

Exploring Cultural Identity and Race in the Elementary Classroom

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Introduction

In modern America, do most parents talk with their children about topics like race, ethnicity, gender, class, or other social identity issues? Not very often, according to a recent survey conducted by the Sesame Workshop and the University of Chicago¹. This survey of more than 6,000 parents revealed some interesting differences. It found that parents of color were much more likely to talk to their children about it because of the potential impact race and ethnicity could and would have on their lives. According to the report, “Black (64%), Asian (64%) and Hispanic (51%) parents are more likely than White parents (41%) to say that race and ethnicity shape how other people treat their child a lot or some”².

Further results suggest that even when these conversations do occur, many parents waited until their children were “10, 11 or even 12 years old”³ because they think that younger children do not notice these differences. Anyone who has spent any time with young children knows that they often have “no filter” when they see people and things that are different from themselves. They notice when someone’s hair or skin tone is different. It is natural curiosity, and it is not wrong, but the way that adults react can send messages that can last a lifetime. Children need to be taught that different is not bad or wrong, and we need to start these conversations early before the questions arise from a negative interaction. Parents and I’d like to add teachers, need to provide trusted guidance, so that they are not left to trying to make sense of a complicated world on their own.

As elementary teachers, our students spend the majority of their day with us, in our school communities. Here they learn far more than just the prescribed curriculum. We need to have open and ongoing conversations to help our students develop a definite sense of their own identities, and to respect those of others around them.

¹ Kotler Jennifer, Haider Tanya, and Levine H Michael, “Sesame Workshop Identity Matters Study,” Sesame Workshop (University of Chicago, 2019), <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/research-and-innovation/sesame-workshop-identity-matters-study>

² Kotler Jennifer, Haider Tanya, and Levine H Michael, “Sesame Workshop Identity Matters Study,” Sesame Workshop (University of Chicago, 2019), <https://www.sesameworkshop.org/what-we-do/research-and-innovation/sesame-workshop-identity-matters-study>

³ Ibid.

Demographics

We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now.
-Martin Luther King, Jr.⁴

Thurgood Marshall Elementary is an excellent example to illustrate MLK's quote. It is currently the largest elementary school in the Christina School District. Nestled among apartment buildings, townhomes, and single-family dwellings, it is just beyond the city of Newark. The school has a distinguished achievement history, and many families choose to "choice" their children to the school. Marshall is a K-5 school with an active PTA and strong teaching staff, many of whom have been there for many years. Its families have become increasingly diverse, and last year it was reported that 27 different languages are spoken in our children's homes. We have students from Europe, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Africa, and many more. They live nearby in the apartments that are within walking distance and many are professionals employed by DuPont, and J.P. Morgan Chase.

Demographically, our school is very similar to the District itself. With an enrollment of 14,408 students⁵ last year, the Christina School District is 39.10% Black or African American, 22.4% Hispanic/Latino, 5.04% Multiracial and 27% White. Thurgood Marshall Elementary is 31.37% Black or African American, 8.22 % Hispanic/Latino, 4.63 Multiracial, and 26.97% White. The most significant difference lies with the Asian American population: at the district level, it is 6.08%, but at Thurgood Marshall, it is 28.7%. These numbers may explain our slightly higher English as a Second Language statistics: the District's rate is 13.6%, while Marshall's is 16.67%.

On the economic front, over 40% of the District lives in poverty, but at Marshall, only 16.9% of families are considered low income. This caused us to lose our Title I status, resulting in a loss of over 60,000 dollars in government funding this year (in order to be considered Title I and to receive extra funding, the magic number is 40%). Working in our school every day, we were baffled by this low number, until we began to think about our families. In order to gain approval for free and reduced lunch (the Title I indicator), forms must be completed and returned, and many of our families are fearful of this. Also, many of our students bring their lunches from home, in the style of their culture and have no interest in purchasing lunch at school. This year our principal insisted that classroom teachers include an explanation of this in their Open House presentations so that parents can understand the difference the Title I identification can make. It also has implications for many of the extracurricular activities, materials and field trip grants that I have successfully received in the past, thanks to the Title I distinction.

