

## *Same But Different*

### **Sensitising Students to Cultural Diversity in the Classroom**

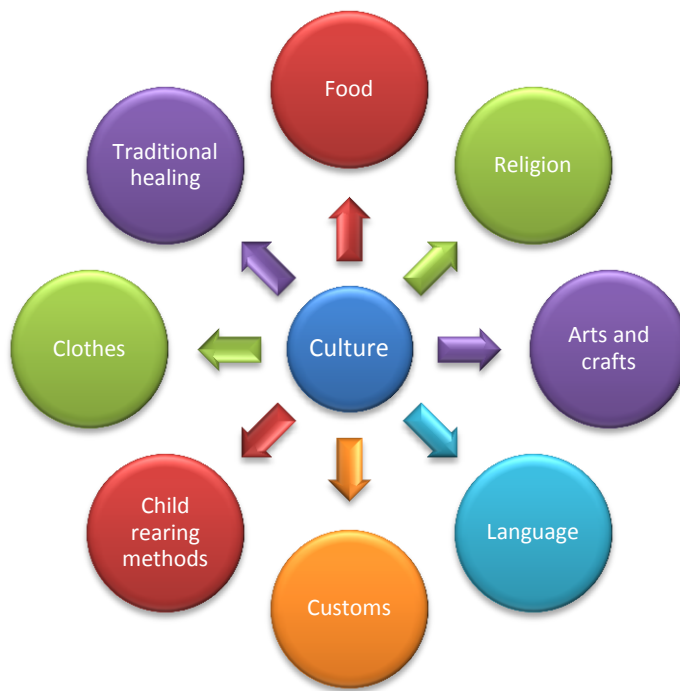
~ Sujata C



Nearly 2500 years ago, Aristotle had said that man is a social animal. The world today is a global village – highly interconnected and interdependent. To be able to survive and work effectively in today's world, it is important to maintain strong human relationships. This requires social and cultural intelligence, both of which can be taught to children from an early age. Children are like clay in a potter's hand. The slightest pressure can mould them into a different shape. But with time, as the pot gets baked and the clay hardens, it becomes impossible to change the shape. Just like a potter's clay, children have the spirit of trust in them, and can be moulded to be caring, compassionate, and sensitive to differences from an early age. Child development expert, Erikson maintains that general attitudes of trust or mistrust develop in early childhood, which persist throughout an individual's life and colour their perception of people and situations.

#### **So what is culture and diversity?**

People and places form the cultural backdrop of a nation. Our culture is our identity and character. It is what makes us unique and distinct. We take pride in being who we are. Our behaviours, attitudes, values, traditions, and beliefs define, nourish and strengthen us. Geographies bring in the diversity in humans. The skin colour, the slant of the eyes, the type of hair, etc. are determined by anthropological and genetic factors. In 1972, the UNESCO recognised places as an important aspect of culture and adopted a convention to identify, protect and preserve places, sites, monuments and cities that add outstanding value to humanity. These are given a **World Heritage Site** tags and are considered cultural and natural heritages of the world.



May 21 is celebrated as the **World Day for Cultural Diversity** for Dialogue and Development. It is a day mandated by the United Nations for the promotion of the following worldwide:

- addressing diversity issues
- thinking about stereotypes
- fighting polarisation along cultural lines



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The Taliban destroyed the famous Buddha statue in Bamiyan, Afghanistan on May 21, 2001. The statue, which had been carved on the side of a cliff in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE was designated as UNESCO World Heritage site. The destruction of the statue was an act of intolerance towards a cultural icon that was not native to the region – Buddha in a predominantly Muslim country. Shaken by this act of vandalism, the United Nations drafted a Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which was adopted by the UNESCO in 2001. It is a legal instrument that recognises cultural diversity as *common heritage of humanity*, which is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity to nature. Safeguarding cultural diversity is a necessity and a moral responsibility in order to preserve human dignity. Subsequently in 2005, the UNESCO integrated cultural diversity into the sustainable development framework.

### Why is cultural diversity important?

An Algerian woman was recently denied a French citizenship because she had refused to shake hands with the officials. To the French officials, this indicated that she had not fully assimilated the French culture, and hence, did not qualify for a citizenship. For the Algerian, shaking hands was simply not a way of greeting. However, what is ironic is that one European Human Rights Report mentions that the French are becoming increasingly racist and intolerant.

A clash of cultures, most of the times, results in conflict. A look at the persisting conflict sites around the world will reveal that nearly 75% are due to cultural and religious intolerance. This brings home the point that tolerance towards cultural difference is essential for peace and stability in the world. *Does that mean that peace is possible in only one cultural section of the society?* Peaceful co-existence between two different communities is important and it comes with mutual understanding and respect.

