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- [Search](#)
- 
- [Menu](#)

X

[Classroom Resources](#)

[Professional Development](#)

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[Latest Issue](#)

[Magazine Archive](#)

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[Publications](#)

[Build a Learning Plan](#)

[#NeverAgain](#)

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[Educator Grants](#)

[TT Award](#)

[Advisory Board](#)

[Partners](#)

[Recognition](#)

[Writing for Us](#)

[Our Team](#)

[Frequently Asked Questions](#)

[Grants](#)

[Topics](#)

[Race & Ethnicity](#)

[Religion](#)

[Ability](#)

[Class](#)

[Immigration](#)

[Gender & Sexual Identity](#)

[Bullying & Bias](#)

[Rights & Activism](#)

[Mix It Up!](#)[Getting Started](#)[Activities](#)[Activities | After Mix](#)[Activities: Before Mix](#)[Activities: During Mix It Up](#)[FAQs](#)[Posters & Printables](#)[Register](#)[Frameworks](#)[Social Justice Standards](#)[Identity](#)[Diversity](#)[Justice](#)[Action](#)[Teaching Hard History](#)[Critical Practices](#)[Digital Literacy](#)[Teaching the Movement](#)[National Standards](#)[Search](#)[Create Account](#)[Log in](#)

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X

LESSON

Painting Beauty: Creating Self-Portraits

This lesson is the fifth in a series called “The Different Colors of Beauty.” The goal of these lessons is to help students develop their racial or ethnic identities in a safe and open classroom environment, and appreciate the broad spectrum of beauty in our diverse, multicultural world.

Grade Level: [K-2](#)

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Topic: [Race & Ethnicity](#) **Subject:** Reading & Language Arts **Social Justice Domain:** [Identity](#)

Social Studies

Objectives

SEL

Arts

ELL / ESL

Activities will help students:

- enhance observation skills which can be

useful for self-reflection and inquiry

- develop vocabulary for discussing skin color, race, beauty, and racial identity
- analyze the relevance of commonly used racial terminology, labels, and language
- examine portraits and self-portraits by a variety of artists from diverse cultural backgrounds
- critique another student's artwork, offering specific praise and constructive criticism

Essential Questions

- What is a portrait? What is a self-portrait?
- How can portraits and self-portraits help you think about your own and others' identity?
- How can you use close observation skills to feel good about yourself and the people around you?
- What are some ways we can make ourselves and our classmates feel comfortable when we are talking about complex or confusing topics?
- What words are used commonly to describe skin color and racial identity?

Materials

- small hand mirrors for each student or several large mirrors for groups to share
- heavy paper for painting
- sharpened pencils
- erasers
- tempera paints, brushes, and pallets
- smocks (optional)
- chart paper
- variety of self-portraits and portraits from diverse artists (*Note: If you do not have an ample selection of books available in your school and classroom library, use images from the links in the professional development section of this lesson.*)

Framework

Artists often use self-portraits as a way of expressing various aspects of themselves and their identities beyond the surface of their physical appearance. Racial identity—including the relationship between race, color and beauty—is often present as a central theme in artists’ works. Children, too, can use artistic expression as a way to deepen their understanding of the distinctive nature and potential richness of racial identity. Students will look carefully at themselves and the different shades of their skin. Their language for talking about racial identity will evolve so that they can work toward a fuller understanding of themselves and others. This, in turn, will help enhance each child’s sense of belonging in a community.

In this lesson, students will look at self-portraits by a series of artists. The primary purpose of the lesson is for students to revisit their original portraits from [Lesson 1](#), deepening their views of themselves and their identities.

Professional Development

Race can be a difficult topic to address. Lesson 1 in this series begins the conversation. In addition to the professional development resources listed in Lesson 1, some other helpful books include *What If All the Kids Are White: Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families*, by Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia G. Ramsey; *Diversities in Early Childhood Education: Rethinking and Doing*, by Celia Genishi; and *Other People’s Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, by Lisa Delpit.

In *The Languages of Learning: How Children Talk, Write, Dance, Draw, and Sing Their Understanding of the World*, Karen Gallas addresses the idea of using artistic expression to get students talking about personal identity and issues of social justice.