⁴ "Martin Luther King, Jr. Quotes," BrainyQuote (Xplore), accessed October 13, 2019, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/martin_luther_king_jr_132359.

⁵ State of Delaware School reports 2018

My role at Thurgood Marshall is to serve the highest achieving students through the Advanced Academics Program. This program begins officially in the third grade, and most students who are selected remain in my classes through their fifth grade. They qualify for the program through a variety of measures: standardized tests, a nationally normed assessment given in second grade, classroom performance and teacher and parent recommendations. Our curriculum includes rigorous math and ELA programs and I have been able to introduce cross-curricular units on topics of student interest, along with a variety of competitions throughout the year. Parents are often strong advocates for their children and pursue acceptance into the Advanced Academics Program. The immigrant population is tightly knit, and they readily share information with each other about the best schools, programs and after school tutoring. They are a large part of the reason that our school is so vast, and parent participation is so high.

Rationale

I have been involved with the Delaware Teacher Institute since its very first cycle and have created many units that I continue to use year after year. Since participating in *Stamped from the Beginning*, I have begun to form an idea for this next unit that could expand on my previous curricular unit. That unit was focused on identity, as students used artifacts and pictures that represented their ancestry as inspiration for poetry writing. This time, my objective is for students to examine their own family history and cultural identity, then to expand it to their classmates' and school community and then beyond our walls to the global community. Encouraged by the Sesame Workshop research findings, this unit will stimulate conversations and reflections about all kinds of social identity *because* of their tender age, before misconceptions and prejudices are significantly formed. Perhaps it will also encourage family conversations and open avenues for dialogue on these important topics.

Objectives

My goal for this unit is to help my young students think critically about the world around them. Specifically I would like them to become aware that there are injustices in their very own world, and that they can do something to help, such as spearheading service projects in our community. It will also develop their skills in considering the perspective of others and begin to develop an understanding of our country's history, beyond the traditional texts. Along with this, I hope that it will set them on a path of appreciation for diversity in my class and beyond.

As a result of learning from this unit, students will: recognize and value diversity among their classmates, understand similarities and differences between themselves and others, and hopefully they will build an appreciation for the diverse backgrounds and stories of children from other countries. They may find that their cultures are different but they may also be surprised to find some commonalities.

In addition, this unit is guided by the Enduring Understandings that learning about the lives of others can help build empathy, respect, understanding and connection; that it is

important to listen to and appreciate the personal stories of others, and that we are all affected by the past but can be active participants in social justice and change.

The Essential Questions asked throughout this unit include *What can we learn from our past? What does diversity mean to me? What does it mean to be different? How can I appreciate the differences of others? What is social injustice and what can I do about it?* Many of my students have faced adversity, poverty and discrimination. This unit is designed to help them become more thoughtful about themselves and others and to help them feel empowered to make a difference in the future.

Content

This seminar truly caused me to reconsider my acceptance of history and to examine my own place in it. As a white, middle class woman who grew up in Canada and immigrated to the United States as an adult, my American History was largely developed through television. Growing up near Niagara Falls, the television news from Buffalo and Niagara Falls N.Y. was often seemingly full of violence and racial discontent. From the Canadian side, this gave a very skewed version of life in the United States. Today I am far more aware of the need to consider the news source and the way that stories can be manipulated. Students need to be educated about this as well.

I had little idea of the fallacies that are often accepted as fact about history. Just a few years ago, it was common practice to close schools for Columbus Day to celebrate the hero that discovered America. Not so today, for although Columbus did indeed “discover” the New World, historians are now making us familiar with his controversial actions, such as his use of slavery and violence towards indigenous people, and the introduction of diseases that would eventually wipe out thousands of them. Once revealed, his personal journals and advocacy of the slave trade created a dark cloud over his legacy and beginning in 1991, many cities and a few states now celebrate Indigenous People’s Day⁶, instead of Christopher Columbus. It recognizes the atrocities inflicted upon them by the European explorer and his followers and helps bring to light the fact that many history textbooks “sanitize” their treatment at the hands of the White Europeans.

