



**COLORFUL**

A Guide for Using Paint to  
Inspire Conversations About  
Skin Tone and Celebrate  
Racial Identity



**CONVERSATIONS**





GRADE LEVEL:  
Elementary

# COLORFUL CONVERSATIONS

This lesson was designed to help students learn about the science and social significance of skin tone and to support the development of positive racial identity and sense of self. Creating a world where empathy, diversity, and inclusion are valued begins with teaching children to observe and affirm the many aspects of their own and others' identities, including skin tone. Conversations about race and skin tone should start early because racial identity and bias develop at a young age, and avoiding the topic of skin tone sends the message that our differences are something to be ashamed of, rather than celebrated.

## OBJECTIVE

Students will develop art, science, and observational skills as they learn about the range of human skin tones. They will use paint to create a custom color that matches their own skin tone, to be used in a self-portrait or classroom mural project. Students will reflect on and appreciate the diversity in their classroom as they develop positive cultural identity, empathy, and inclusivity.

This lesson involves an art activity. You will need paints, paint brushes, paper, and a surface or container for mixing paints. Plastic palettes, thick paper, and cardboard are all good surfaces for mixing paints. This is a great opportunity to use recycled cardboard, such as First Book boxes.

This lesson was designed for use with tempera skin tone paints. If you don't have skin tone paints, you can create a range of colors that match human skin tones using primary color paints. (See [page 13](#) for instructions.)

See the Arts & Crafts section of the [First Book Marketplace](#) for paints, brushes, and other supplies.

## PREPARATION

## PROCEDURE

- 1 Read a book with your students about skin tone and/or a book that shows children with a diverse range of skin tones (such as *All Are Welcome Here*, *Happy in Our Skin*, *Skin Again*, or *Beautiful Shades of Brown*). You can find books on the [First Book Marketplace](#), available to any First Book member, or on our affiliate page on [Bookshop.org](#), for non-members.
- 2 Explain why and how humans evolved to have different skin tones. (See [page 10](#).)
- 3 Talk about the history of race and discrimination based on skin color. (See [page 11](#).)
- 4 Talk about the importance of color in our lives. (See [page 13](#).)
- 5 Give each student a copy of the identity chart template (See [page 5](#)) or a blank piece of paper. Ask them to complete the identity charts using some characteristics that are visible (examples: hair color, skin color, or height) and some invisible characteristics (examples: loves to draw, older brother, adventurous).
- 6 Have students create individual self-portraits that can be displayed together on a classroom wall or used in a gallery walk. (You can also use one large piece of paper for a classroom mural). Students can create traditional self-portraits or add words and images from their identity charts around the outside of their self-portraits (examples: sister, basketball player, artist, reader, and bilingual).

Source: [Exploring Perceptions About Identity Through Self-Portraits](#) | Edutopia

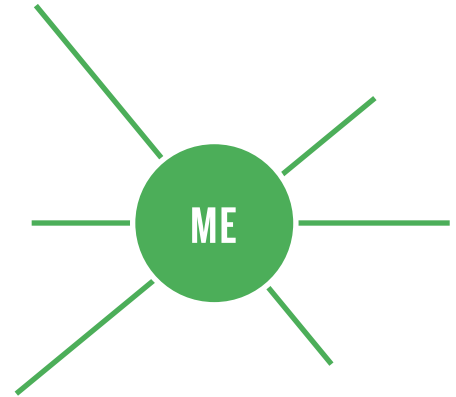




# SELF-PORTRAITS

## FIRST STEP: CREATE AN IDENTITY CHART

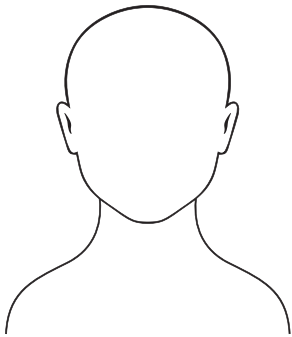
Have each student complete an [identity chart](#), using the blank space around the self-portrait to write or draw visible and invisible traits and other important aspects of their identities. Completing an identity chart before the self-portrait will help kids keep in mind that identity is complex and involves both visible and invisible traits.



## SECOND STEP: FIND THE RIGHT COLOR

Once students are set up with their painting supplies and skin tone paints, have them determine which color most closely matches their skin tone. (If using primary colors, [see page 13.](#))

- Have students compare their skin to the skin tone paints available to determine which is the closest match.
- Have students customize their chosen skin tone paint further by adding white, black, brown, or other shades from the skin tone paint set.



## THIRD STEP: DRAW A SELF-PORTRAIT

Students can now complete their self-portraits, using a blank piece of paper or the [self-portrait template](#) at the end of this lesson. Referring to the traits and characteristics on their identity charts, students can write or draw some of those qualities in the margins around their drawing. If students would like additional colors for clothing, accessories, hair, and eyes, they can use another set of paints, crayons, or colored pencils.

