Notable Trade Book Lesson Plan

The Colors of Us

Written by Karen Katz and Illustrated by Henry Holt

This lesson should be used with students in grades pre-K-2 as they develop an understanding of cultural diversity. This lesson involves students making comparisons between their skin tones and comparisons of skin tones to those of different foods found in their everyday environment. The book is a starting point for these comparisons as it displays bright images through an artist’s perspective. The book includes fictional characters from several nations that have different colors of skin as Lena and her mother notice on their walk around the neighborhood. Students also will make comparisons between their skin color and the skin color of the characters from the book. The lesson further includes students identifying their own skin tone through the mixing of paints and digital photo use.

Key Words: Compare and contrast, Cultural diversity, Food, Neighborhood, Perspective, Skin tones

About the Author

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Citation for this Article

The Colors of Us (1999)
Written by Karen Katz and Illustrated by Henry Holt.
Ages 4-8; Recommended for pre-K to second grade.
Lesson requires two to three days.

A seven-year-old girl, named Lena is learning how to mix colors as she begins to paint a picture of herself, but unbeknownst to her there are many different shades of brown. It is through a walk in the neighborhood that Lena’s mother helps her discover these variations of the color brown through familiar faces. This simple yet powerful picture book is a beautiful introduction through which children can see how familiar faces. This simple yet powerful picture book is a beautiful introduction through which children can see how people are different, yet the same. This book serves as a useful tool for assisting young learners’ development and understanding of cultural diversity.

NCSS Standards

1. Culture
3. People, Places, and Environment
4. Individual Development and Identity

Materials

1. Book: The Colors of Us By Karen Katz
2. Crayola multicultural crayons (Wal-Mart Item)
3. Acrylic paints (multicultural colors)
4. Digital camera
5. Drawing paper
6. Writing paper
7. Large tag board paper
8. Pencils
9. Computer
10. Printer (color)
11. Large map of world drawn on butcher paper
12. Pictures (samples) of people from various nations related to the book
13. Pictures of students in the class

Objectives

Students will

- Compare their skin color with those of the characters in the book and indicate the differences and similarities they notice.
- Identify their skin color as a mixture of colors
- Make comparisons between their skin color and various food items.
- Discuss how our skin color makes us different; while there are many things we all have in common.
Exploration/Introduction

Tell the students they will observe some food items (e.g. cinnamon peanut butter, if there are no allergies among students, honey, butterscotch, and chili powder). They should consider the color of the food item and decide on a name that describes the color of the food item you are observing. Ask, “What is the name of the color of the item you are observing?” “How does the item feel, smell, etc.?”

**Note:** If a student indicates butterscotch is “orange” that answer would be acceptable. Prompt the students for more description by asking, “Can butterscotch be the color of someone’s skin?” Prompt with more questions regarding other food items: peanut butter, a peach, chocolate cupcakes, and coconut.

**Assessment:** Consider the appropriateness of the comments made by students regarding the food items observed and record which students have made appropriate comments on a checklist.

Development

1. Gather the students for a Read Aloud. Read *The Colors of Us* once. Have students describe the skin color of the character Lena and note the comparison made between her skin color and cinnamon in the book.

2. Discuss the other characters and comparisons made in the book between skin colors and food items. Have students describe the people and the colors of their skin in the pictures. Ask, “What food is Sonia’s skin color compared to that of a peach?” Ask, “Can you tell the race of the student?” Ask, “Is your skin color similar to, or different from, any character in the book?” “Why do you think so?” Ask, “In what ways other than skin tone, are the children in the book different from you, and how they are the same?”

3. Have students name some food items they think are similar to the color of their skin such as yogurt, pizza crust, cheese etc., or a food item they remembered from the book.

4. Have the students draw a picture of their face (individual task), color it with multicultural crayons, and write a sentence (with assistance), that describes a comparison between their skin color and a food item of their choice (e.g., Jo-Jin’s skin is the color of honey).

5. Laminate students’ pictures and construct a class book titled “The Colors of Our Class.”

6. Closure: Create a class definition of “the colors of us.” Write out this class definition on the board. Ask, “What makes our class different and what makes us the same?”
Assessment: Student indicates that skin colors make us different but there are many things that make us alike. Consider the comparisons made in students’ discussion (Rubric included)

1. Student identified one difference and one similarity in him/her self from a classmate (1 point)

2. Student identified one difference and two similarities in him/her self compared to a classmate (2 points)

3. Student identified one difference and three similarities in him/her self compared to a classmate (3 points)

Expansion

1. Read: The Colors of Us for a second time.

2. Take a digital photo of students then have them compare their digital photo to their self-portrait (see procedure below).

3. Tell the students they will be “mixing paints” to create a color that resembles their unique skin color (assistance needed for painting activity).

4. Have the students mix two or more paints to create a color close to their skin tone. Draw their face portrait and then paint it with the color, which they previously mixed.

5. After the students have painted their pictures have them paste the digital photo and painted picture side by side on a larger piece of paper and discuss comparisons between the two with a partner. Ask, “What differences do you notice in your skin color between the two pictures?” “How similar is the color between the two pictures?” “Does it take more than one color to create our skin tone?” “Does your skin tone make you feel special?” “How?” “What would it be like if everyone were exactly the same color?” “How is your portrait different from your classmates?”

6. Laminate the photos and place in portfolios or send home.

Assessment: Complete the following rubric for each student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Maybe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student indicates his/her skin color is a unique mix of colors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student makes appropriate comparisons between digital photo and self portrait</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student explains that his/her skin color is different from his/her classmates but they still have many things in common</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Assessment**

1. Student identified at least one similarity and one difference with a character from the book.

2. Student indicates that his/her skin tone is a mixture of colors.

3. Student made comparison between his/her skin color and a food item.

4. Student indicated that skin color is one difference between classmates, but they have many things in common too.

**Suggested Extension Activities**

1. Have students identify some of the nations where characters in the book are from on a globe.

2. For children ages seven and eight draw a picture of the world with an equator included on butcher paper; and have students identify some of the nations where characters in the book are from. Place pictures of people representing these nations on the world map. Discuss with the children how people born closer to the equator usually have darker skin, as darker skin is a protection from the sun and that people born far from the equator usually have paler skin.

3. Additional Books addressing cultural diversity issues.

   - Hamanaka, S. (1999). *All the Colors of the Earth*. New York, NY: William Morrow and Company: This poetic picture book takes a look at children's skin tones and hair and relates these characteristics to the rich colors seen in our environment. Great for teaching cultural diversity. (Ages 4-8)


   Summary: Tarpley’s upbeat, positive portrayal of African American hair helps young girls feel pride in their hair. (Ages 4-8)
### Additional References and Weblinks

A source for articles, recommended readings, and related links on multicultural education.  
[http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/multicultural/front_multicultural.htm](http://www.newhorizons.org/strategies/multicultural/front_multicultural.htm)

A guide with over 50 web sites to assist multicultural educators in locating resources.  
[http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/Multi.html](http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~jar/Multi.html)

A source for websites, books, and journal articles related to cultural diversity in children’s literature.  
[http://staff.lib.msu.edu/corby/education/multicultural.htm](http://staff.lib.msu.edu/corby/education/multicultural.htm)

A source demonstrating the equator, prime meridian, and a map of hemispheres.  