So why did we celebrate as hero someone who just might just as easily labelled a villain? In his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, , author James W. Loewen states that “authors may leave out things that many Americans hate, such as socialism or racism, to make historical figures appeal to as many people as possible.”⁷We all know the story of

⁶ Becky Little, “Goodbye, Columbus. Hello, Indigenous Peoples' Day,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, October 6, 2017), <https://www.history.com/news/goodbye-columbus-hello-indigenous-peoples-day>.

⁷ JAMES W. LOEWEN, *LIES MY TEACHER TOLD ME: Everything American History Textbooks Get Wrong* (NEW YORK: NEW PRESS, 2019), 13

the tenacious Helen Keller who learned to communicate despite being deaf and blind, but Loewen fills readers in on the rest of her life, beyond being the little girl who overcame extreme physical challenges. As an adult, Keller realized that her achievements were made possible in large part to her privilege and she became a passionate social activist, advocating for those who were not born to the advantages that she was. However, most of America remembers her most for her achievements despite her disabilities, freezing her forever in their minds as a deaf/blind child.

What other misconceptions have been encouraged about the history of America; this melting pot where the streets are paved with gold? In 2016, author Ibram X. Kendi published his novel, Stamped from the Beginning,⁸ tracing what he calls “the definitive history of racist ideas in America”. Very quickly, it became a bestseller, bringing these conversations to the mainstream media. It forces us to confront our biases and beliefs and provided for rich discussion and learning as the anchor text for this seminar.

The Roots of Racism

We began this seminar with introductions, but with the intent not just of learning each other’s names, but to really connect on a personal level. We started with a free writing opportunity about our initial thoughts on the topic: What is race? Why does it matter? What do you worry about in your teaching with regard to race? At first people were reticent to share, but then we began to open up, talking about our schools, and the populations we serve. Although we discovered that we taught different grade levels, we had a great deal in common. After all, we all were there by choice. We wanted to learn more about race in America and how we can use this important content to help our students.

Certainly the political landscape and present President makes it practically impossible to avoid the topic of racial discrimination at many, many levels. One cannot listen to or view the new media without being confronted with yet another report of prejudice and racial discrimination. Although there have been periods of time when the country has seen similar unrest (think back to the 1960s and Vietnam era), it doesn’t make it any better. We should like to think that our society has evolved since then, but it can seem that with immigration issues at our borders, it has gotten much worse.

Can the roots of racism be traced? Where did this term and divisions stem from? The term ‘race’ did not even appear in the English language before c. 1520, stemming from the term ‘Razza’, meaning group or type of people. Driven by trade routes, Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries began exploring the world and encountering humans that had different appearances from themselves. As new groups of people were encountered on these travels, use of the term increased, although at that time, it was based more on the civilization status, such as Roman/Barbarian, Free/Slave,

⁸ Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017).

Christian/Jew/Muslim. Skin color was not the main determinant. In fact, people were under the misconception that skin color was fluid, based on the climate where people lived. Hence they believed that people from Africa had dark skin merely because of the high temperatures and sun exposure there. Of course, there were many other fallacies that were accepted at that time, perhaps making up origin stories to explain the variety of features, such as hair texture, facial structure and physical size variations.

By the mid-1400s, explorers were seizing more than natural resources from their conquests, taking slaves and constructing anti-racist ideas. These ideas evolved quickly and by 1630, there was a judicial decision forbidding interracial relations, thus binding racism and sexism. Scientific racism was born with two very distinct theories emerging: the Assimilationists believed in monogenesis, while the Segregationists believed in polygenesis. Puritan colonists brought God and religion into the forefront, believing that the souls of the enslaved needed to be saved and cleansed through Christianity. This Puritan frenzy increased fear and control and it played a significant role in the Salem Witch trials. The Devil was given a face, and that face was Black. The connection between race and religion was cemented.

