

Teaching the Enduring Understandings About Culture In Primary Social Studies

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Abstract

Educating the young for multicultural understanding and social cohesion are amongst the most important goals of Social Studies. Teachers can broaden and deepen the learning of the concept of culture in order to help students to understand cultural differences and similarities across different communities and to better appreciate the diversities in their midst. This paper offers several enduring understandings about culture that can guide curricular and instructional decisions. Finally, it suggests learning activities that teachers can consider to augment the food, festival and artefacts approach that is commonly used in schools to teach about cultural diversity.

Introduction

Educating the young for multicultural understanding and social cohesion are amongst the most important goals of Social Studies. In the primary school curriculum Social Studies is the school subject with the most potential to help students develop understandings about the complexities of cultural diversity. What is culture? Why are societies or communities different or similar? How can we understand and appreciate our differences? How can diversity be a source of strength rather than a potential for conflict? These are important questions that Social Studies educators must grapple with. In an increasingly interconnected world, Social Studies needs to contribute to the understanding of

multiple perspectives from diverse cultures.

It is commonly understood that the population of Singapore is usually classified into three ‘races’ – Chinese, Malay, Indian - and a fourth category known as “Others”. “Others” is a catch-all category meant for those who do not fit neatly into the Chinese, Malay and Indian categories. This categorization is popularly shortened into the acronym CMIO. Racial classification is a legacy of the British colonial administration (Tan, 2004). The CMIO categorization serves to define and order the culture of the different ‘races’ as each group is ascribed a specific culture with its attendant artefacts, festivals, and artistic expressions (Matthews, 2018). Anecdotal evidence suggest that the teaching of identity and culture are closely linked to this racial categorization and dominated by concrete representations especially food, fashion and festival. According to Banks (2001) and Nieto (2000), the approach emphasizing “food and festival” for multicultural understanding is easily accepted as it is safe, accessible and has a celebratory element. The celebratory element has the potential to engender positive feelings and cultivate appreciation. However, the approach can result in students or teachers approaching “ethnic and religious identities” as “special events to be taken note of on designated dates” (Matthews, 2018, p. xxiv) and may not lead to genuine understanding.

This paper would like to propose that broadening and deepening the learning of

the concept of culture can help our students to understand cultural differences and similarities across different communities and to better appreciate the diversities in their midst. The paper will firstly describe the concept of culture and then propose several enduring understandings about culture that can guide curricular and instructional decisions. Finally, it will suggest two learning activities that teachers can consider to augment the food, festival and artefacts approach.

The Nature Of The Concept

Culture is a complex concept and it has been described as an “elaborate, ever-changing phenomenon” (Wintergeist and McVeigh, 2011, p. 3) as well as a dynamic process (Hidalgo, 1993, p. 100). According to the dictionary of Sociology (Marshall, 1998), social scientists use the term to describe “a less restrictive concept than that implied in everyday speech. In social science, culture is all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted, whereas the commonsense usage tends to point only to the arts. Culture is thus a general term for the symbolic and learned aspects of human society...” (p. 137).

Hidalgo (1993, pp. 99-101) describes culture as existing on “at least three levels”. On one level, we see the “the products of culture” or “cultural artifacts” like technology, music, foods as well as artistic expressions and materials. This is described as the concrete and visible level of culture. The next level, the behavioural level “refers to how we define our social roles, the language we speak, the rituals we practice and the form taken by our nonverbal communication” (p. 99). Our behaviour and language reflects our values which is found in the third level of culture, the symbolic level. This level also includes our beliefs. The symbolic level, which is implicit and

abstract, is crucial to how people interpret their experiences. We often hear of culture described as an iceberg with much of it invisible. Hidalgo’s description divides culture into elements that are visible and concrete and those that are less so. The invisible elements are key to understanding the visible aspects of culture.

Another view of culture describes it as being made up of “big *C* culture” and “little *c* culture”. Big *C* culture refers to “classic or grand themes” and little *c* culture refers to “minor or common themes” (Peterson, 2004 as cited in Wintergeist & McVeigh, 2011, p. 9). (See Table 1)

There are many interrelated dimensions to the concept of culture and not all of that is appropriate to pursue in primary Social Studies. While that is the case, the definitions and elaborations above are put forth as stimuli for us to reflect on our own understandings of the concept. Which aspects of culture have we been teaching more of? What else should we teach and how do we dive into the less visible aspects of culture in our Social Studies lessons?

We can reach for depth by focusing on important understandings and characteristics about culture. The following statements are drawn from the National Council for the Social Studies descriptions of the theme of culture (NCSS, 2019) and from Gollnick and Chin (2002, pp. 6-8).

- Human beings create, and adapt to culture.
- Culture is learned and shared and a shared culture provides a group with a distinct identity.
- Culture is an adaptation and accommodates different environmental conditions.
- Cultures change over time. They may change in response to advances in technology and challenges in the

physical environment and they may change to accommodate different ideas, values and beliefs.

- There are differences between cultures but cultures also share similarities.

These understandings can guide teachers in re-imagining the content related to the concept of culture.

