



## **Hidden Heroes: Teaching History and Anti-Racism Through Critical Thinking and Empowerment**

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:  
First Grade Social Studies

**Keywords:** anti-racism, critical thinking, empowerment, history, empathy, hero, activism, authority figure, fair

**Teaching Standards:** See [Appendix I](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

### **Synopsis:**

Young students are often taught to accept all the information they are presented by their teachers as fact or truth. This way of learning continues throughout their education. The information and way of learning presented to students enables the continuation of white supremacy and racism, both subtle and overt, within our classrooms and schools, and ultimately the systems and policies of the United States as a whole. This unit will not only expose students to historical and present-day examples of injustice and racism, but it will also equip students with critical thinking skills needed to analyze information and determine its truth or expose its perpetuation of oppression. Additionally, the students will learn about lesser known historical figures of Color who have worked to dismantle these systems and resist oppression. In doing so, the students will evaluate which skills and characteristics one may need to advocate for an end to systemic racism. The students are going to plan for how they can cultivate these skills and characteristics within themselves and embark on an anti-racist journey throughout their lives; resulting in foundational empowerment needed to do so. Through reading, researching, writing, and role playing, these students will be able to articulate their critical thinking skills, disagreement with the status quo, and demands for an end to oppression.

*I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 17 students in First Grade English Language Arts and Social Studies.*

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## Introduction

### Rationale

Have you ever heard someone say something along the lines of “Children don’t see color, they just love everyone,” , “Elementary students are too young to learn about something as traumatic as racism,”, “Focusing on race will divide children, shouldn’t we focus on unifying them?”, or “If we just teach our children to treat everyone equally, they will not be racist.”? I know that I have. These points of view are common misconceptions within our society—including both teachers and people outside of schools. Until about a year and a half ago, I thought these same things and it is likely that I would have said some of these same inaccurate statements. We are often led to believe that young children are too innocent and naive to notice or perpetuate racism, but this is unfortunately not the case. Due to this belief, teachers are provided with minimal education on *how* to teach children about race and racism. I know that I myself was taught very little in my college courses about how to approach this topic with my early childhood students, and as a result, I found it to be a daunting and difficult task.

Children notice and wonder about race and racism. In the fall of 2020, while teaching first grade remotely, a student pointed out that she liked my pink water bottle. I thanked her and showed the other students who wanted to see it better. It was at this point that another student mentioned to me: “Your skin is kind of pink like your water bottle.” We had previously discussed race so I took this opportunity to ask my students that even though my skin might look pink or reddish at times, if they remembered which race I was. Most of them recalled that I was white, and that even though white people’s skin may be different shades and not actually white, that is what the race was called. It was then that one of my students, a Black six-year-old girl, unmuted her mic to ask me “Why are white people so mean to Black people?” This moment stood to prove, yet again, that not only do young children see color, but they also see injustice and racism and have questions about it. How could I, who had been trusted to be a teacher in this young girl’s foundational years, ignore or dismiss this comment and pretend that it would be better for her if I did not address and candidly answer her pointed question? I could not allow her to think that she should accept it status quo or “that’s just the way it is.” While my lesson had clearly taken a turn from teaching about addition, we found ourselves in the midst of a much more crucial lesson: why is there racism and what can we do about it? My own personal research and preparation to teach students of Color about race and racism within the last year allowed me to engage in this meaningful lesson and help my students to process that difficult reality in a way that I would not have been able to previously. My lack of preparation has previously been a disservice to my students. This curriculum has been developed to improve my preparation and knowledge, and for other teachers to do the same; and hopefully, as a result, begin to remedy the disservice far too many students of Color receive as a result of the thought that they are “too young”.

In schools, even in early childhood education, there is an emphasis is on teaching math and reading. This emphasis is intense. Social studies, science, and social emotional learning often get pushed to the side. In my recent years of teaching I have found myself squeezing in most of the content that is not math or reading, and sometimes not even getting around to it at all. This time constraint, along with my previous uncertainty, meant that race and racism were rarely discussed in my classroom and almost never intentionally brought up by myself. I know that I

am not the only early childhood educator who has let wariness and required standards get in the way of confronting racism explicitly within my classroom. This is exactly what led me to develop this curriculum unit. I needed to learn the research behind why to teach my students about the issues, and I needed to learn how to do it so that I can create a classroom in which the students feel safe to discuss racism and to question inequities they witness in their everyday lives.