Here in the Western world, slavery and racism reinforced each other. In Roman times and earlier, one *race* enslaved another when wars were fought and victors took the spoils, (including people). However, the practice of slavery in the New World was different. White people made all the rules, even making them up as they went along. Europeans in the Western world seemed to forget the level of sophistication that could be found in civilizations of Africa and Asia, and instead promoted other racist ideas that justified their reliance on slave labor to build their social and economic systems. As more world nations began to join the slave trade, the notion that Africans were not only different, but they were inferior in every way became widely accepted.

Children are often surprised to hear that even our founding fathers owned slaves. This is often conveniently omitted from textbooks because it is hard to reconcile the idea that these heroes of our nation could engage in such inhumane activities. Even as resolutions were being passed in 1774, condemning the African slave trade as “injurious”, “wicked”, “cruel” and “unnatural”⁹, Thomas Jefferson still supported the belief that the White man was superior. Meanwhile, he continued to own slaves and it is highly likely that he fathered several children with a slave named Sally Hemmings. This revelation causes one to question the generally accepted folklore of all our forefathers. I will never visit the Constitution Center from the same perspective again!

*But never yet could I find that a black man had uttered a thought above plain narration; never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture.*¹⁰
-Thomas Jefferson

⁹ Adam Foley, seminar notes, 5/14/2019

¹⁰ Seminar notes, 5/14/2019

Finally, in 1785, Jefferson put forth an Emancipation plan that “called for all Blacks born after a certain date to be freed at birth, raised at public expense till the age of majority, then “to be colonized to such place as the circumstances of the time should render most proper”¹¹. To compensate for the decrease in labor forces caused by this proclamation, he then called for increased White immigration from other parts of the world, to be encouraged by incentives. But when delegates from South Carolina and Georgia, with support from North Carolina rejected the idea, the other delegates compromised in order to appease them, safeguarding the practice for another twenty years. Despite this, other states moved forward with abolition of the slave trade, beginning with Vermont (1777), and followed by Massachusetts (1783), Pennsylvania (1780), Rhode Island (1784), Connecticut (1784), New Hampshire (1788-1789), New York (1799), Ohio (1802), New Jersey (1804), Indiana (1816) and Illinois (1818). Although slaves were freed, their legal statuses varied from state to state.

By 1805, slavery was outlawed or in progress by means of gradual emancipation in all northern states. Activist like Benjamin Lundy tried to convince Southerners to follow suit. He had the idea that the freed slaves could be colonized somewhere else which resulted in the American Colonization Society which founded the colony of Liberia as a new home for them. This was also the time of Fredrick Douglass, perhaps the most commonly well-known escaped slave and abolitionist. While still enslaved, he had learned to read and write and mastered a trade, he managed to earn enough money to send back to his slave owner and purchase his own freedom. Other key figures in the abolitionist movement include William Lloyd Garrison (who truly saw African Americans as equals and promoted revolution if necessary), Sarah and Angela Grimke, Henry Highland Garrett, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Dwight Weld and Elijah P. Lovejoy.

Also during this time (1787-1855), American was extending growth towards the west, lands that had been laid claim to by Spain and of course, the American Indians. This brought more racial conflict. The landholders were greedy for the land and they did not care who they were taking it from. American folklore heroes Davy Crockett, Jim Bowie and others fought at the Alamo and our Native Americans have seen their culture and land destroyed by the white man. We have tried to “whitewash’ them by stealing their land and their children, forcing them to assimilate in orphanages with the intent to civilize them.

Kendi does not skim over the deplorable treatment of African Americans after slavery. African Americans did not suddenly gain all the rights and freedoms of White Europeans. Although there were many who fought to bring their injustices to light, White Privilege remains very real. Just by virtue of being born White, regardless of socio-economic status, we are given rights and privileges that people of color are not. This is the very definition of White privilege.