Table 1: Big C culture and little c culture (Peterson, 2004 as cited in Wintergeist and McVeigh, 2011, p. 9)

Big C culture	Visible	Invisible
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Objective, highbrow culture • Institutions 	literature classical music architecture historical figures geography	core values attitudes or beliefs society’s norms legal foundations assumptions history cognitive processes
Little c culture	Visible	Invisible
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective culture • People’s everyday thinking and behaviour 	gestures body posture use of space clothing styles food hobbies music artwork	popular issues opinions, viewpoints preferences or tastes trivia and facts

How Can We Teach For Deeper Understanding?

Content about culture involves the lived experiences of diverse groups. Social Studies content often include the practices, customs, and traditions of different communities. Content of this nature may not be easily found in published material. In fact, much of the experiences, practices and beliefs of different communities may not be documented or published. As practices change and traditions evolve over time, we can and need to learn about them through interactions with individuals and groups.

**Suggested Learning Activity:
Interviewing Resource Persons**

Key understandings about culture that can be taught using this strategy:

- *There are differences between cultures but cultures also share similarities.*
- *Cultures are dynamic and change over time. They may change in response to advances in technology and challenges in the physical environment and they may change to accommodate different ideas, values and beliefs.*

In this activity, we provide opportunities for children to learn from people around them. Set up interview sessions where children can interact with people from

different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Invite two colleagues or parents from different ethnic groups to co-operate in these series of lessons. Explain your objectives to your interviewees and prepare them to co-teach the class with you. Your interviewees are important as co-facilitators of the lessons, not just as sources of information and experience. Prior to the interview session, prepare your students by encouraging them to brainstorm relevant questions and teaching them interview skills. In particular, teach them how to probe about cultural differences respectfully.

In choosing the interviewees, ensure that they have experiences that will help you to uncover the important understandings about culture with your students. For example, two colleagues from different ethnic groups can talk about how they celebrate similar festivals. They can also be asked to share stories about their daily lives as well as their values and beliefs growing up in Singapore. These two focus of the interview provide opportunities for you to discuss different understandings about culture. From the content of the interview, the interviewees and the teacher can lead students to the understanding that customs and traditions change over time and that there are similarities and differences between cultures. For example, many of us are experiencing changes in how we celebrate traditional festivals and changes in our lifestyles, relationships and values due to technological affordances and the reduction in family size. The interview session allows children to uncover reasons for different practices with the active facilitation of knowledgeable adults.

Suggested Learning Activity: What's In A Name?

Key understandings about culture that can be taught using this strategy:

- *There are differences between cultures but cultures also share similarities.*
- *Cultures are dynamic and change over time. It may change in response to advances in technology and challenges in the physical environment and it may change to accommodate different ideas, values and beliefs.*

In this activity, we use names to uncover understandings about culture. Ask children to find out the meaning behind their names. Several days before the activity, inform parents about what you will be doing so parents are ready to talk to their children about the meanings behind their children's names. In some families, children may be named by their grandparents or names follow particular family traditions. Informing parents beforehand gives parents a chance to prepare their explanations. This also creates an opportunity for children to interact meaningfully with their family members and ask questions about their family traditions.

In class, invite several students to share the meanings behind their names. Ask them to write their names in their mother tongue script on the whiteboard. Invite the rest of the class to learn to write these names too. This way, children learn to appreciate the writing of another language. (Follow the same procedure if the students' mother tongue language is written in the Roman alphabet). You may wish to take the opportunity to teach some features and vocabulary of the language and talk about language as part of culture. Encourage children to pronounce their classmates' names properly. Here again, you would choose names that allow you to initiate a discussion to illustrate the key understandings related to culture. During the course of the activity, students will find

that there are many similarities across different cultures. They may also find that names can be influenced by pop culture and the changing times. Many of us know people named after popular pop stars or characters from television dramas, movies or novels. You may also have noticed that parents of different generations may favour particular names. All parents, regardless of ethnicity or cultural background, hope their children will be safe, happy and healthy and names embody positive values and characteristics families hope to see in their young. Students can be led to understand that different cultures value similar traits and all have similar hopes that their children will have bright futures.

For the next stage of the activity, get the students into groups. Ensure that there is a good mix of students from different ethnic groups, if possible. In this segment, students who did not get to share the meanings of their names with the whole class will do so in their small groups.

To conclude the lesson, pair the students up and get them to write their partner's name on a card. You may wish to encourage them to write in their partner's mother-tongue script. They are to write the meaning of the names behind the card and to decorate it. These cards can be hung all over the classroom. This activity provides a good opportunity to discuss about similarities and differences between different cultures and the students themselves are the active and essential contributors to the lesson.

Conclusion

In a diverse, interconnected world, one of the most important concepts that our students need to understand is culture. A complex idea, it requires that we, as teachers, reflect on our own understandings. While we continue to have children experience and learn about the more visible,

concrete aspects of culture, we need to also set up purposeful interactions, and teach children to ask questions, to partake in discussions and to reflect on the enduring understandings about culture in order to pave the way to deeper and more meaningful learning about cultural diversity.

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