Title of Lesson Plan: The Nacirema Culture: How Different Are They?

Lesson Creator(s): Catherine Fernandez, 6th grade Social Studies teacher, ET Booth Middle School, Woodstock, GA

Grade Level: 3-12

Synopsis/Summary of Lesson:
Students read an article about the “Nacirema” culture. Most students will feel that the rituals of the Nacirema culture are quite “strange.” However, the word Nacirema is American spelled backwards. After reading the article, students should be aware of their own possible ethnocentric tendencies when learning about cultures from around the world. As students become aware of their own judgments and biases, they may be more likely to accept others around them and see similarities they have with others.

Background Introduction:
Unfortunately, bullying is a harsh reality for students in many schools and communities. Many times, those who exhibit bullying behavior feel they are superior to others and tend to focus on behaviors and characteristics of their classmates that they consider to be “different” or “weird.” This lesson aims to disrupt stereotypes students may have about others, and help students reflect on their own attitudes and behaviors. Learning about the Nacirema is an eye-opening experience to show students that all cultures have their own social norms, and while those norms might seem odd to outsiders, they are “normal” to that culture. Analyzing the social norms of the Nacirema allows students to appreciate the norms of other cultures and recognize those norms as daily routines versus differences that should be exploited. Additionally, learning about the Nacirema empowers students to see that no one is better than anyone else and we all have differences.

Possible Units to Use With: Anti-bullying, Civil Rights

Focus/Essential Question(s):
• How can our view of other cultures impact how we treat others?

Objectives:
1. Identify how you view cultural characteristics other than you own.
2. Diminish the idea that no one is better than anyone else.

C3 Framework Standards:
D2.Geo.5.6-8. Analyze the combinations of cultural and environmental characteristics that make places both similar to and different from other places.
D2.Geo.6.6-8. Explain how the physical and human characteristics of places and regions are connected to human identities and cultures.

Required Materials and Preparation:
- Nacirema article (one per student)
- Decoded Nacirema article (one for teacher reference)
- “Reading with Your Pencil” chart (one per student)
- Chart paper
- Tape, markers, Post-its

Procedure:
1. Distribute copies of the “Nacirema” article to each student.
2. Distribute copies of the “Reading With Your Pencil” chart to each student.
3. Read the Nacirema article aloud to the class and have the students annotate as you read, using the “Reading with Your Pencil” handout to guide their annotations.
4. Students answer the questions that follow the article on their own. If they are not sure about a particular answer, inform them not to worry; they will work with others to discuss the questions.
5. Student form groups of 2-4 and discuss the questions. The goal is to have each group member have an answer for each question.
6. Distribute 5 Post-its to each group.
7. Groups evaluate their answers to the questions and come up with a collective group answer for each question.
8. Groups record answers on the Post-its provided. If groups cannot vote on a single answer, all suggested answers should be recorded on the Post-it.
9. Students should place their Post-its on the board or on chart paper, labeled with each after-reading question. Then, as a class, discuss the responses.
10. Announce that “Nacirema” is American spelled backwards. Tell students we are going to be studying a variety of cultures in class and sometimes they might feel the other cultures are “weird.” However, the Nacirema article should serve as a reminder that the American culture can appear “weird” to others too. The goal of the article is to have students examine each culture within the context of that culture and not to compare it to their own and see their own as being better than others.
11. Ask the groups to decode the rituals in the Nacirema article, now that they know that everything is about Americans.
12. Answer any questions students might have about the rituals. Refer to the “Decoded Nacirema” article if needed.
13. As a group, describe something in modern-day American culture that could be added to an updated version of the Nacirema.

Summative Assessment
“Ticket out the Door”: Give students index cards or small pieces of paper. Ask them to respond to the following question: How can learning about the Nacirema be useful in preventing bullying
behavior in schools or communities? As they leave the classroom, they should hand their response to the teacher.

**Differentiated Engagement Strategies for Accessibility of All Students:**
For younger students, those with special learning needs, and/or for ELL students the Nacirema article can be “chunked.” Individual characteristics of the Nacirema culture can be selected by the teacher and placed on separate index cards for groups to examine instead of reading the article in its entirety. Terminology used in the Nacirema article may be defined as well to assist students with reading comprehension.
NACIREMA

Adapted from Body Ritual Among the Nacirema by Horace Miner from American Anthropologist, 1956, 58(3), 503-507.

The facts below are taken from studies anthropologists have done with a group of people who are known as the Nacirema. The studies were conducted to shed light on a culture that is generally misunderstood. Much of the data was gained in the 1930s and 1950s, but, you will find the data still stands true today and will probably agree that continued research should be conducted with the Nacirema. No names are used in the research findings; the information pertains to the Nacirema culture as a whole.