¹¹ Notes on the state of Virginia, 1785

In her book, White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism,¹² author Robin DiAngelo points out that we often sorely lack open education about racism and how it works in the world. And even when we do take courses or attend trainings, they avoid the uncomfortable truths and instead use racially coded language that avoid terms such as “white”, “over advantaged” or “privileged”. Instead, we are comfortable shifting responsibility by using terms like “urban”, “inner city” and “disadvantaged”. Although my students are young, literature such as our novel Front Desk¹³ can provide them with situations that encourage them to recognize and discuss racial injustice in a way that they can understand and reflect upon.

And so today, we are in the midst of an America that continues to be so divisive and biased that we are separating families, pulling immigrant children from school and using violence to control our streets and borders. It is a turbulent time but by not teaching and talking about what is real and authentic, we are missing out on the opportunity to build a better, more tolerant society for our future.

Nothing is easier, or more dangerous, than cultivation of hatred of the stranger. We must be humble & listen & heed forgotten voices.

What is new is the means we now have, if only we would use them right, to build a connected world of dignity & decency.

-Steve Stostak¹⁴

Why It's Important for Teachers

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics¹⁵ white students are no longer the majority in our schools. However, most teachers in the United States are white. Even with the best intentions, there is a disconnect between the experiences of our faculties and real lives of our students. Students of color have unique needs, as outlined by Gonzalez¹⁶. In an online article, she says that first and foremost, students of color need to be taught to love themselves. Instruction should be authentic, centered on their lives, realities and experiences. It may be a challenge, but secondly, families and community members should be invited to become partners with the school. Thirdly, she stresses the fact that

¹² Robin DiAngelo, White Fragility: Why Its so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism (London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2019))

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Steve Sostak, “Twitter Post,” Twitter (Twitter, October 12, 2019), <https://twitter.com/inspirecitizen1/status/1183005756632649729>.

¹⁵ National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014

¹⁶ Jennifer Gonzalez, “Four Ways Teachers Can Support Students of Color,” Cult of Pedagogy, September 21, 2018, <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/students-of-color/>.

students need to be exposed to role models of color--those that look like them—through guest speakers, books and news articles. And fourth, it is crucial that we “disrupt the single narrative of color”. In “the Danger of a Single Story”¹⁷ Chimamanda Adiche gives a thought provoking presentation on this very topic of stereotyping and prejudice. She cautions about judging an entire group of people by a single interaction in a very engaging way.

But these conversations are not easy.

*In the ways that we teach and learn about the history of American slavery, the nation needs an intervention.*¹⁸

-Southern Poverty Law Center

Africans and Native Americans share a common experience of mistreatment at the hands of Americans. Racism and white supremacy today have their roots firmly planted in the history of past racial justifications for slavery and atrocities inflicted on our fellow man. But if we want to avoid repeating the mistakes from the past, we must first truly learn about them. Unfortunately, there is evidence that our curriculums and classrooms are failing to teach the uncomfortable history of slavery in America. Teaching Tolerance¹⁹ is an organization committed to providing resources for educators to confront the complexities of prejudice and bias in our country today. In a recent study, they surveyed U.S. high school seniors and social studies teachers and did a deep dive into the textbooks and standards being taught. Their results are troubling: only 8% of *high school seniors* identified slavery as the main cause of the Civil War, and 68% don't know that in order to put a formal end to slavery, it took a constitutional amendment. While teachers responded that they were comfortable talking about it in class, open ended questions revealed that the opposite was true, and 58% said their prescribed textbooks were “inadequate”. Even state standards fail to stress the importance of teaching the tough history of the American enslavement of Africans, skirting the issue of the rise of white supremacy ideology from the practice of slavery. Avoiding these issues does not make them go away, and can result in misconceptions that are hard to change.

The findings of this report has a great deal to say for educators. After analyzing all the survey responses, they were able to highlight seven key problems with the way we teach history today. The first is that we teach about slavery without context., “preferring to

¹⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” TED, accessed October 7, 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.

¹⁸ Cory Turner, “Why Schools Fail to Teach Slavery's 'Hard History',” NPR (NPR, February 4, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/02/04/582468315/why-schools-fail-to-teach-slaverys-hard-history>.

