

## Cultural Appropriation

*On Heritage Day, is it OK for teachers and children to dress up in other culture's attire? Or is it cultural appropriation? Is it right or wrong?* This was a question posed at a recent workshop I was facilitating.

### A few thoughts

1. It is not about 'right' or 'wrong' it is about different ways of thinking and a developing of our understanding. We so quickly want to classify things as right or wrong as if it has to be one or the other, rather than understanding the complexities around the situation.
2. People are allowed to feel differently about people wearing their cultural attire or dress. One person at the event indicated that they love seeing people with no Zulu heritage wearing Zulu attire on Heritage day. However, for someone else it can be completely the opposite. This is OK. We don't have to agree, or all feel the same way, but rather understand each other and make our decisions from a place of understanding. The big question for many is whether someone is celebrating or using the Zulu culture.
3. So then, the question arises, are we 'celebrating' someone's culture or just wearing their attire because we don't have attire from our own culture? If it is a true celebration of Zulu culture, that someone is wearing something from Zulu attire because they want to celebrate Zulu culture, this is different to just wearing something, anything, for a day.
4. Do we understand what the attire is that we're wearing? Do we understand the reason for or history of the beads, or shape of hat or headdress, etc? Do we know what they are called? Can we celebrate something if we don't understand it? Are we creating opportunities for understanding the different cultures in our society rather than just copying something that has no meaning to us?
5. What does it look like to have this as a real conversation in the classroom? Children and teachers need to discuss how they feel if someone else wears their ethnic attire. This is, again, why we need to create safe spaces in which there's not 'right or wrong' judgements around different perspectives and points of view. We can accept that people feel differently. Then students themselves can decide, perhaps based on how their own friends feel, what they wear and why.
6. Imagine two South African girls or boys discussing how the one feels about the other wearing her ethnic attire because she herself doesn't have cultural attire. Imagine the growth and acceptance that could develop through understanding how each feels about the situation.

Use our discussion guide below, and our PowerPoint presentation, to help guide you through these conversations with staff and students.

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### A Guided Discussion:

**Create a safe space for the discussion – listening to understand, respectful, treating others as you would like to be treated. Invite children to participate as they feel comfortable.**

- Where do you come from? What are your ethnic origins or nationality? We call this our heritage. It's like our roots – like a tree – where we come from and is part of our culture.
- Who has traditional clothing/attire that they wear in their culture?
- How does it feel to put on your traditional clothing/attire? Why do you think that is? Is wearing traditional clothing a way of celebrating your culture? What does it celebrate? **Acknowledge and validate any feelings that are offered. There is no right or wrong, some may have mixed feelings depending on the context in which they are wearing it.**
- Who doesn't have traditional clothing/attire in their culture? Did they in the past? (Many may have had in years gone by even if not worn or celebrated today) How do you feel about not having traditional costume to wear?
- What does it mean to borrow something? What does it mean to lend someone something? Are there some things that you can't borrow? If you lend something to someone, how do you want them to treat it? **Draw out the concepts of valuing something and treating it with respect.**
- Do you think you can borrow someone's traditional attire? Why? Why not? What might some of the reasons be that you could borrow someone's traditional attire? What might some of the reasons be that you couldn't borrow someone's traditional attire? **Encourage all possible thoughts and answers, remind children there are different ways of thinking about this.**
- Have you heard of cultural appropriation? ***It's when someone takes someone else's cultural customs or practices, ideas or clothing and take it as their own inappropriately or without understanding what it means or acknowledging where it's from.*** For example, Basotho blankets should be worn with the stripe running vertically. Men should wear the blanket with the darker side facing out, whilst women should wear it with the lighter side showing.
- What do you think you could do to respect someone else's culture if you want to wear their traditional clothing or jewellery? **Ask questions, understand what you're wearing, know what it's called, treat it with respect and dignity.**
- How can we find out about someone else's culture and clothing?

You can use the PowerPoint slides on this link to guide the discussion.