

# **Unity and Diversity**

**Issues in Social Studies Video: All Grade Levels**

# Introduction

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## Summary

What does it mean to teach about unity and diversity in social studies? Not all educators answer this question in the same way.

Some argue that issues of unity and diversity are subjective, contingent on the demographics of each class or community, and best expressed through individual characteristics and common goals. Other educators believe that a major role of social studies is to highlight the historical backdrop of different races, religions, classes, and cultures that make up a pluralistic, democratic society.

As the American classroom grows increasingly diverse, everyone can agree that issues of unity and diversity present both opportunities and challenges for social studies teachers. The cultural and ethnic diversity found in many classrooms provides teachers with an opportunity to develop habits of mutual respect and appreciation of differences. That same diversity also allows teachers to explore themes of unity by examining the things we have in common. Appreciating one another in the classroom is the first step toward connecting with others in the larger community.

If one of the purposes of social studies is to help students see themselves as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society, then exploring concepts of unity and diversity is a powerful means of attaining that goal.

## Overview

Even classes that appear to be homogenous contain diversity—in terms of gender, personality, and ability. Social studies provides a natural forum for teaching students to recognize and respect differences within the classroom and beyond. In the video “Unity and Diversity,” teachers help students understand differences by:

- assigning group work that requires consensus about different values,
- examining artifacts to explore other cultures,
- integrating other languages in studying a culture or region, and
- drawing on personal experiences that reveal the prevalence of stereotypes.

# Exploring the Issues

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## Unity in the Classroom

“Students learn what they live. A classroom organized along democratic principles is the best way of teaching democracy. Students should also understand that the outside world is diverse, even if their classroom is not. And given the mobility of modern life, they’re probably going to encounter diversity wherever they go, so it’s important to develop the skills to relate to people who are different.” —Cherry McGee Banks, Professor of Education, University of Washington, Bothell

### Wrestling With the Issue

- How can classroom set-up and visual aids promote unity and diversity?
- How do you ensure that students connect democratic practices in the classroom with those in the community?
- How do you teach the skills and knowledge needed to relate to different people?

## Cultural Diversity in the Classroom

“I want students to realize that the world is much bigger than their neighborhood and much more diverse and interesting than they could ever imagine.... That knowledge will foster the desire to learn more about other cultures.” —Gwen Larsen, Sixth-Grade Social Studies Teacher, Dorchester, Massachusetts

### Wrestling With the Issue

- Why is it important to teach students about the world beyond their community?
- How do you foster the concept of unity in a classroom where diversity is the primary focus?
- How would you introduce students to cultures that are represented or not represented in their classroom?

## Linguistic and Learning Diversity

“Students learn in different ways. But if you are familiar with different ways of delivering the curriculum, you will be more likely to reach the full range of students.” —Cherry McGee Banks, Professor of Education, University of Washington, Bothell

### Wrestling With the Issue

- What strategies do you use to accommodate linguistic and learning diversity?
- How can instruction be designed to benefit students at all skill levels?
- What are the risks and rewards of highlighting learning differences?

# Applying What You've Learned

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As you reflect on the classroom activities from the video, think about how you might adapt and extend these ideas to your own teaching.

- Darlene Jones-Inge's fourth-grade class studies problems in the community, nation, and world. Ms. Jones-Inge fosters a democratic model to teach students how to work together for the common good. Students work in groups to plan a community service project for people in Chile to develop an understanding of the civic importance of their service, beyond their own personal satisfaction.
- Gwen Larsen's sixth-grade students examine historical and family artifacts. Students thus encounter the past in a hands-on, personal way before they begin studying world history. By examining artifacts, students understand both the differences and similarities between people.
- Libby Sinclair asks her fifth-grade students to define and identify examples of stereotyping. She extends their thinking by asking why it is important to examine stereotypes at all. Students draw examples of stereotypes from their own experience as well as literature to see how people sometimes impose the concept of "unity" on a group by ignoring individual diversity.

Consider your own classroom as you answer the following questions. Write down your answers or discuss them as a group.

- What strategies do you employ in each situation to teach students about different cultures or to debunk common stereotypes?
- What topics in your curriculum lend themselves to teaching students about issues of unity and diversity?
- How do you cultivate a classroom climate that allows students to speak candidly but respectfully about the range of differences among them? Among different cultures?
- How do you handle popular misconceptions or stereotypes about different races, classes, genders, religions, and student abilities?
- How do you foster ideas of unity in teaching about different cultures or historical periods?

# Links to the Lessons

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“Unity and Diversity” features the following teachers and lessons from the *Social Studies in Action* library:

- Darlene Jones-Inge: Making a Difference Through Giving
- Eileen Mesmer: Celebrations of Light
- Tim Rockey: Gender-Based Distinctions
- Gwen Larsen: Explorations in Archeology and History
- Libby Sinclair: Understanding Stereotypes
- Gary Fisher: The *Amistad* Case
- David Kitts: Historical Change
- Diane Kerr: State Government and the Role of the Citizen
- Wendell Brooks: Competing Ideologies

and from the *Teaching Reading K-2* library (see [www.learner.org](http://www.learner.org) for more information):

- Cindy Wilson: Building Oral Language

## Standards

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Each video lesson in the library is keyed to standards and performance expectations. *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* defines what students should know and be able to do in social studies at each educational level. Issues of unity and diversity relate to the following NCSS themes:

- Culture
- Time, Continuity, and Change
- People, Places, and Environments
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions
- Power, Authority, and Governance
- Global Connections
- Civic Ideals and Practices

# Resources

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## Print Resources for Teachers

Cole, Robert W., ed. *More Strategies for Educating Everybody's Children*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001.

Parker, W. C., ed. *Education for Democracy, Contexts, Curricula, Assessments*. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2002.

Soder, R., J. I. Goodlad, and T. J. McMannon, eds. *Developing Democratic Character in the Young*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc., 2001.

Tomlinson, C. A. *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1999.

## Web Resources for Teachers

National Council for the Social Studies: <http://www.ncss.org>

The NCSS Themes identify standards-based themes in the classroom.

Teaching Controversy: <http://www.streetlaw.org/controversy2.html>

Streetlaw.org offers tips for teaching controversial issues.

Multicultural Education Activities and Research: <http://depts.washington.edu/centerme/home.htm>

This site contains research projects, activities, and resources for those interested in equity, inter-group relations, and the success of students of color.

Multicultural Education Links and Events: <http://www.nameorg.org/>

This site provides position papers, links, and a listing of events related to multicultural education.