## FOURTH STEP: DISPLAY THE ART

Display all the artwork together so the class can admire the range of beautiful skin tones in their classroom. Students now have a better understanding of why there are so many skin tones as well as the social significance of this diversity.

Don't forget to share your classroom mural or gallery wall using the hashtag **#colorfulconversations**

# IDENTITY CHART

Use this identity chart to explore aspects of identity that include visible traits like skin, hair, and eye color as well as invisible traits like interests and talents.

VISIBLE TRAITS

INVISIBLE TRAITS



Share your Identity Chart and see others at  
[#colorfulconversations](https://twitter.com/colorfulconversations)



# GRÁFICA DE IDENTIDAD

Usa esta gráfica para analizar los aspectos de la identidad que incluyen rasgos visibles, como la piel, el cabello y color de ojos, y también los rasgos invisibles, como los intereses o aptitudes.

## RASGOS VISIBLES

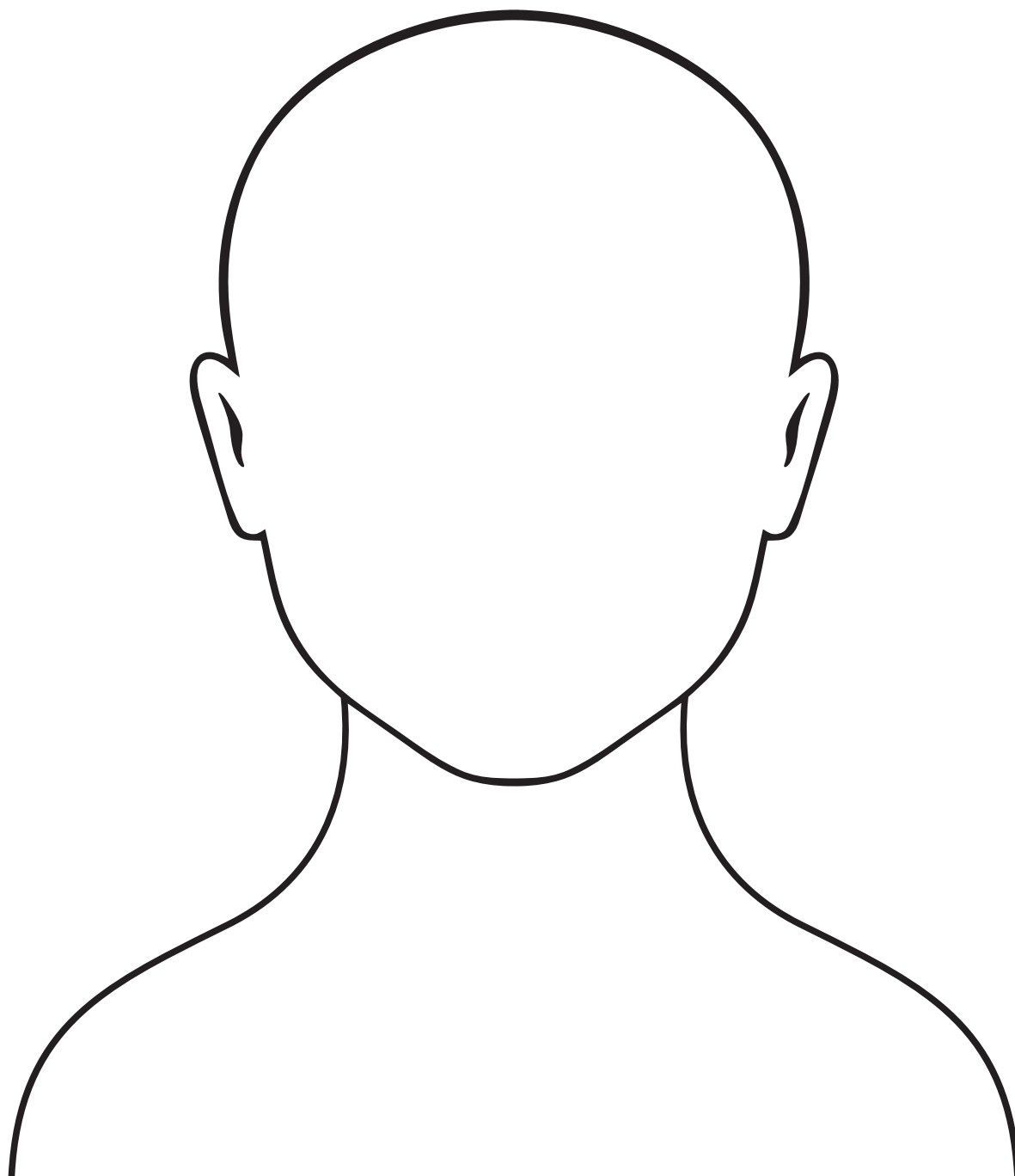
## RASGOS INVISIBLES



Comparte tu gráfica de identidad y ve otras en [#colorfulconversations](#)