With this unit, I plan to teach students crucial life skills including empathy and critical thinking - cornerstones of anti-racist pedagogy in the elementary school years - through an exploration of what we will name “hidden heroes” - figures usually not recognized as national leaders despite their tireless efforts in anti-racist activism. Early childhood students are not too young to learn how to stand up for themselves and others in the face of oppression and cruelty. I plan to teach this essential content and these skills to my young students in a way that not only makes sense to and empowers them, but also ignites in them a growing passion for justice. I aspire for my classroom to be a space in which my students feel comfortable talking about race, racism, oppression, privilege, and more while knowing they are heard, they are valued, and they are safe. This unit will help to achieve these aspirations.

### Student and School Demographics

I teach at Hickory Grove Elementary, a Title I school, where there are about 750 students. Nearly the entire student body is composed of students of Color, with the majority of the students being Hispanic (47%) and Black (38%). The rest of the students are Asian, White, Pacific Islander, Native American, and two or more races; these groups each make up less than 10% of the student population. I will be teaching this unit to my first-grade class of approximately 17 students. This topic idea connects with my students’ lives because most of the students I teach are part of the most oppressed racial groups in the United States. Sadly, these students likely have already witnessed or experienced overt racist transgressions. Moreover, systemic racism already plays a role in their lives, whether they know it or not. To challenge these issues, this curriculum will center the excellence of communities of Color rather than focus primarily on detailing oppression. As a result, this curriculum unit is intended to help students of Color feel empowered by and become confident in their identity as peoples of Color. Additionally, since multiple racialized groups will be represented and celebrated, all of the students, both those of Color and the white students will be taught to recognize the incredible qualities of groups other than their own.

### Unit Goals

This curriculum will be multi-faceted in that it will address social-emotional learning, racial identity, racism, and anti-racist activism. I believe that all of these aspects are crucial for teaching young students about racism. With empowerment and empathy, these students will be able to begin their lifelong journey as anti-racist activists. Students will have already begun to learn about empathy prior to this unit, so this unit will use what they know about empathy and apply it to what they learn about racism. The focus on empowerment and excellence will help white children to recognize the value and beauty of peoples of Color and it will help develop high confidence and self-esteem in students of Color. I believe this will be an underlying

message throughout the school year, however I will take this opportunity to explicitly teach the students to identify their own special qualities and to find value in them.

One of the main goals of this unit is to teach students about the more authentic history of Black people, Hispanics, Indigenous peoples, and Asian Pacific American peoples here in the United States. These histories are vital to the students' education and need to be taught outside of their respective "history months". We will approach this topic by learning about, challenging, and critically analyzing the concept of "heroes". The students will discuss what they think makes someone a hero and decide together which characteristics we would look for to declare someone a hero. I would like to encourage the students to think about how heroes would use empathy, empowerment, and critical thinking - all antiracist actions - to do good for others. Initially, the students will learn about people who are currently widely accepted as heroes, specifically those who have been recognized with national holidays. However, we are going to analyze these people and the societal norms and systems that allow *these* "heroes" to be recognized and not others. After a critical analysis of the question, "What does it mean to be a hero?" they will be encouraged to question *why* each person has a special day. The students will think critically about whether they would classify each person as a hero or not. After learning about widely accepted heroes, the students are going to, as a class, research lesser known people who impacted history in a positive way; we will call them Hidden Heroes. These are unrecognized heroes who fought for racial justice. Again, the students will analyze these people, and the societal norms that cause them *not* to be acknowledged as heroes. They will be encouraged to question *why* these people do not have special days. The students will then think critically about whether they would classify this person as a hero or not, and if they would give this person a national holiday. My goal in teaching history this way is to encourage a great deal of critical thinking. The students will be encouraged to think about the status quo (what gets accepted as the norm), white supremacy (how white people with power keep power), and racism (the unfair treatment of people according to skin color/shade) in regard to people who may or may not be recognized in the United States as a hero, rather than simply accepting history stories and society's depiction of historical figures as the truth. This ability to analyze representation can be used throughout their schooling.

Critical thinking skills are crucial, in everyday life, and when it comes to challenging oppression and systemic racism. That is why one of the most important goals of this unit is to provide students with the critical thinking skills necessary to challenge the issues that they see affecting themselves and those around them. These students will learn to question everything that seems unfair or not right. The way our education currently operates encourages students to take what they learn without question. The typical elementary classroom culture does not encourage students to question what information they are provided by their teachers, nor does it encourage students to express disagreement with their teachers. This only perpetuates racism by requiring students to accept the status quo that is often presented in pre-packaged curricula on topics related to race, racism and anti-racism. Most school curricula advocate for a form of multiculturalism, or appreciating diversity and difference, without addressing the impact of power on various racial groups. (Thompson, 1997). This unit will provide the children with practice analyzing what they are learning, questioning why things are the way they are, and bringing to light issues they have with what they are being taught, without fear of repercussions.