The Nacirema culture is very much concerned with their outward appearances and therefore have very precise rituals to address how they view themselves and how others view them. Here are some examples of their ritualistic nature and determination to make the human body become “un-ugly”:

1. Nacirema people have shrines in their homes devoted to rituals. The more shrines you have the more successful you are considered.
2. Their homes may be constructed with wattle and daub construction but the shrines are often walled in expensive stone.
3. The ceremonies conducted in the shrines are secret and done on an individual basis. The rules of the ceremonies are only discussed with children at a certain age and then are not revisited.
4. The focal point of the shrines is a box or chest built into the wall.
5. The chest contains magic potions and charms that the Nacirema believe they cannot live without,
6. The Nacirema get the magical potions from medicine men by giving them gifts. The medicine men write in a language only they and the ones who prepare the potions can understand.
7. Once the charms and potions are used they are not thrown away but put back in the chest just in case they must be used again. However, the Nacirema often forget they have the remaining potions and go out to get more potions from the medicine men instead.
8. Underneath the chest is a small font. Every day each member of a Nacirema family enters the shrine and bows their head in front of the charm box, fills the font with holy water and starts a washing ritual. The holy water comes from the Water Temple of the community where priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the water ritually pure.
9. The Nacirema also have “holy-mouth men.” Many of the Nacirema people are terrified of the holy-mouth men but still go to see them. Holy-mouth men open the Nacirema mouths and use tools such as augers and awls to detect if any evil is in their mouth.
10. The Nacirema perform a daily mouth rite in their shrine which they insert a small bundle of hog hairs in their mouth along with some magical powders and then move the hairs in a highly formalized series of gestures.

11. Men and women have their own unique set of rituals in the Nacirema culture.
   a. Men: scrape and lacerate their face with a sharp instrument.
   b. Women: Up to four times a month they bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour.

12. The latipsoh is an important part of Nacirema towns…every town has one. The latipsoh is where some medicine men work and where extremely sick Nacirema go. Children and some adults are afraid of the latipsoh because many who enter there die there.

13. When the Nacirema enter the latipsoh they take all your belongings from you and make you wear latipsoh clothes. The belongings and clothes will be given back when the Nacirema leave the latipsoh.

14. At the latipsoh, the medicine men and their helpers wake the Nacirema every few hours and put magic wands in their mouths, force them to eat and drink substances, and jab magically treated needles into their flesh.

Answer the questions below.

1. Would you like to live in the Nacirema culture? Why or why not?

2. In your opinion, what is the most bizarre part of the Nacirema culture?

3. Where do you think the Nacirema people live? Include what part of the world you think they live in AND if you think they live in an urban (city) or rural (country) area. Support your answer with evidence from the text (item number included).

4. What level of education do you think most of the Nacirema people have? Support your evidence from the text (item number included).

5. What would you like to ask someone from the Nacirema culture?
NACIREMA Decoded

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1. Nacirema people have shrines in their homes devoted to rituals. The more shrines you have the more successful you are considered. (bathrooms)
2. Their homes may be constructed with wattle and daub construction but the shrines are often walled in expensive stone. (bathroom tile vs. regular walls in rest of home)
3. The ceremonies conducted in the shrines are secret and done on an individual basis. The rules of the ceremonies are only discussed with children at a certain age and then are not revisited. (potty training)
4. The focal point of the shrines is a box or chest built into the wall. (medicine cabinet)
5. The chest contains magic potions and charms that the Nacirema believe they cannot live without (medicine)
6. The Nacirema get the magical potions from medicine men by giving them gifts. The medicine men write in a language only they and the ones who prepare the potions can understand. (doctors, pharmacists)
7. Once the charms and potions are used they are not thrown away but put back in the chest just in case they must be used again. However, the Nacirema often forget they have the remaining potions and go out to get more potions from the medicine men instead. (over the counter medicines)
8. Underneath the chest is a small font. Every day each member of a Nacirema family enters the shrine and bows their head in front of the charm box, fills the font with holy water and starts a washing ritual. The holy water comes from the Water Temple of the community where priests conduct elaborate ceremonies to make the water ritually pure. (bathroom sink, washing face, water sanitation dept)
9. The Nacirema also have “holy-mouth men.” Many of the Nacirema people are terrified of the holy-mouth men but still go to see them. Holy-mouth men open the Nacirema mouths and use tools such as augers and awls to detect if any evil is in their mouth. (dentist)
10. The Nacirema perform a daily mouth rite in their shrine which they insert a small bundle of hog hairs in their mouth along with some magical powders and then move the hairs in a highly formalized series of gestures. (brushing teeth)
11. Men and women have their own unique set of rituals in the Nacirema culture.
Men: scrape and lacerate their face with a sharp instrument (shaving)

Women: Up to four times a month they bake their heads in small ovens for about an hour. (hair dryer at the hair salon)

12. The latipsoh is an important part of Nacirema towns...every town has one. The latipsoh is where some medicine men work and where extremely sick Nacirema go. Children and some adults are afraid of the latipsoh because many who enter there die there. (hospital)

13. When the Nacirema enter the latipsoh they take all your belongings from you and make you wear latipsoh clothes. The belongings and clothes will be given back when the Nacirema leave the latipsoh. (hospital gown)

14. At the latipsoh, the medicine men and their helpers wake the Nacirema every few hours and put magic wands in their mouths, force them to eat and drink substances, and jab magically treated needles into their flesh. (thermometer, IVs, shots)
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