

Critical multicultural geography: moving beyond the 'Four Fs' of fairs, festivals, food and folktales

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When pupils learn geography they are extending and reshaping their worldview. In this article, Lesley and Joe argue that primary geography can and should play a critical role in challenging societal issues of inequality, racism, prejudice and stereotypes, particularly pertaining to perspectives of the 'Other'.

Some geography resources and online sources can demonstrate capacity in fostering multiple perspectives, appreciation for diversity, development of critical thinking and enquiry, and making connections. However, many resources present stereotypical, oversimplified accounts of issues, peoples and places, which can result in feelings of superiority among dominant groups and more entrenched feelings of 'Otherness' amongst minority groups.

'Soft' and 'hard' multicultural education

Multicultural education (MCE), sometimes called intercultural education, values different cultures and ethnicities. It prepares pupils to live and thrive in a diverse world, both locally and globally. MCE fosters equality, justice and equity, and establishes the reality of philosophical ideals in classroom environments.

While there are different definitions of, and approaches to, MCE, general criticisms and distinctions can be made between 'soft' and 'hard' MCE. Soft MCE comprises tokenistic, superficial approaches that focus on aspects such as fairs, festivals, food and folktales – see Grant and Sleeter's 'four Fs' (2009). Hard MCE encompasses more critical, transformative approaches that empower pupils to critique and challenge the social norms, issues and decisions that benefit one group to the detriment of others.

This article advocates for hard – or critical MCE (CMCE) – approaches, which are aimed at attaining educational equity, understanding and respecting

ethnic groups and cultural diversity, while recognising and combating oppression, stereotyping and prejudice (Acar-Ciftci, 2014).

Many criticise soft forms of MCE where diversity is celebrated yet inequalities and prejudices go unchallenged. Here, a superficial, 'tourism', approach can be adopted whereby lessons about other cultures outside the dominant group are often taught through a Eurocentric lens, with the 'Other' being reduced to stereotypical symbols and artefacts such as boomerangs, traditional clothing and dances, thus presenting certain cultures as primitive and uncivilised (Acar-Ciftci, 2014). This soft form of MCE is centred on the idea that 'the world is as it is'; and thus the existing social order should be maintained and all minority groups encouraged to accept the worldview of the majority and assimilate. Without critical engagement and questioning, sensitivity alone cannot adequately address societal issues of inequality, power relations and prejudice (Usher, 2021). Our schools should be aiming to produce critical and creative thinkers who are knowledgeable about and sensitive to other cultural perspectives.

The CMCE Framework

Usher (2021) argues that geography education is best placed to facilitate this hard approach and to produce critical and creative thinkers who are knowledgeable about (and sensitive to) other cultural perspectives as well as associated issues of injustice and inequality. This idea of synergy between geography and CMCE (CMCE) is advocated for by Burnett (2020) and Dolan (2020), who argue that pupils need to understand the relationships that exist between cultures, including differences and similarities. As far back as 1998, Harrington (1998, p. 46) noted that 'geography is uniquely placed to challenge stereotypes and help children build up accurate and unbiased images'.

However, while geography education offers opportunities for challenging stereotypes, the very notion that there are 'accurate' and 'unbiased' images wrongly assumes that there is a singular

'true' or 'real' idea about a place: an 'authentic place'. Prejudice is based on an egocentric judgement that there is only one way of experiencing the world; but, instead, it is better to think from multiple perspectives; of multiple places, of places within places, local and global, similar and different, independent and interdependent (Burnett, 2020; Picton, 2008).

The whole picture

Teachers could highlight this by using 12 images of a place/country under investigation, but showing two contrasting perspectives (e.g. tourism, local life, agriculture and natural landscapes, urban areas). Divide the class into two groups and give each group six images (without revealing the location). Each group should speculate about their six images, then briefly present their conclusions about what kind of place it is. Both groups will have different views of the place/country. When the teacher reveals the images all show the same place/country, pupils are always amazed. From this, teachers can start to address stereotypes and pupils can develop an understanding of how an image impacts on your impression of a place/country. They will see that, while these images are all 'real' and 'authentic', they cannot provide the whole picture on their own.

CMCE encourages pupils to be critical; to ask questions of systems, sources and society, to be enquirers and investigators, to recognise and value similarities and differences between peoples, to explore power relations between groups, and to see things from multiple perspectives (Usher, 2021). After all 'the world we know and attempt to understand is shaped by our own individual experiences of places, by what we hear from others, and by the images, maps and text provided by books and the media' (Roberts, 1998, p. 46; Burnett, 2020). Both teachers and pupils need to be critical of the way things are in the world around them, asking such questions as: Is it true? Who says so? Who benefits most? What alternative ways of looking at a problem can we see?

Synthesising the literature pertaining to both geography education and CMCE, Usher (2021) created a framework for CMCE (Figure 1). Through their questions and the resources, teachers must make efforts to encourage pupils to think critically about issues, information, inter-group power relations and places, and to relate the issue/places/people under study back to their own everyday lives and contexts.

Applying the CMCE Framework to geography resources

Teachers can apply the Framework for CMCE to any teaching and learning resources they are considering using in geography. For example, Figure 2 is based on an extract from an Irish primary geography resource for 7–8 year-olds learning about Brazil as a distant place.