The students will be able to utilize their empathy, their empowerment, and their understanding of racism and anti-racism to create their own ideas of what they think anti-racism will look like in their lives. They will do this by identifying ways they have already acted as a hero and envision ways in which they see themselves acting as a hero in the future. These skills and this knowledge will help them create their own foundation of anti-racist activism. By imagining themselves as empathetic and empowered anti-racist activists, their continued efforts to challenging the oppressive systems and institutions they interact with regularly will be encouraged. It is my goal that the students see that heroes can act in big and small ways to positively impact their communities and their own lives. By identifying their own heroic feats, I believe the students will gain confidence in their abilities to continue to act heroically, even when it is challenging. Additionally, I would like for them to analyze ways in which they see themselves represented and treated based on societal norms. I want the children to understand that they can always challenge the way that they are treated if they are not okay with it; even if they are being treated in a way that is accepted by society or being mistreated by someone in authority. The sooner children begin to develop these skills, the stronger these skills will be when it comes time for them to act courageously and face injustice.

## **Content Research**

### **Young Students Are More Than Ready**

“If we ain’t too young for you to hate us, for you to sell us, for you to kill us, then we ain’t too young to learn how to love ourselves enough to heal, to resist, to unlearn, to empathize, to fight back, and to really get free,” Akiea (Ki) Gross (2020), the creator of Woke Kindergarten, said recently in an interview. This statement exemplifies that not only are young children ready to discuss race and learn about racism, but early childhood is also the most crucial time for them to do so. Students of Color, even by early elementary school, experience the trauma of racism and it is our duty to help these students process and heal before the trauma has lasting effects. Teachers have the critical opportunity to help students of Color make sense of the confusion and anger they may feel as a result of experiencing or witnessing racism by giving students a place to comprehend and direct those complex emotions (Hamilton, 2015).

Young children notice physical differences early on, and the first of these differences that they notice is skin color (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2015). Research shows that children begin to become aware of race as young as three months old and then have a sense of their own race, categorize themselves and others into racial hierarchies, and recognize stereotypes about particular racial groups all by the time they are in Kindergarten (Early Childhood Education Assembly et al.). It is essential to talk about race and racism before internalized dominance or oppression can make a lasting impression in children’s lives. Studies show that discrimination negatively impacts cortisol levels in people (Greenberg, 2020). Thus, those that face racial discrimination more frequently have lifelong health problems as a result. I cite this to highlight the importance of starting the healing process early and continuing to assist their healing throughout their education.

It is undeniable, children are going to notice each other’s differences; therefore, we need to teach them to honor, value, and respect those differences. Young kids may not have the words

and knowledge to understand the way race affects their thinking. Ervin (2014) says, “Kids who don’t have the information and language to put race into context are more likely to use the visual cue of skin tone to separate people into “us” and “them” groups”. Explicit conversations with children about race and interracial friendships can substantially improve their attitudes about race rapidly (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). Whether or not children express their it verbally, they are curious about physical differences, nonetheless. Therefore, teachers must take an intentional, active role in facilitating conversations about such differences and the injustices that have resulted from prejudice against those differences (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2015). It is essential for teachers to ensure that these conversations occur within the classroom in order to encourage students to have a healthy understanding of their own racial identity and the racial identities of those around them. This will help children foster positive relationships with each other, especially those who are different from them.

Teaching children to be “colorblind,” a characteristic of many manifestations of multiculturalism (Thompson, 1997), or simply treat people “equally” gets us nowhere when it comes to combating racism, because we have not had equal opportunities in a racially stratified society. This has been a tactic used by whites frequently throughout history to ignore the impact of racism on people of Color. This philosophy did not work then to minimize racism, and it will not work now. In fact, “colorblindness” is one of the ways in which racism is commonly reinforced. “Colorblindness can and should be reversed; however, it must first be recognized as being problematic (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011, p. 341).” People of Color do not want their identity, culture, history, and heritage to be ignored or erased, nor do they want the history of their discrimination and oppression ignored or erased (McKenzie, 2015). Conversely, white people must understand they are a raced group who has benefited from their race, since the formation of our country. Teaching children to be colorblind, or pretending to be colorblind ourselves, can do harm. Gillborn (2006), describes the danger of this by explaining that to teach individuals to simply treat *all* people with respect and simply “not be racist” does not encourage them to acknowledge or challenge the deep rooted issue of systemic racism. This mindset of just treating people nicely, “color-blindly”, and ignoring the systemic issues will allow racism to continue undisputed.

