

How the Meanings of Colors Transmit Navajo Culture

Summary

Students will be able to identify the four colors important to the Navajos and understand how these colors represent different elements of Navajo culture. They will also be able to understand how values and beliefs associated with color help transmit culture from one generation to the next.

Main Core Tie

Social Studies - 4th Grade

[Standard 2 Objective 1](#)

Time Frame

2 class periods of 45 minutes each

Materials

Teacher Materials

- [At a Glance: Color in Navajo Life and Beliefs](#) (pdf)
- [Navajo Symbolic Associations Chart](#) (pdf)
- Video: [We Shall Remain: The Navajo](#)

Student Materials

- Photo of Navajo Rug
- [Navajo Coloring Page](#) (pdf)
- Photos of Navajo weavings, sand paintings, and other materials at UtahIndians.org

Background for Teachers

In many cultures, colors serve as symbols. The Navajos use colors artistically, but they also use them to symbolize important elements in the Navajo belief system. While many colors have significance, four in particular--black, white, blue, and yellow--are tied to the Navajo view of the world. These colors are associated with the four directions, certain times of day, the four mountains that serve as markers of the Navajo homeland, important spiritual beings and people, and many other aspects of Navajo culture and tradition. They appear throughout Navajo stories, and Navajo artists use them in sand paintings, weavings, and other forms of art.

Instructional Procedures

Before starting the lesson, briefly remind the students what a symbol is, and explain that color works as a symbol in many cultures. Show them the American flag as an example. Explain that in the American flag, the white stars symbolize each of the states and the blue square represents "union," or the way in which the individual states are tied together into one nation. Ask them to think about what colors mean in their cultures. (You could give suggestions, such as colors associated with holidays, weddings, funerals, signs, etc.)

Next tell the students about the Navajos, a nation of Native Americans that have lived in what is now Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona for centuries and continue to be an important part of these states. Explain that the Navajos have special colors that act as symbols in their culture.

Based on the information in the teacher materials, explain how the four colors represent different spiritual beliefs, people, and places. Discuss how these colors and spiritual beliefs are also associated with the sacred mountains of the Navajo homeland, the four directions, and certain times of day. Explain that these colors are especially important because they tie the Navajo to their

homeland.

Give the students the Navajo coloring sheet, and have them complete it either as homework or as an in-class project. When they have completed it, discuss what they have learned about the colors and the Navajos from the coloring sheet. Ask some of the students to share the color they chose for "family" and tell the class why they selected that color.

Tell the students that color is also an important way for Navajo parents to pass their culture on to their children, and that one way to do this is through art. Show them the clips from *We Shall Remain: The Navajo* or photos of Navajo artwork at www.UtahIndians.org. If time permits, you could also focus specifically on the importance of weaving in Navajo culture using the information from "The Art and Technology of Utah's Five Unique Indian Cultures" lesson plan. Reinforce that this artwork is a beautiful and important part of Navajo life, and of Utah's culture.

Extensions

Include words from the lesson in vocabulary or spelling tests. Here are some suggestions: culture, education, nation, history, tribe, and symbol.

Students can use their knowledge of colors and their symbolic meanings to evaluate the flag of the Navajo Nation and other tribal flags.

Have the students do a brief report on Navajo weaving, basketry, or silversmithing. Have them focus on the use of colors in these art forms

From oral histories or other sources at www.UtahIndians.org, have students investigate what words or ideas the Navajo associate with colors and how certain facets of Navajo life link to colors.

Assessment Plan

Completion of coloring sheet

Discussion responses

[End of Unit Assessment](#)

Bibliography

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