What good does cultural diversity do, one might ask, other than making life more complex? Cultural diversity propels a society towards development and growth in every aspect of life – social, spiritual, intellectual and emotional. Cultural diversity must be seen as that which can be leveraged to bring about peace and stability



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for people to lead healthier and happier lives. Cultural diversity must be the epicentre of development, the fulcrum of a healthy society, a pre-requisite for global peace.

### What are cultural stereotypes?

Cultural stereotypes are sweeping generalisations about people from a certain region or belonging to a particular community. These are beliefs that do not always necessarily follow any logic or reasoning. They are simply perceptions about a community that refuses to go away. On a global scale, typecasting happens all the time.

Some of the popular stereotypes that exist include:

- White-skinned blonde Americans are obese, lazy, and dim-witted. Homer Simpson of the TV series **The Simpsons** is the personification of this *stereotype*.
- Mexicans are troublemakers.
- Arabs are fierce and violent people.
- Indians are intelligent, corrupt and argumentative.
- Africans are drug dealers and abusive people.

While teaching about cultural stereotypes, students must be discouraged from making fun of, defame, malign or comment on people based on their cultural background. It is tantamount to slander and the victim has the right to take legal action. Many a times, preteens and teens get into trouble for these very reasons. Hence, it is important that they are made aware of the consequences.

### How to go beyond differences?

Having sensitised their students to the coexistence of people from diverse backgrounds, teachers should also help them accept differences. They need to be taught to look at a person as human first and then at the external manifestations like skin or hair colour, religious symbols, practices, etc. Indian scriptures talk about the concept of one world, one family. *Sama drishti* or the ability to see everyone as equal is at the core of the Indian Upanishads. It is also referred to in Chapter 5 verse 18 of the *Bhagvad Geeta*. Passages from the *Bible* and the *Quran* may be referred to illustrate the idea of humanity.



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There are 195 countries in the world today and cultural understanding can help students become open to their influences. It is the onus of the teachers to groom the next generation so that they learn to cherish and preserve the cultural heritage and diversity of the world.

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## Lesson plan: Sensitising Students to Cultural Diversity

~ Sujata C



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Even in a multicultural country like India, the idea of teaching cultural diversity is often met with resistance. However, it is like a bull in a China shop and must be addressed by engaging students into conversations or dialogues about race, caste, language, religion, class, etc. The challenge for teachers is to diminish any prejudice and bias their students might harbour towards or against a particular race, tribe, socio-economic status, or disability through the lessons and curricular materials.

The class may be begun by showing a picture of people of different ethnic origins and telling the students how we may all look, speak, eat, wear differently from one another, but we all smile in the same language. Real life examples can be drawn from your class, like Asma wears a Hijab, Gurmeet wears a turban, etc. to show how diversity exists everywhere. To embrace it is a part of life.

### Instances of diversity:

1. **Eggs:** Eggs come in different shapes and sizes, but all have a yolk and egg white inside. For very young children eggs can be used to teach about diversity.



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2. **Festivals:** India is a land of festivals and each region celebrates in different ways. Encourage children to share their experiences of celebrating their favourite festivals in class.
3. **Art:** Paintings on the theme of diversity can help an individual become empathetic and create connections. Organise drawing sessions to encourage such practices.
4. **Food:** Each region in India has a variety of sweet dishes and pickles unique to that place. Organise a brief party where children can bring and share these and talk about it.
5. **Dress:** What we wear tells a lot about our cultural background. This can be used to explain how clothes give identity to a person. Arrange for a go-as-you-like competition where children can wear their traditional costumes.



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6. **Emojis:** Social networking sites have embraced diversity by including emojis with various skin and hair colour. Have your students identify these emojis and explain how they help in creating awareness on diversity.

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7. **Crafts:** Visiting various state emporia gives exposure to the different arts and crafts of various states. Arrange for a short day trip with your class to introduce them to the world of difference.

8. **One vs Many:** The way we greet one another is influenced by our language, religion as well as the place where we live. Encourage students to prepare posters to depict the concept of diversity of cultures.

*One jungle, many kinds of trees*  
*One garland, many types of flowers*  
*One dal (lentil), many different tastes*  
*One rice, many varieties of dishes*  
*One world, many languages*

9. **Reading:** Books are windows to the world that help to broaden our horizon of thinking. Introduce students to books with stories that celebrate cultural harmony.

10. **Essay writing:** New Year is one event that is celebrated in diverse ways around the world. Help students analyse prevailing customs by bringing in stories of regional practices.



11. **Poetry:** The idea of cultural diversity lends itself well to poetry writing. Encourage students to let their creativity flow and find expression through poetry.