### Discussing Racism Belongs in the Classroom

Teachers are often afraid of speaking about race due to the concern of saying something wrong or racially insensitive and thus perpetuating racism. The paradox is, it is the avoidance of the topic of race and racism that does more harm than a minor mistake in teaching would. Teachers are going to make mistakes and feel uncomfortable at times, this is inevitable, but it is important that we accept this inevitability as a part of the process and talk about it anyway (Ruiz, 2016). When mistakes are made, we must work to correct them, but the biggest mistake would be not creating space to discuss racism in the classroom. Once teachers understand that silence on issues of racism perpetuates racism, they will be more likely to interrupt racism as opposed to ignore it (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011)

Whether teachers teach white students or students of Color, it is crucial that they explicitly teach race and racism and open those discussions with students. While the race of the students taught will change which aspects teachers focus on the most, all students need to learn and talk about racism. Teaching white students might lead to discussing white privilege and

strategies to confront bias more, while teaching Black and Brown students might lead us to discussing self-love, empowerment, and resilience, but the reality of racism is taught, nonetheless. Talking about race should be done often. Conversations and anti-racist lessons should be ongoing as opposed to short, singular events (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). Limiting conversations and anti-racist activities to one-time events can reinforce stereotypes and colorblindness (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). The opportunity to discuss race with children is presented every day, and we must seize those opportunities and foster these conversations. Talking about race is not limited to planned social studies lessons and should be incorporated and normalized in regular conversations with our students (Ruiz, 2016). Discussing it regularly will allow us to talk about racism proactively rather than reactively. This curriculum unit will help to normalize daily conversations about racism. While it is vital that our lessons are age appropriate and do not traumatize students further, there are safe ways to teach our students about racism. This unit will be used to do so.

### Centering the Excellence of Peoples of Color

Since young children notice physical characteristics of themselves and others, they also add value to the traits they notice. A child's development of self-esteem is closely related to how the child views their own physical characteristics (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2015). Seeing as a child's immediate environment plays a crucial role in how the child perceives themselves, positively or negatively, it is imperative for teachers (who are part of this immediate environment) to recognize and utilize their significant role to encourage a development of a positive self-esteem and identity; this can be done through intentional conversations and activities about race (Kemple, Lee, & Harris, 2015). "Anytime you talk about people's oppression, you also have to talk about people's resistance to power. (Birdsong, as cited by Ruiz, 2016)". This serves as a reminder that if all that students of Color see about their history is limited to tragic events, it could cause harm to their definition of their own racial identity. Having derogatory attitudes and beliefs about others or about oneself can become an integral aspect of a child's disposition toward racism (Early Childhood Education Assembly et al.), therefore it is crucial to ensure that students' self-esteem is raised and not diminished through the way the topic of racism is taught. It is extremely important to study the powerful and beautiful history of Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and Asian Pacific American peoples and create a space in which students can explore the unique, wonderful intricacies of their identities, not just how slavery, oppression, or trauma are a part of their cultures' histories. It is imperative that when teaching about racism, that we emphasize to our students that there is nothing "wrong" with peoples of Color and that their oppression is not a result of anything they have done to cause it (McKenzie, 2015).

Too often in American classrooms, the experiences of peoples of Color are misrepresented or historically excluded. Black history is often whittled down to slavery, last century's civil rights movement, and a few monumental moments in between. There is very little else. Africa is all too often misrepresented, stereotyped, and ignored. Black history content is also often taught in a way that emphasizes the "white savior" mentality by centering the whites who helped Black people, as opposed to centering the Black people themselves. Hispanic and Latinx stories are often represented in stereotypical ways or in reference to immigration and anti-immigration policy. Indigenous peoples are usually taught about only in relation to Christopher Columbus and Thanksgiving, and even then are taught about inaccurately. And lastly, Asian Pacific American peoples experiences are often ignored altogether. Therefore, prior to teaching

this unit, it is important to teach about the excellence of peoples of Color before their experiences of racism and oppression in the United States. This can be done by ensuring that students are presented with material to gain an understanding about the vast amount of cultures, countries of origin, and experiences people of Color have.

