

## Helping Young Students Feel Positively About the Color of Their Skin

“When I look out at my room full of 1<sup>st</sup>- and 2<sup>nd</sup>-grade students,” says Oregon teacher Katharine Johnson in this article in *Rethinking Schools*, “I see a symphony of colors. I see this as beautiful and invaluable. Yet I realize the world does not always embrace my students’ multiracial reality... Young people, like adults, receive countless confusing and negative messages about the implications of skin color... I know that children, even as young as 6, experience racism directed at themselves, their moms, their neighbors, their cousins, the man in front of them in line at the grocery store.”

These beliefs and assumptions find their way into Johnson’s classroom, and she has found it necessary to step in and correct assumptions about who needs extra help and who gets invited to play with a certain group of girls. After attending a workshop by Katie Kissinger on celebrating skin tone, Johnson decided she would teach a short unit with two goals: first, getting students to understand the science of skin color and see their similarities across the full range of skin tones; and second, using poetry to practice the art of praising their own skin tones and its positive relationship to their identity. Here’s how the lessons unfolded:

- *The science of skin tone* – Johnson read aloud from Kissinger’s book, *All the Colors We Are* (Redleaf Press, 2014) to introduce the idea that all people come in shades of brown. “Yes!” exclaimed one white student, “Why do they call me white? I’m not white. I’m pinkish brownish tannish goldish.” Listening to this book, and to one by Paul Showers, *Your Skin and Mine* (HarperCollins, 1991), students got an elementary understanding of the genetics of skin color: Skin tone has evolved over time; it’s an adaptation that makes it possible for people to survive and thrive in environments with varying degrees of sunlight intensity; and everyone, regardless of how one’s ‘race’ is named, is a shade of brown. Students did several turn-and-talks to process this information, and four new vocabulary words were added to the class word wall: *melanin*, *tone*, *genetic*, and *heritage*.

In the next lesson, Johnson took out dozens of paint chips she had picked up from the local hardware store, gathered her students around her, and talked them through deciding which chip most closely matched the skin on her forearm – this one was too dark, this one too light, this one had too much blue or too little red – finally landing on a good match, Caramel Whip, and writing her name on the back of that chip. Johnson then had students explore the chips she’d spread on the rug, mingle and chat, find a good match, and write their names on the back of their chip. At the end of the lesson, students shared their chips with the class to rounds of applause – Saddle Brown for Jessica, Beach House for Fergus, Coconut Grove for Justin and Tyrone, Liberty for Samantha.

- *The poetry of skin tone* – Johnson kicked off the next lesson by reading Sheila Hamanaka’s picture-book poem, *All the Colors of the Earth* (Mulberry Books, 1999). She had students look at the illustrations, pair-share their favorites, and share them with the class: one student liked “the roaring browns of bears and soaring eagles,” another talked about “caramel and chocolate and the honey of bees.” Johnson was pleased with this extended sharing: “We needed our exploration of skin color to begin with a gentle, welcoming discussion... I wanted students to begin to think like poets.” She asked students to recall the things Hamanaka had used as comparisons and recorded what they said on chart paper: bears, eagles, seashells, chocolate. “Sheila Hamanaka chose her comparisons very carefully,” she said. “How do you think she feels about skin tone based on the comparisons she chose?” Students saw that Hamanaka’s piece was a praise poem that had evoked positive feelings in all of them: strong like eagles and bears, peaceful like whispering grass and the ocean.

“How do you feel about your skin tone?” Johnson asked, a little apprehensive that some students might still have negative feelings or claim they had no feelings at all, and welcomed positive terms like *happy* and *strong*. “What is one thing in the world you can compare your skin to?” she asked, and had students mingle around the room and share their comparisons with as many partners as they could. Johnson walked around listening in and noticed that students of color were better able to generate lists of comparisons than her white students. “I used suggestive questions and references to nudge some students toward richer language and also toward celebration,” she says. She sent one boy who was a loss to describe his light-colored skin to the science area and he added river stones and prairies to his list. This was just right because the boy spent summers fishing with his grandfather in Montana.

The next day, Johnson read from another book, *The Blacker the Berry* by Joyce Carol Thomas (Amistad, 2008), which celebrates the many hues of African-Americans and links them to family memories, berries, sky colors, and feelings. “Now we had enough poetic moves and categories borrowed from other poets to move into generating student ideas,” says Johnson. She unveiled a brainstorming template with categories students had noticed in the poems they’d heard: nature, animals, smells, food, emotions. “Today, we are going to think of our own ideas about how to describe our skin tones,” she said. She pulled out her paint chip and read the name: Caramel Whip. “Where would I put this on my chart?” she asked. In the food section, of course. “Let’s see if we can think of any other comparisons for my skin,” she prodded. “What in nature is like this color?” Beach sand, suggested one student. Bunny fur. Dry grass. Peaches. All these went onto the chart.

Then Johnson invited students to remember the associations they’d generated about their own skin color and share them with partners. More associations went up onto the brainstorming chart. Then she released them to work on their own individual brainstorming charts. “Try to get at least one idea in each section,” she said, and roamed around the room observing students at work, helping those who were having trouble generating positive associations. She prompted a white girl who said her skin was like paper and milk, comparing the girl’s forearm with her own. The girl decided strawberries and grilled cheese bread more accurately described the actual tone of her skin.

“Now students were ready to sculpt their ideas into poems,” says Johnson. She gathered students around the master brainstorming chart they’d made and said, “I am going to take these ideas and turn them into a poem today. You are going to take your ideas and turn them into a poem as well. I need some advice on how to do this.” She had two students read aloud the Hamanaka and Thomas poems and began composing her own poem, thinking aloud as she wrote: *I am the color of the Earth. My skin is the color of warm beach sand*. “What idea should I write next?” she asked, and students helped her draft additional lines, completing the poem. Then she released them to work on their own poems, asking, “Who thinks they will start with a food comparison? Who wants to include a detail about how your skin is like the skin of someone else in your family? Who wants to start with hair instead of skin? Who wants to start by comparing it to an animal? Tell a neighbor how you will start your poem.”

“We wrote for the rest of the week,” says Johnson. “Some days we cranked out longer sessions of 45 minutes of writing and sharing. Once or twice, we simply squeezed in 20 minutes before lunch. But each day that week, students touched this work – writing, rereading, sharing with friends, sharing in small groups, and sharing all together.” Johnson held revision sessions, adding more detail to metaphors, adding action to images, suggesting allusions. When students were satisfied with their poems, they created self-portraits, and the poems and pictures hung in the hallway for several months.

“The two weeks we spent writing and learning about skin tone opened my classroom in some important ways,” Johnson concludes. “Samantha, an African-American girl who barely spoke even in morning circle time at the start of the year, read her entire poem aloud to her classmates. Tyler and Justin, one white and one African-American, who had never spent free time together before, became friends when they realized they both had skin that matched Coconut Grove. Jeremy, also African-American, finished a piece of writing on the same schedule as the rest of the class for the first time.” Maybe these breakthroughs would have happened anyway, she admits. “Maybe the discussion of the science of skin tone and the praise of our beautiful differences facilitated these important transformations. I prefer to attribute my students’ growth to the poems in celebration of skin tone.”

“Celebrating Skin Tone: The Science and Poetry of Skin Color” by Katharine Johnson in *Rethinking Schools*, Spring 2015 (Vol. 29, #3, p. 12-16), <http://bit.ly/1NOXdQ9>