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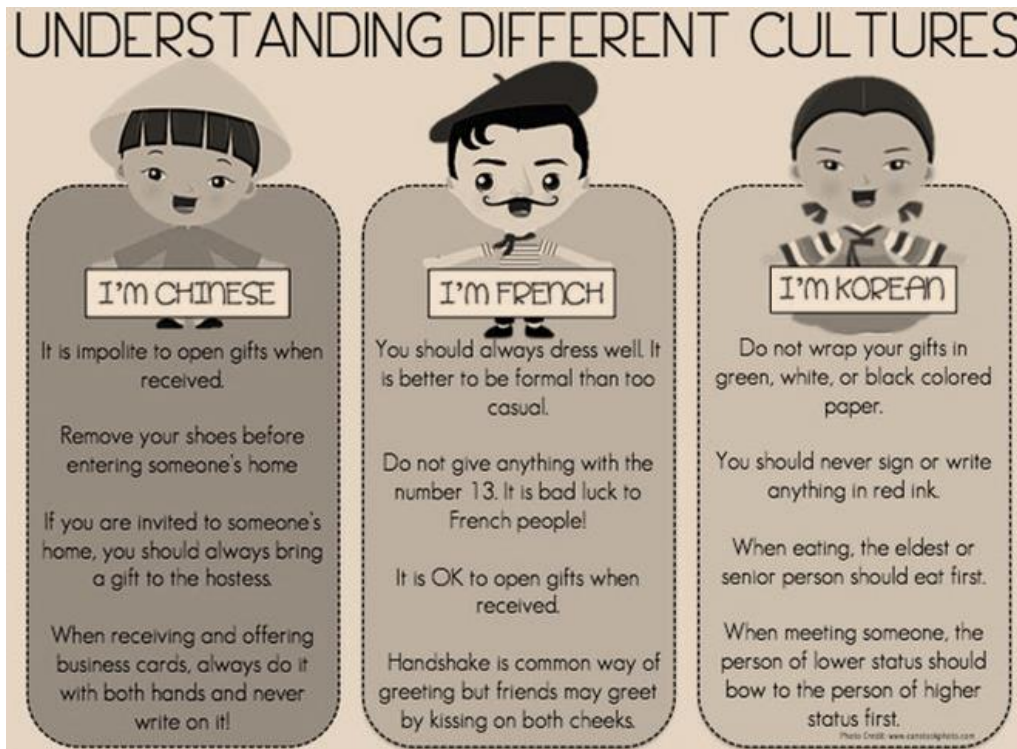
12. **Story writing:** Imagine a world where all the humans looked same, spoke the same language and behaved in the same manner like robots coming out of a factory. Ask students to write a story along these lines.

13. **Cinema:** Cinema is replete with instances of diversity and unity. Organise a festival showcasing the following classic short films:

- *Ek Chidiya Anek Chidiya* (1974)  
This short film was directed by India's animation pioneer, Bhimsain. It is an iconic film that is still popular as is evident from the number of views on YouTube.
- *Ek Sur – Mile Sur Mera Tumhara* (1988)  
It is one of the earliest examples of a music video that promotes national integrity and brings out the idea of unity in diversity.



14. **Body language:** Different cultures have different behaviours that are socially acceptable and unacceptable. Engage the class in a discussion on body language:



15. **Cultural minorities:** High school students can explore this concept and see what world governments are doing to preserve them.
16. **Cultural stereotypes:** Explore the cultural stereotypes that exist in society.
17. **Organise a talk** on *Spirituality, Society and Culture* by an expert for middle and high school students.
18. Help middle and high school students **identify the UNESCO world heritage sites** in the world and read about them.

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**Haecceity (noun)**

**Pronunciation:** /hæk'si:ti/

**Meaning:** That property or quality of a thing by virtue of which it is unique or describable as 'this (one)'

**Origin and additional information:** Mid 17<sup>th</sup> century from the medieval Latin *haecceitas* (translates as 'thisness'), which is drawn from Latin *haec*, the feminine of *hic* (this). Haecceity is a term from medieval scholastic philosophy that was coined by the followers of Duns Scotus (or John Duns, one of the three most important philosopher-theologians who had considerably influenced both Catholic and secular thought).

**Word section:** Duns introduced the concept of *discrete qualities, properties or characteristics of a thing that make it a particular thing*. According to the philosopher, haecceity is that individualising difference that makes a person or an object what it is. Indeed, the word haecceity is a literal translation of Aristotle's *to ti esti* (Greek) meaning *the what (it) is*.

Some dictionaries equate *haecceity* with quiddity or hypokeimenon, meaning that which evoke the essence of a thing. However, each of these terms has subtle differences, and hence, cannot be considered synonymous.

Modern sociologists like Harold Garfinkle (the founder of ethnomethodology) used the word *haecceity* in his seminal studies *to enhance the indexical inevitable*

*character of any expression, behaviour or situation.* Gilles Deleuze too used the term to elaborate his concept of difference and individuation.

**Usage:**

- i. *Not that it actually matters, but that is the haecceity of the question and its answer.*  
(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/haecceity>)
- ii. *The haecceity of a thing is what makes this particular thing what it is in particular.*  
(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/haecceity>)
- iii. *He has a paramount concern with haecceity, the thisness of things.*  
(Source: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/haecceity>)