In order to do so, teachers must not begin Black history with slavery, because Black history began much before that. Beginning by teaching about Africa, its many countries, and African countries' influences on the world will be foundational for this unit. To teach Black history is to teach about Africa and its peoples' incredible contributions. The same goes for teaching Hispanic history. The history of their existence or their cultures must not begin with immigration, nor conflict between the United States and Mexico. The students must learn that there are many different countries from which Hispanic people have emigrated, and thus there is not just one single Hispanic culture, but many different ones within the Latinx community. They also need to learn about Latin America's contributions to the world and Latinx contributions within our country. Moreover, the study of Indigenous peoples and their cultures should not begin with the arrival of Europeans to the Americas. It is crucial that students understand that there are hundreds of native nations, Indigenous people do not only exist in the past, and their identities and contributions are more than what is typically taught. And finally, the vast variety of Asian Pacific American cultures and contributions must be explored before delving into anti-Asian racism and oppression and ultimately their resistance and advancement. All-too-often Asian Pacific American history is missing from school curricula. Teachers must teach students about the wide variety of cultures, countries of origin, and experiences of the Asian Pacific American peoples. These historical explorations are foundational to teaching this curriculum unit.

### Lifelong Critical Thinking Skills

Not only is this unit about the content the students learn but it is also about the skills they cultivate. Critical thinking is an essential life skill that we use daily. This is a skill that can and should be taught explicitly in schools. This can be done by encouraging the pursuits of curiosity, learning from others, helping children evaluate information, promoting the children's interests, and teaching problem solving skills. When in school, children are given so much information; learning critical thinking skills can help them evaluate that information to decide if it is true, if it is important, and whether they should believe it. They can be taught to think about who or where the information is coming from and why it may or may not be important. Critical thinking skills will also be useful for children when it comes to handling conflict and problem solving. They can be taught to use their critical thinking skills to think of solutions and decide how they will work. (Rymanowicz, 2016)

Critical thinking skills are some of the most important things students can learn in order to challenge systemic racism. This can indeed be taught to young students. We can teach them, when examining the world around them, to look at ways in which Black and Brown people are portrayed, spoken about, or left out altogether. Children can learn to examine this in TV shows and movies, news, books, and more. Teaching Tolerance, a web-based resource for teachers (see [Appendix III](#)), provides the framework for doing just this with our students by providing us with essential questions they can ask: "What explicit and hidden messages about race do authors and illustrators of picture books send to readers?", "What obvious and hidden messages about beauty



do authors and illustrators of picture books send to readers?”, “What can authors, illustrators and readers do to make picture books that include more people from more different backgrounds?” These questions, and others, will be asked regularly when we read books together in this unit, until it becomes something that students do automatically when reading or being read to.

## **Instructional Implementation**

### Teaching Strategies

#### *Interactive Read Alouds*

This strategy will be used consistently throughout this unit in order to tell stories, empower students, showcase diversity, acknowledge racism, exemplify activism and more. These read alouds will also provide ample opportunities to think critically about what is being read to them, who writes the words, who is shown, who is hidden, and more.

#### *Know/Wonder/Learn Chart*

A KWL chart will be used throughout the unit to keep track of what we think we know, what we wonder or are confused about, what we learn about race, racism, and heroes. I will encourage students to continue to wonder and learn about this even after this unit is over, so when this unit ends I would like to add another section of the chart: “S- Still want to know more about”. The goal of this section of the chart is to help students understand that this may have been one Social Studies unit, but our learning does not end here. Finishing a unit is not the end of learning, wondering, and analyzing the topic. There are so many more people to learn about, more people to question and think critically about, and even more ways in which we can engage in anti-racism. This unit is a starting point and it is beneficial to be left with questions and wonderings because they will guide us through the rest of first grade and they are questions that can be brought with them to second grade and beyond.

#### *Whole Group Discussion*

I want to encourage students to find their voice by speaking up in whole group discussions. Through this strategy I will give students guidance and practice both expressing their agreement *and* disagreement with myself and their peers, or with something we have learned. I think the whole group environment will challenge them and help them grow since they will have to speak up in front of others which can be intimidating for young students.

#### *Small Group Discussion*

I will foster conversation within small groups of students while taking a more passive role. This will give the students a chance to hear their peers' understanding of the material, express their own ideas, and learn from each other. It will foster connections that will help them feel supported, not just by their teacher, but also by their friends.