Looking at the work of artists who have done culturally relevant portraits and self-portraits is an invaluable resource in preparing to discuss these themes with students. Some helpful websites for finding images and related analysis include those of [Kim Philipson](#), [Frida Kahlo](#), [William H. Johnson](#), [Aaron Douglas](#), [Asian American Portraits of Encounter](#), and relevant links at the [National Museum of the American Indian](#) and [12 Faces of Latin America: Portraits of a Region](#).

Vocabulary

color [KUHL-er] (*noun*) the natural appearance of something, including how bright it is and what shade it is

skin [skin] (*noun*) the outer covering of a human or animal body

skin color [skin KUHL-er] (*noun*) the coloring of a person’s face and skin

race [reys] (*noun*) one of the major groups into which human beings can be divided. As a social construction, it relates to the grouping of people based on shared physical characteristics, such as skin color, often for the purpose of creating the perception of a superior race.

(Note: There are many different ways to define the term race. We provide a working definition, but one of the goals of this lesson—and the other lessons in this series—is for students to come to individual and collective understandings of the term that make sense to them and satisfies their personal, developmental, and communal needs.)

beauty [BYOO-tee] (*noun*) the part of a person—or thing—that makes us like how he, she, or it looks

(Note: There are many different ways to define the term beauty. We provide a working definition, but one of the goals of this lesson—and the other lessons in this series—is for students to come to their own understanding of the term and concept.)

perspective [per-SPEK-tiv] (*noun*) a way of looking at things

portrait [PAWR-trit] (*noun*) a picture of a person done by someone else

self-portrait [self-PAWR-trit] (*noun*) a picture of one's self done by one's self

identity [ahy-DEN-ti-tee] (*noun*) the sense people have of themselves, who they are, and what they feel is most important and defining about them

Activities

1. Throughout your classroom, set up copies of portraits and self-portraits by a variety of artists. Have students walk around in pairs, examining the different images. Encourage students to pay attention to what they think each artist is expressing about his or her identity. *(Note: If the term identity is new to your class, you will want to supply them with a working definition.)*
2. Come together as a class. Facilitate children's discussion of what they noticed from these portraits and self-portraits. Some guiding questions: How do the artists show themselves as beautiful, whole and multifaceted people? What strategies do you think they are using? Which portraits did you especially like or dislike? Why?
3. Revisit these questions: What is race? What is skin color? Help students with some terms you know are commonly used to describe race and skin color. *(Note: Chart the terms listed by your students. If they have trouble getting started, offer a term like black, brown, biracial or white to start them off. Consider showing pictures of honey, mocha, tea, coffee, cocoa, ebony, eggshell.)* Ask students what they think about these words. Challenge them to consider what the artists they were examining would say about these words, and why.
4. Skin color, race, and racial identity are more complex than one simple word can describe. Help students understand that words we use to characterize race are not accurate descriptions of skin color. Drawing on students' prior knowledge, help them understand that people come in many shades and variations. Emphasize that one is not better than the other. With partners, encourage

students to make a list of more useful words that help them describe their own skin color, race, and racial identity. *(Note: If you used [Lesson 3](#) in this series, you can encourage students to draw on their work with poetry to help them.)*