¹⁹ <http://www.teachingtolerance.org>

present the good news before the bad”²⁰ . We teach about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad in elementary school, celebrating their bravery but without teaching about why the Underground Railway existed in the first place. Likewise, in high school, the curriculum often dictates abolitionists and the Emancipation Proclamation without promoting an understanding of the role slave labor played in the development of our country. The second problem points to our vision of improvement without facing the “continuing legacy of the past.” The third educational issue is that we lay the blame for slavery only on the shoulders of the South when we know that it existed in all colonies and in all states. The fourth problem is that we ignore the role of white supremacy, which was a necessary component of the slave trade.

The fifth and sixth problems are in the way we teach history today lie with our pedagogy. Maybe because they are not truly comfortable with the topic, when teachers were asked about their favorite lesson about slavery, dozens talked about classroom simulations of historical events, a strategy that is not seen as useful and can be quite upsetting to some students. Failing to make authentic connections to today without teaching the connections to the past were also standard practice.

The final problem identified by the report is that “we tend to center on the white experience when we talk about slavery.” Too much focus is on the role of the white people in the Civil War and the political and economic impacts of slavery.

The results of this research have significant implications for educators today, mainly white educators. Recognizing that teaching about slavery is challenging for everyone, Teaching Tolerance’s website provides a wealth of educational materials including a framework, a wide variety of primary source texts, and videos, all with teacher guides. It is a precious resource for classroom teachers of all grade levels.

Inequity in Gifted Education

The identification of students for gifted and advanced academic programs has a history of inequity. Whether it is through the use of intelligence tests, standardized testing, and/or teacher recommendation, the balance is frequently tipped in favor of white and upper class children. Children who live in poverty and lower socio-economic environments are often overlooked:

Racism in educators’ attitudes—and in how students are placed in advanced classes—still robs minority students of chances for success. ²¹

²⁰ Cory Turner, “Why Schools Fail to Teach Slavery's 'Hard History',” NPR (NPR, February 4, 2018), <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/02/04/582468315/why-schools-fail-to-teach-slaverys-hard-history>, 10

²¹ Julie Landsman, “Confronting the Racism of Low Expectations,” *Closing Achievement Gaps* 62, no. 3 (November 2004): pp. 28-32)

-Julie Landsman

From their inception, intelligence tests have had a dark history. They have been used as justification for excluding and controlling vulnerable populations by the majority and those in power. They have been a tool to maintain control and to justify eugenic practices, for fear of weakening the white gene pool. Today, most people realize that they are indeed biased and not so accurate as predictors of intelligence or ability. That is why the best programs use multiple measures in identifying students for advanced programs today.

The power held by educators is not to be underestimated. Although my classes generally reflect the cultural makeup of my school, I know that the students in city schools may not have the same chances that my suburban students have. Keeping these minority students from accessing advanced programs is an injustice that can entirely change the courses of their lives. Attending college and earning a degree provides access to higher earning potential and opportunities they might otherwise not realized were open to them. After teaching in the field of gifted education for over 15 years, I have to agree with Landsman when she says “the system that sets up the hierarchy of intelligence and excellence is racist”²²

Fortunately, those trained in gifted education are gradually spreading the word that these tests are biased and merely a snapshot of a child’s performance on any given day. For this reason, the best and most inclusive programs use multiple measures for entrance to these programs. Professional development needs to occur at all levels, including preservice, to initiate and encourage discussion about racism and minority cultures. Reading, reflection and frequent dialogue are crucial to develop educators’ awareness and ability to recognize their own implicit biases. If we consider the bell curve in any population, those highest achievers are always there, they just might be harder to discover. It is our job, as educators, to find them.

Teaching Strategies

Collaborative Learning and Group Work

Although my students are still in elementary school, they still need opportunities to work together to accomplish goals. By being open to listening to the viewpoints and experiences of others, they will flex their team building muscles and open their hearts and minds. I genuinely believe that by challenging their young minds before the middle school years, it will help them gain confidence and security in their identities. These

²² Ibid, p. 3

group projects and discussions will be conducted in person using Socratic Seminars²³ and using technology such as FlipGrid²⁴ and Mystery Skype²⁵.