### *Pre-Assessments*

Before the unit starts, I would like to gauge the students' view of themselves and their understanding of what makes someone a hero. These pre-assessments will help ensure that I am able to clarify misconceptions and provide targeted support where needed.

### *Post-Assessments*

I will use post-assessments after the unit in order to see how effectively I delivered the content and taught the students. This will allow me to reflect both on what else needs clarification in future lessons and improve my unit for the following year.

### *Role Play*

I will use role play to help the students improve their ability to use empathy. We will use it in this unit to help the students use play to make sense of what they are learning. I will also use it to allow students to practice skills that they learn: expressing disagreement and responding to injustice and racism. Practicing in a safe environment will provide the students with the space to process, clarify, and gain courage to use these new skills.

### *Students as Teachers*

The students will each have the opportunity to teach their classmates during this unit. This will help them take ownership of what they have learned by requiring them to articulate it on their own. It will also, similarly to the whole group discussion, help the students find their voice when it comes to speaking about what they know, questioning, and supporting each other.

## Classroom Lessons & Activities

### *Lessons 1-5*

During the first week of the unit, teachers will use pre-assessments and group conversations to determine the students' prior knowledge about heroes in general. This week will consist of five 25 to 30-minute lessons. In the first lesson the topic will be introduced, and the students draw what a hero looks like and write to describe a hero's attributes. Then the students will share their creations in a whole group discussion to answer questions such as: what is a hero?, do you know of any heroes?, have you ever met a hero?, what does a hero look like?, and what does a hero do for other people?.

In lesson two, the students will work together to write down prior knowledge and current wonderings on a Know, Wonder, Learned, Still Want to Know (KWLS) chart. The students will each write two items for the chart, one about what they already know and one about what they wonder. They will write, share, and add it to the class KWLS chart which will remain on display throughout the unit.

In lesson three, the teacher will explain to the class that they are able to decide what characteristics they truly think make someone a hero. They are going to make a chart, which will stand as a "rubric" by which we will evaluate the leaders we learn about, that has characteristics of a hero and characteristics that would make someone *not* a hero. Then when the students learn

about people in this unit they can decide if they think that person is truly a hero or not. This lesson will be used to demonstrate to students that they have a say in what they believe about what they learn. They do not have to believe nor agree with everything they read, learn, see, et cetera. The students will engage in discussion and express agreement and disagreement with their classmates to determine characteristics of a hero.

In lesson four, the teacher will explain that in all aspects of their lives the students are going to encounter authority figures (the people in charge in any given situation). The teacher will present questions such as: who is the authority figure at home?, who is an authority figure in the community?, and are you allowed to tell an authority figure that they are wrong?. The students will discuss these questions in pairs or small groups while the teacher monitors and provides feedback and further guiding questions. After discussion, the students will write about the role of a teacher: does a teacher have authority?, do teachers ever say or do the wrong thing?, are you allowed to disagree with a teacher? What should you do if you know your teacher is wrong or see your teacher mistreating someone? Why? These questions will guide instruction and provide an opportunity for the teacher to clarify or reteach how students may interact with a teacher or other authority figure. For example, if the students mostly think they may not disagree with a teacher, the teacher has the opportunity to clarify both in this lesson and future lessons that they are allowed to disagree with an authority figure and provide opportunities for them to practice doing so respectfully.

In lesson five, the students are going to learn about the concept of a national holiday. The teacher will describe a national holiday, review some examples of national holidays and how they are honored and celebrated, and ask students which holidays they know about. The students will use drawing and creative writing to explain: if they could create a national holiday what would it be for and how would it be celebrated?

### *Lessons 6-9*

During lessons six through nine, the students will begin to learn about and think critically about various historical figures who have been honored with national holidays. To analyze each of the figures, they will learn information from differing perspectives using various sources. They will learn the traditional perspective and how they have been presented throughout history from the white version of history and one depicting a more accurate historical representation by including the perspectives of people of Color. The students will also visually analyze the figures to determine how their appearance and identities (race, sex, ability, and more) play a role in how they are represented and valued in American history. Through small group discussions, the students will consider the following questions: using the class chart, does this nationally recognized hero meet the class qualifications of a hero?, why did this person get a national holiday?, and do you think they should have a holiday?. After discussion, the students will share their decision with the class. They will then create and add to a chart which shows their determination if each figure is a hero and if each figure deserves a holiday. If the decision is not unanimous, they will vote. The figures taught will be Christopher Columbus, Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln.