5. Give students time to observe the self-portraits they painted in Lesson 1. Encourage them to discuss what they like about their portraits and whether they wish they had done anything differently. Ask them what they feel their portraits show about their identity. Now that they have looked at portraits by other artists, how can they deepen what their own portraits show?
6. Place a palette of tempera paints at each table. Without hurrying, allow students to practice mixing paints together. Particularly, tell them to experiment with what happens when they combine two colors, or when they add white or black paint to another color. Then, have them paint lines on paper and hold their arms up to the line. Encourage students to notice what parts of their skin match up with various colors. Explain that every person has different shades of color in different places on their bodies, and all of these colors are beautiful. A sophisticated self-portrait shows our many different colors. Using the hand mirror, students should mix themselves palettes of the colors they think best reflect the skin color on their faces. *(Note: As students work with these colors, circulate and encourage them to delve deeply into observing themselves and their complexity. Pay attention to the sorts of language students are using to describe themselves. You may want to draw their own attention to particular kinds of description, as this will help them feel richer and unique in their own sense of self.)*
7. Once they have mixed palettes, students should use hand mirrors and pencils to sketch outlines of their faces. Some of the artists they looked at did not outline the shapes of their faces precisely, while others did. The students can decide how they want their portraits to look. Remind students that the portrait's job is to show the complexity and beauty of each individual self. Once students have an outline, they can use their palettes to paint the portraits.
8. When everyone finishes painting the portraits, leave them to dry. Come together as a class to talk about what it means to critique others' art. Remind children that when you comment on someone's artwork, you should focus on giving them specific compliments and one thoughtful suggestion. *(Note: Chart the guidelines your class comes up with for an effective workshop. If your class already has guidelines in place, you may choose to skip this step. Simply remind them of the guidelines.)* As they examine one another's work, encourage students to focus their observations on the complex and subtle ways they might have chosen to portray their own color and other aspects of their identity through their portraits. Return to the words students brainstormed when discussing vocabulary commonly used for racial identity. Challenge students to notice how much more complicated—and interesting—diverse identities actually are. *(Note: If you think your students are ready, you can also connect this conversation to observations in [Lesson 2](#) about illustrations in picture books. This strategy can help open students' eyes to racial identities that are not directly represented in your class. It can also prevent individual students from feeling like they are obliged to stand in as token representatives of a group.)*
9. Allow children to circulate among the tables to look at their classmates' self-portraits. Then come together so students can give each other helpful feedback. Have students share anything new they noticed about themselves or their classmates during this activity. *(Note: If students struggle to talk about identity, and particularly about race and skin color, you may want to start a separate conversation about why race can be difficult to talk about and what might make it more comfortable. Draw on previous conversations about stereotypes, biases, and ideas of inferiority or superiority.*

Encourage students to use what they have learned about history, identity, and the social construction of race to help facilitate this conversation.)

10. Have students reflect on why or how they thought this activity was helpful or important. Working in groups or independently, they should discuss or comment in their journals on any further questions, issues or ideas that arose during the activity. *(Note: As they work on their reflections, you will want to find a way to celebrate the students' work, either by displaying their portraits or compiling them into a class book.)*

Applying What You've Learned

Think about this experience of mixing colors to do a deep self-portrait that genuinely expresses something about yourself and your identity. Consider the conversations you had with your class about racial identity, labels, and beauty as you did this work. Respond to the following questions in your journal:

- What did you learn about yourself and your classmates?
- How did mixing colors to match your skin influence or change your thinking about race, racial labels, identity and beauty? Why do you think this is important?
- If a friend struggled to see his or her skin color as beautiful, would you advise that person to do a careful self-portrait? Why or why not? What advice might you give your friend?
- How have your skills as a portraitist changed from one portrait to another? Which painting are you more proud of? Why? How did conversations around race, racial identity, and beauty that you had in between your two portraits affect or change your ability to create a self-portrait?

Extension Activity

After completing the self-portrait assignment in class, discuss what you learned with someone in your home. Spend some time looking carefully at that person, then try doing a careful portrait of them to practice your close observation skills. Think about what you practiced in school with mixing different colors together. If you don't have paints, you can try using crayons, chalk, markers, or colored pencils. Depending on what materials you use, the end result of the activity may be different. Mixing is more challenging with markers, for instance. Be creative in using different strategies to shade and really show how complicated that person's skin looks. *(Note: You may want to provide students with materials for use at home to make the assignment equitable.)* Share your portrait and experience with your classmates when you come back to school.

ELL Extension

One important set of vocabulary that comes up when thinking about portraits is the terminology used to describe the human face and body. This might include *eyes*, *nose* and *mouth*. For more advanced language

learners, it might include *forehead*, *cheeks*, and *eyelashes*. When your portrait is finished, work with a partner to learn the words for as many different parts of your face as you can. Write each term on a sticky note. Once your portrait has dried, attach the sticky notes to the relevant parts of your portrait.

Activities and embedded assessments address the following standards from the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: **CCSS: SL.1, SL.2, SL.3, SL.4, SL.5, SL.6, W.3, W.4, W.5**

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