Integrating a Previous DTI Unit

As mentioned, this unit will be integrated with a unit that I previously created on Identity. It will be cross-curricular in nature and will be taught at the beginning of the year. This year, I will include participation in the Global Read Aloud Project²⁶. This project connects classrooms around the world who are all engaged in the same text. This year, my class will be connecting with *Front Desk*²⁷, the story of a young immigrant who faces many social injustices as she and her family try to fit in here in the United States. It will initiate deep conversation and reflection for my students, while also engaging in communication with classrooms from around the world where daily life is very different. We will utilize Skype²⁸ and electronic postcards.

CNN 10: Student News²⁹

This daily roundup of news from around the world will also be used extensively. However, because it is primarily aimed at middle and high school classes, episodes will be edited where necessary. Clips will be shown that are considered age-appropriate and highlight geography, culture, some politics, and specific international conflicts. This may

²³ “Socratic Seminars - ReadWriteThink,” readwritethink.org, accessed October 9, 2019, <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/socratic-seminars-30600.html>.

²⁴ “Flipgrid,” Flipgrid., accessed October 9, 2019, <https://flipgrid.com/>.

²⁵ “Mystery Skype,” Microsoft in Education, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://education.microsoft.com/skype-in-the-classroom/mystery-skype>.

²⁶ Pernille Ripp, “The Global Read Aloud,” The Global Read Aloud, accessed October 7, 2019, <https://theglobalreadaloud.com/>.

²⁷ Kelly Yang, *Front Desk* (New York, NY: Scholastic Inc., 2019).

²⁸ Microsoft in Education, accessed October 9, 2019, <https://education.microsoft.com/skype-in-the-classroom/mystery-skype>.

²⁹ “CNN 10,” CNN (Cable News Network, February 14, 2017), <https://www.cnn.com/cnn10>.

provide issues that can be used in other activities (such as Four Corner Debates³⁰) in this unit.

Introduction to Debate

Another strategy included in this unit is the introduction of debate. Students will begin to think critically about an assigned topic, research, and present their viewpoint. Historical documents from the Teaching Tolerance website, CNN10, novels, poetry, art from various cultures/countries will also be integrated as sources.

A Note About Social Media

As educators, it is our professional responsibility to keep up with trends in education and stay connected to the issues, policymakers and stakeholder voices. I strongly encourage teachers to use social media, Twitter, in particular, to connect with a robust professional learning network. I find inspiration, collaboration, networking, and just plain, fabulous ideas to incorporate into my repertoire. Begin with your district and colleagues, and by searching for topics and issues that are important to you, you will find a vast wealth of knowledge that will cause you to feel affirmed, conflicted, supported, and reflective. A general Google search will provide straightforward advice on how to get started and on your way to using this excellent resource for your professional development.

Activities

The Global Read Aloud Project

This year's Global Read Aloud book provides an awesome introduction to this unit. It is entitled *Front Desk*³¹ and it tells the story of a young Chinese immigrant and the many challenges she and her family face in America. This main character lives at a motel run by her parents and views many social injustices through the eyes of a child. From the way she is treated at school where she is one of two Asian children in the whole school, to the mistreatment of the people who are "weeklies" at the motel, this novel provides a great deal of rich conversation starters and opportunities for student reflection and debate.

This novel is a read aloud, and students will participate in a global post card exchange with other students reading the same book. It is an opportunity to connect with students in other places and as they describe their daily lives and schools, it opens up discussions about similarities and differences worldwide. It also allows for communication, technology and social studies standards to be integrated. The reading of this novel will be a common thread throughout the unit.

³⁰ "Four Corner Debates", <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/four-corners>

³¹ Kelly Yang, *Front Desk* (New York, NY: Scholastic Inc., 2019)

Four Corner Debates

As an introduction to debate the Four Corner Debate Strategy will be used. Each corner of the room will have a descriptor: Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree. An explanation of this strategy can be found at www.facinghistory.org³². Statements for this activity can be gleaned from the Read Aloud, current events, local issues, or classroom curriculum. Effective statements will give students a chance to reflect and include their own experiences. After revealing the statements, students will be given the chance to think and organize their thoughts in writing. A graphic organizer can help them to clarify their personal pros and cons and to help gather their evidence.