### *Lessons 10-16*

In lessons ten through sixteen, the teacher will guide the students through researching lesser known historical figures of Color (“Hidden Heroes”) who played a significant role in resisting oppression and standing up for what they believed in. One to two leaders may be studied each lesson in order to expose students to a large variety of people with varying identities. Class research will be done through websites and books. While the language in such websites and books may be for an older audience, the teacher will help the students make sense of what they are hearing. The students will write notes during each lesson by identifying important information about each figure. The teacher will guide students to infer and note which skills and characteristics the person had that made them capable of their achievements. The students will again visually analyze the figures to determine how their appearance and identities play a role in why they are “hidden” and largely unrecognized in American history. Using the notes and the class hero rubric, the students will discuss and determine if each figure is a hero and if they deserve a holiday. The decisions will be indicated on the class chart. The teacher may choose the hidden heroes of Color the class studies or have the students vote in order to have a say about whom they would like to learn. It is suggested that the teacher include Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian Pacific American heroes. Some or all of the following may be included: Ruby Bridges, Malcolm X, John Lewis, Joan Baez, Caesar Chavez, Juan Felipe Herrera, Joy Harjo, Susan La Flesche Picotte, Osh-Tisch, Fred Korematsu, Rev. Mineo Katigiri, and Anna May Wong.

### *Lessons 17-20*

In lessons seventeen through twenty, the students will work increasingly independently to determine which hidden hero they believe deserves a holiday and write a persuasive piece explaining why. In lesson seventeen, they will choose which hero they would like to write about and discuss their knowledge and reasons in a group with the other students who have chosen the same hero. They will share their previously written notes about that hero and add more to their notes based on their discussion, to use in their writing. In lesson eighteen, they will begin writing their first draft. The teacher will confer with students one-on-one and offer support where necessary. In lesson nineteen, utilizing teacher feedback, the students will revise and add more details to their writing. And finally, in lesson twenty, they will finalize their piece and ensure that it looks the way they want it to (illustrations, color, neat writing, et cetera).

### *Lessons 21-25 (Assessments)*

In lesson twenty-one, the class will complete their KWLS chart. The students will again have the opportunity to write two items for the chart: one about what they have learned about heroes and one about what they would still like to learn. Once the class has added to the chart, the students will engage in small group role play acting as everyday heroes. The students will practice utilizing the skills and characteristics that make someone a hero. The role play will focus on students practicing respectfully disagreeing when they hear information that is incorrect or racist. This practice will continue in lesson twenty-two in which the students will spend the entire lesson role playing various scenarios regarding respectful disagreement (including with authority figures), defending knowledge they know is true, and finally standing up for themselves and others in disrespectful or unjust situations.

In lessons twenty-three and twenty-four, the students will formulate a plan for how they are going to be a hero now and in the future. To do so, they will create a self-portrait in the form of a puppet. They will determine how they will use various body parts (eyes, ears, mouth, heart, feet, hands) to fight racism and injustice. For example, “I will use my mouth to speak up against discrimination.” This information will be indicated directly on their puppet. They will then attach a writing piece to their puppet which will further articulate their goals and plan for anti-racist activism by reflecting on various questions such as: how will you be a hero when you see or experience injustice?, what skills do you still need to develop to be a hero?, and whose support do you need to do so?

As the culminating activity, the final day of the unit will be a “Classroom Holiday” to honor and celebrate all the hidden heroes who have not been honored with a national holiday. The students will be the teachers on this day; they will be able to share their persuasive writing with their classmates. To honor and celebrate themselves, they will display their puppets around the classroom and take a gallery walk to admire each other's hard work and determination to end racism. If possible, depending on restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, administration, family members, and other classes will be invited to our celebration to learn from the students about heroism and the Hidden Heroes. If this is not possible, their puppets and persuasive writing pieces will be presented in the hallway for the rest of the school and visitors to admire and learn from.

The activities within lessons 21-25 will be used by the teacher as summative assessments. The teacher will assess the students’ growth by listening to what they have learned and added to the KWLS chart, observing their role play participation, and reviewing the information and knowledge presented through their puppet creation and persuasive writing. These assessments will provide the teacher with information regarding which material may need clarification, which skills may need further development, and how this unit can be improved for the following year.