Characteristic	Does the resource:
Different perspectives	Provide different perspectives of the place and/or issue being presented to the pupils (i.e. many truths)?
Diversity	Show a variety of images and accounts pertaining to the place and/or issue being presented (i.e. acknowledging differences in cultures within a place – diversity)?
Critical thinking and enquiry	Encourage enquiry and critical thinking on 'why things are as they are' in relation to the issue and/or 'Other' place?
Power relations	Explore power relations between groups within the 'Other' place and/or between that place and pupils' own locations?
Connections	Allow for making connections between the 'Other' culture/place/issue and the pupils' locality, experiences and local/national contexts (i.e. thinking globally, acting locally)?

Figure 1: Framework for Critical Multicultural Geography Education. Source: Usher, 2021.



My name is Julio. I live in an apartment in the city of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Brazil is the largest country in South America. I speak Portuguese and I learn English at school. Our summer holidays are in December and January when it is very hot. My favourite dinner is black beans and rice. There are nearly seven million people in my city. Some people build their homes on hillsides, in places called *favelas*. My city is famous for its carnival. People celebrate on the streets and dress in colourful clothes and costumes.



Brazil nuts



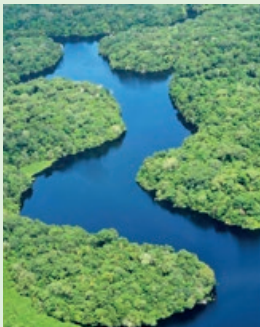
Houses



Carnival



Fruits



Amazon River and Rainforest



Beaches



Coffee



Samba



Soccer

Figure 2: Teaching about Brazil as a distant place to 7–8 year olds. After: Griffin and Sheehy (2010). Photos © Adam Jones, Carnaval.com Studios, Sarah. Ahearn, bossa07, Nick Fullerton, Jason Rosenberg, 2011CIAT/NeilPalmer, Rafael Saldana, Rodrigo Soldon Souza, Arash Aghassi.

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Using the CMCGE Framework, teachers can critique and evaluate the resource, thus gaining an idea of whether it is appropriate, what its strengths and weaknesses are, whether to use it and how, as well as how to supplement it with other resources and activities (Figure 3).

Following this analysis of the resource through Usher's (2021) CMCGE Framework, teachers could consider incorporating other learning activities and resources to supplement it. This will help the pupils to further their understanding

of the topic/place. For instance, the pupils could create a profile of themselves, imagining this would be used by children in Brazil when learning about their local area. Having read Julio's profile, and in creating their own, pupils can consider if all Brazilian children like blackbeans and rice for dinner and so on. The profile that each pupil creates could be shared with the class, drawing attention to the uniqueness of each pupil in terms of their favourite foods, pastimes, etc. The pupils could also bring in nine images to

represent their local area/region/country. What images would they choose? Would each pupil select the same nine images?

Conclusion

This article has drawn attention to 'soft' and 'hard' approaches to teaching geography, and the need for teachers to be more critical of resources and methods they use in the classroom. The Framework for CMCGE is presented as a means of ascertaining the extent to which some resources and teaching approaches facilitate or repress hard multicultural education in geography. The Framework for CMCGE can be downloaded (see web resources).

References

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Characteristic	Does the resource...	Brazil (profile resource)
Different perspectives	Provide different perspectives of the place and/or issue being presented to the pupils (i.e. many truths)?	It is a profile of one person (Julio) and so presenting a single perspective? Other people are mentioned in the text, in relation to those who live in <i>favelas</i> , but no description or definition is given for the term <i>favelas</i> or what kind of people might live there.
Diversity	Show a variety of images and accounts pertaining to the place and/or issue being presented (i.e. acknowledging differences in cultures within a place – diversity)?	Nine images are presented to accompany the text. These illustrate different landscapes, such as rainforest, beaches and urban areas. There are no explicit images of <i>favelas</i> or different aspects of peoples' lives in Brazil. The images themselves could be interpreted as stereotypical.
Critical thinking and enquiry	Encourage enquiry and critical thinking on 'why things are as they are' in relation to the issue and/or 'Other' place?	The pupils could hypothesise as to why Brazilian people speak Portuguese, highlighting similarities with why Irish people speak English (i.e. colonial past). Pupils could be asked why summer holidays are in December–January, etc.
Power relations	Explore power relations between groups within the 'Other' place and/or between that place and pupils' own locations?	No power relations are explored in this resource. There is no indication that any inequality exists in Brazil nor between Brazil and Ireland. No indication is given as to what life is like in <i>favelas</i> , aside from the fact that they are 'homes on hillsides', giving an almost idyllic impression of what these places are like.
Connections	Allow for making connections between the 'Other' culture/place/issue and the pupils' locality, experiences and local/national contexts (i.e. thinking globally, acting locally)?	These nine images could be deemed to be somewhat stereotypical, but are a good stimuli for discussion and investigation into connections between Ireland, the pupils and Brazil. The images of coffee, fruits and Brazil nuts could all be used to examine connections.

Figure 3: Using the Framework to critique and evaluate a resource.

Web Resources

Download the CMCGE Framework:
<https://www.geography.org.uk/journals/Primary-geography>

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