Next the teacher will read one of the statements and students then move to the corner that best represents their thoughts on the subject. Students will be asked to volunteer to share their viewpoint and reasoning, and students can move from their corner to another if they have changed their minds as a result of what they have heard. After each corner has had a chance to share amongst themselves, students should be given the chance to ask questions of others who had different opinions and feelings. After discussion, students should be given the opportunity to switch corners if they feel differently after hearing the explanations of their peers.

Finally, students return to their desks to reflect in their journals about the experience, whether it caused them to change their minds or think more deeply about certain subjects or issues.

Reflecting on Our Roots

Since my students come from many different countries and backgrounds, we have a lot to share and learn from each other. Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* provides a beautiful narration on the day she was born and how she got her name. In the first section of her book, Woodson shares her personal beginning in the part titled *I am born*. These first few pages can be used to introduce the students to researching their own origins. Woodson begins with the day of her birth, where her name came from and what other family members remembered and shared about her as a child.

My students will use iMovie to interview their families and loved ones about their beginnings, including where they were born and when. The origins of their names will be a big part of this activity, along with the proper pronunciation—no nicknames allowed! These will be shared with a photo of each student and linked to a QR code that will be displayed with their photos in a gallery walk. As the QR code is scanned, it will link to the student's presentation. This activity can also be linked to a photo and or family artifact that can be the inspiration for Ekphrastic poetry (see my previous unit).

³² "Four Corners," Facing History and Ourselves, accessed November 29, 2019, <http://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/fourcorners>)

Celebrating our Similarities and Differences!

After sharing our stories, we will construct a huge wall display that shows the many things we have in common and the ways that we differ. For example, several students are from India, but from different geographic areas with different customs. My goal is to show these things in a visual way, perhaps as a collage with words and visual images like photos and illustrations. This would be a nice reveal if you can bring in favorite dishes from the families to try, and to share the students' work with families (unfortunately I cannot, due to food allergies at my school).

Conclusion

The purpose of this unit is to inspire students to explore their identities and family cultures. Beginning with the individual, it can then broaden perspectives by building understanding of their peers and their family origins, using narratives, art, history and literature. It has the potential to integrate standards in technology, geography and history/social studies. It is my hope that by stimulating these kinds of experiences and discussions, my students will become more socially aware and able to better understand the injustices in the world and perhaps even be able to become future community problem solvers.

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Appendix

Implementing District Standards

My goal for this unit is to help my young students think critically about the world around them. It will also develop their skills in considering the perspective of others and begin to

develop an understanding about our country's history, beyond the traditional texts. Along with this, I hope that it will set them on a path of appreciation for diversity, in my class and beyond.

As a result of this unit, students will 1) Recognize and value diversity among their classmates, 2) Understand similarities and differences between themselves and others and 3) Appreciate the diverse backgrounds and stories of children from other countries.

The **Enduring Understandings** for this unit are formed from the District and Common Core standards. After the unit, students will understand that *learning about the lives of others can help build empathy, respect, understanding and connection, that it is important to listen to and appreciate the personal stories of others and that we are affected by the past but can be active participants in social justice and change.*

Essential Questions to guide this unit include *What can we learn from the past? What does diversity mean to me? What is social justice? How are others similar and different from me?*

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7: Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone or beauty of a text (e.g. Graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH6-8.7: Integrate visual information with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.5.7: Conduct short research projects that use several sources to build knowledge through investigation of different aspects of a topic.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy W. 5.11.3.16 Students will use written and oral English appropriate for various purposes and audiences.

Also

Civics 4-5a.5: Students will understand the responsibilities, rights and privileges of United States citizens.

History: 4-5a.17: Students will employ chronological concepts in analyzing historical phenomena

Notes