## **Appendix I: Teaching Standards**

- 1.H.1.3 Explain why national holidays are celebrated (Martin Luther King, Jr., Presidents’ Day, etc.).
  - The students will be able to explain both why national holidays are celebrated in general and why holidays representing specific historical figures are celebrated by the end of this unit. They will demonstrate this knowledge by explaining why certain people are recognized with holidays and make an argument for other people who should, but are not currently, be celebrated, as well.
- 1.C&G.1.2 Classify the roles of authority figures in the home, school and community (teacher, principal, parents, mayor, park rangers, game wardens, etc.).
  - The students will analyze authority figures in their lives and determine the role they play in their own lives. The students will also be able to analyze their own role in relation to various authority figures and how to engage respectfully with them.

- 1.C&G.1.3 Summarize various ways in which conflicts could be resolved in homes, schools, classrooms and communities.
  - The students will demonstrate their knowledge regarding this standard through their role play participation. They will practice resolving various conflicts in respectful and appropriate ways.

## **Appendix II: Materials**

### Optional Read Aloud Books about “National Heroes”

#### *A Picture Book of Christopher Columbus by David A. Adler*

This book can be used to demonstrate and analyze the white supremacist portrayal of Christopher Columbus and his actions. In this book, he is revered for “discovering” America and his mistreatment of the native people is not mentioned whatsoever. It misrepresents the interactions between the settlers as friendly. It mentions that he brought Indigenous people back from America with him but does not acknowledge that they were kidnapped and taken as slaves.

#### *Encounter by Jane Yolen*

This book tells the story of Christopher Columbus’s arrival from the point of view of a young Taino boy. When the young boy grows up, he reflects on the destruction of his people and their land. The story tells of the mistreatment of indigenous people in a child friendly way.

#### *I am George Washington by Brad Meltzer*

This book can be used to portray the historical representation of George Washington as a courageous hero from the white perspective. It centers Washington as a brave young boy who grows up to help with the Revolutionary War and then founded a new nation. It does not touch on his racism or sexism. Without a storybook that tells the truth of this actions, the teacher can provide students with the evidence in other forms (i.e. presentation, storytelling, or online research).

#### *Looking at Lincoln by Maira Kalman*

This story represents the accolades of Abraham Lincoln and identifies some of the many ways that President Lincoln is honored in the United States today. This tells his journey from boyhood, throughout his life, and ultimately to his death. It portrays him as a hero who wanted equality and justice for all. While some of his actions may have led to the end of slavery, this book does not describe his racist words or actions used throughout his life to demonstrate that perhaps he did not actually want equality for all, after all. An examination of this can be done with the students by finding evidence in other forms, as previously stated regarding George Washington.

#### *My Daddy, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by Martin Luther King III*

This story is a nonfiction story about Dr. King told by his son. It tells his father’s history from the point of view of witnessing it as his young child. It demonstrates Dr. King’s achievements as well as the special bond he and his son had.

## Materials for Student Use

### *Crayola Colors of the World*

This pack of crayons has a much wider range of skin colors to be used by the students. This will be important both for their writings about a hidden hero and for the puppets they create of themselves, and they will be useful throughout the school year. These can be purchased at many major retailers such as Michaels, Target, and Amazon.

## **Appendix III: Resources for Teachers**

### Early Childhood Assembly: Resources for Educators Focusing on Anti-Racist Learning and Teaching

This [website](#) provides a plethora of additional resources to support teachers in their endeavor to engage in and teach anti-racism within their classrooms. The resources help teachers to analyze racism within schools and other systems within the United States, the misrepresentation or lack of representation of people of Color in the curricula, and to understand why and how to talk to young students about race.

### Teaching Tolerance

This [website](#) provides resources for teachers to inform their teaching and create classrooms in which all students are valued and respected. Some of the resources include, but are not limited to, lesson plans, discussion guides, educational podcasts, professional developments, teaching strategies, and student tasks.

### Teaching for Black Lives

This educational [website](#) has teaching resources related to the book with the same title. This website and these resources provide teachers with guidance to ensuring that Black history and Black contributions are not denied within classrooms. Its goal is to ensure that Black students are not pushed out of classrooms and schools. Teaching for Black Lives aims to show teachers how we can make our classrooms and schools places in which white supremacy and anti-Blackness is resisted and in which Black excellence is known.

### Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong by James W. Loewen

This book serves to debunk many of the patriotic, white supremacist myths we have learned our whole lives. Teachers can use this book to learn about inaccuracies about various national heroes and use this knowledge to inform their teaching within the unit. It will guide teachers to think critically about the history we have been taught and thus allow us to better help our students think critically.

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