

Teaching about diversity

When teaching about religion, culture and in particular minority-minority relations, there are certain aspects to consider and be aware of. Presented below are six tips on how to encourage the teaching of inclusive citizenship:

1. Inclusive citizenship and human rights

Teaching about diversity can be closely linked to teaching about inclusive citizenship and human rights. It is particularly important to underline that the right to freedom of religion or belief and expressions of cultural identity and linguistic diversity are universal human rights, and are not dependent on the goodwill of the current majority or ruling party. The rights to collective expression and to exercise these human rights must never, however, infringe on individual human rights. The right to protection against discrimination on grounds such as gender, religion, ethnicity and sexual orientation may provide a solid base for a balanced approach to human rights and inclusive citizenship.

2. Interdisciplinary teaching

Treating the topic as an integral part of different subjects instead of as a separate topic can increase cultural understanding. If knowledge about minorities is taught as a separate topic and not as a part of the national narrative, it can consolidate a view of minorities as “the other(s)”. This in turn can sustain and nourish existing prejudices and a sense of exclusion rather than inclusion.

3. Diversity is natural and identities are complex

Working on diversity and identity teaches students how to think critically and to be more nuanced in their perceptions of groups and individuals. There will always be variety and diversity, both within groups and between groups. A person’s perception of himself/herself can also vary, depending on the situation. Different aspects of our identity become important in different situations. It is important to be aware that the way in which minority groups are portrayed in, for example, school textbooks, may not apply to students/pupils who identify with these groups.

4. “Culture” is dynamic and religions are internally diverse

It can be difficult to fully grasp the meaning behind, and depth in, cultural expressions. One main challenge in teaching about different cultures lies in the difficulty in creating nuances. This means that teachers should avoid using static cultural expressions as a symbol of a group’s characteristics. Oversimplifications and stereotypical presentations may, in turn, lead to alienation of minority students if they are attributed characteristics they do not necessarily identify with.

5. No single person represents the entire history or identity of a group

There are various ways of looking at history, at the present, at identity and at belonging. An individual cannot define on behalf of others what it means to be part of a certain group. If external representatives from an organization are invited to the classroom to speak about the religious or ethnic group to which they belong, it is important to emphasize that there is often more than one organization representing that group. Perhaps representatives from different organizations can be invited? Additionally, teachers should underline that different people will have different views on the group's history, its characteristics, and what it means to belong to that group.

6. Be careful about presenting individual students as representatives of an entire group

Students belonging to a group that constitutes a minority at the local or national level should be allowed to choose whether or not they want to share their identity openly with other students. It can be enriching, and thus tempting, to ask students to share their background and culture with the class. However, it is important to note that identity is something intimate, sensitive and personal, and teachers should therefore not readily assume that students want to open up in this way. If a student himself/herself takes the initiative, his/her presentation should also be nuanced by the teacher, since his/her story is only one cultural representation of that group. The diversity within the group can be emphasized through the teaching.

Adapted and translated from:

<https://dembra.no/utema/urfolk-og-nasjonale-minoriteter/nasjonale-minoriteter/>