart paper, complete a character analysis on the main character, Jeremy. The character analysis should include the character’s name, physical description, description of where he lives, important people in the character’s adventure, and character traits. You may need to conduct a lesson on what character traits are prior to completing the character analysis. After completing the character analysis of Jeremy, explain to students that we will be reading another story on the following day and we will be looking to compare what we have learned about Jeremy to our new character.

### Lesson 4

Materials that are needed for this lesson are chart paper and a copy of “The Last Stop on Market Street” by Matt de la Pena. Begin the lesson by having students turn and talk about the main character in “Those Shoes”. Students should recall the character analysis page that you completed whole group yesterday. Explain that today they will be reading a story that is about a boy who goes on an adventure with his grandmother. Explain that we should look and listen for similarities and differences between Jeremy from “Those Shoes” and CJ from “The Last Stop on Market Street”. Read “The Last Stop on Market Street”. As you read, ask questions that guide students to understanding how the characters felt throughout main events in the story such as “Why does CJ want all of these different items?” Allow students the opportunity to make connections with the characters by embedding turn and talks throughout the story for students to share predictions. Allowing students to make connections with the character’s feelings and experiences within the text will develop a deeper understanding of key details in the text.

As a whole group, complete a character analysis on the main character, CJ. The character analysis should include the character's name, physical description, description of where he lives, important people in the character's adventure, and character traits. Discuss the similarities and differences between Jeremy and CJ.

## Lesson 5

After students have learned about the word *diversity*, discussed how their differences contribute to stronger relationships, and compared the differences of characters within the same story and within different stories, we are going to introduce the cumulative project for the unit. Students are going to think of one difference about themselves that is personal to them, for example, a student could write "I celebrate Kwanzaa." as their difference. They are going to take that sentence and create a page for our class book. This class book will consist of the different pages that students write that talks about each of their differences. The culminating project will be a class book that you could laminate and place in the classroom library at the end of the unit.

## Appendix

Students will be given the opportunity to ask questions about key details that are within the texts. This activity will address **Common Core State Standard for Literature RL.1.1: Ask and answer questions about key details in a text.** Students will answer questions provided by the teacher regarding key details in the text in order to demonstrate understanding of the story sequence.

Students will be asked to discuss stories and important details within these stories to demonstrate comprehension. This activity will address **Common Core State Standard for Literature RL. 1.2: Retell stories including key details and demonstrate an understanding of their central message or lesson.** After reading multiple stories, students will demonstrate understanding by creating a character analysis on main characters and comparing the lives and experiences of those characters.

Students will be given the opportunity to describe characters, settings, and major events within each story as they read and think about the lives of the main characters. This activity will address **Common Core State Standard for Literature RL.1.3: Describe characters, settings, and major events in a story using key details.** After reading multiple stories, students will demonstrate understanding by creating a character analysis on main characters and comparing the lives and experiences of those characters.

Students will be given the opportunity to analyze 2 characters within the same story and discuss how their similarities and differences help to make them even better friends. After comparing two characters in one story, students will read 2 different stories, “Those Shoes” by Maribeth Boelts and “The Last Stop on Market Street” by Matt de la Pena. After reading, students will analyze the lives, personality and experiences of each character and compare/contrast them. This activity will address **Common Core State Standard for Literature RL.1.9: *Compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in stories.***

### **Annotated Bibliography**

Boelts, Maribeth. *Those Shoes*. Somerville , MA: Candlewick Press, 2009.

This book does a great job with utilizing a character of color as the main character who lives in an inner city. This particular character will allow students from the area in which I teach to have exposure to what life in the city looks like through thoughtful discussion and conversation. Many of my students have never been out of their hometown of suburban Middletown, DE. Exposing them to characters who have different experiences than them gives them the chance to see environment different from their own.

Brown, Babette. *Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years*. Trentham Books, 1998.

Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years was crucial to the development of this unit. I spent many months trying to find research that supports the idea that even young students begin to pick up on discriminatory behaviors. I needed to find research that demonstrated what I felt in my heart about students and how they learn about stereotypes, race and how to navigate discussions around those topics. Many people told me that discussing race in first grade was not developmentally appropriate and that they should not be exposed to such a heavy topic. The research that I found from this book allowed me to feel comfortable in my decision to start the conversation around diversity with my first grade students.

De La Pena, Matt. *Last Stop on Market Street* . New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2015.

This book does a similar job as “Those Shoes” by Maribeth Boelts. This tells a story of a child of color travelling through the city with his grandmother. This book provides students with exposure to another culture and a child with difference experiences than them.

McAvoy, Michele. *Cookie and Milk: A Scientifically Stunt-Tastic Sisterhood*. Dearborn, MI: Cardinal Rules Press, 2019.

This is a wonderful story about two friends who are very different on the inside and on the outside, but their differences are what make them the best of friends. This story was perfect to help teach the idea that we are all different, but our differences are what make our relationships stronger. It supports the fact that differences can be a good thing.

Michael, Ali. *Raising Race Questions*. New York, NY: Teacher's College Press, 2015.

This book was helpful because it focused directly on how whiteness in education has an effect on the relationships with students as well as their achievement in the classroom. This book gave me the information to take this topic of race in America and apply it directly to the classroom.

Price, Karla. "It's Okay to Be Different: Teaching Diversity with Todd." Readworks.org. International Literacy Association, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2019.  
<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/okay-different-teaching-diversity-890.html?tab=4>.

This article was great in helping me begin the conversation around diversity with my first graders. It gets them engaged by starting out with a fun game-like activity, and taking them into being excited about sharing and celebrating their differences.

Notes