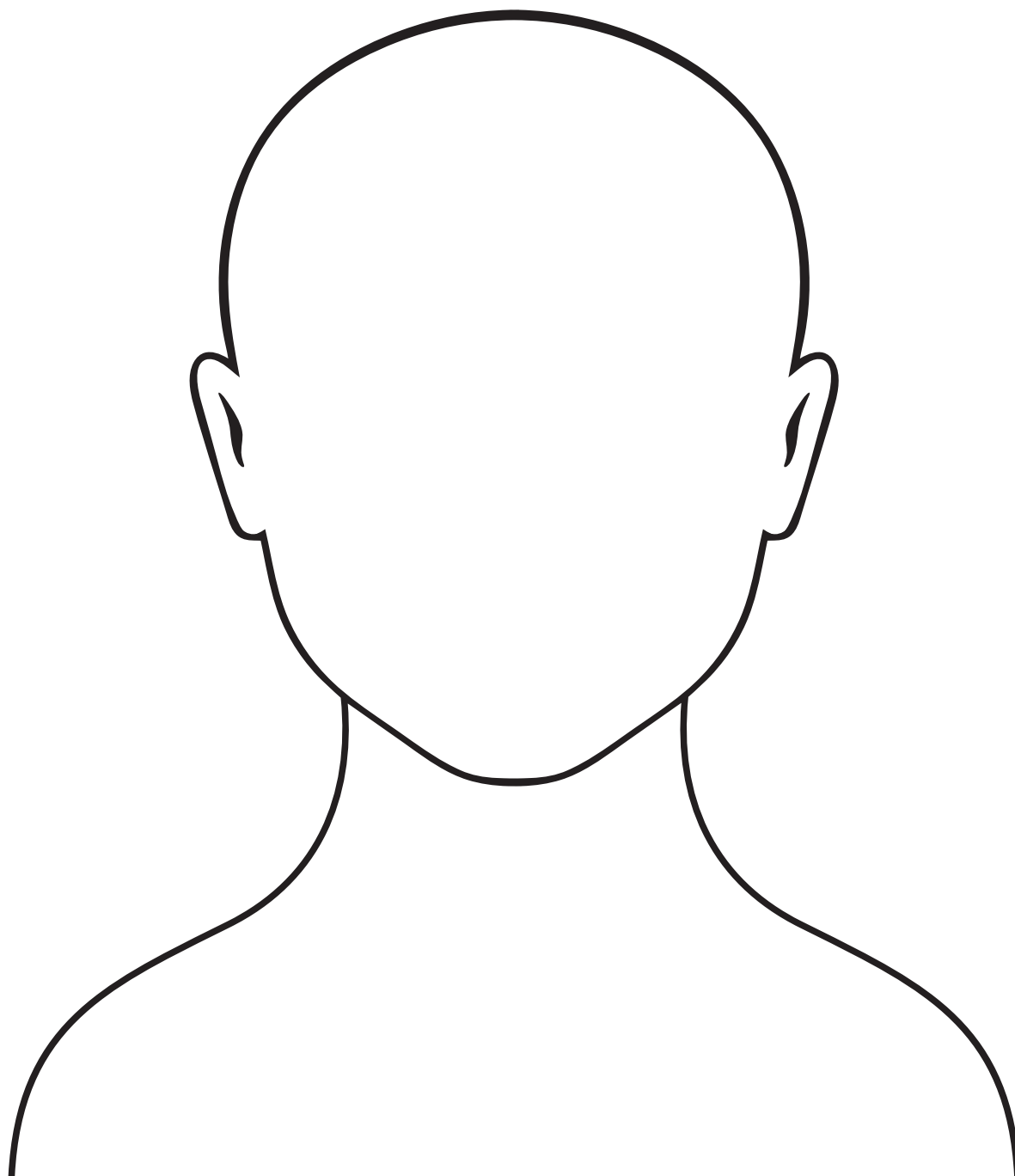
# SELF-PORTRAIT



Share your Self-Portrait and see others at  
[#colorfulconversations](https://twitter.com/colorfulconversations)



# AUTORRETRATO



Comparte tu autorretrato y ve otros en  
[#colorfulconversations](#)



# APPENDIX

In the following pages, you'll find supplemental and additional resources related to this lesson.

## FACTS ABOUT SKIN & SKIN TONE

## FACTS ABOUT RACE & RACISM

## WHY WE SHOULD SEE SKIN TONE AND TALK ABOUT IT

## DO'S AND DON'TS OF TALKING ABOUT SKIN TONE

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & RELATED LESSONS

## USING PRIMARY COLOR PAINTS

## FACTS ABOUT COLOR

## VOCABULARY (ENGLISH)

## VOCABULARY (SPANISH)

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# FACTS ABOUT SKIN & SKIN TONE

- We get our skin color from our parents and **ancestors**, from the sun, and from a chemical in our skin called melanin.
- We can't see the **melanin** in our skin, but we all have some.
- People with more melanin have darker skin, and people with less melanin have lighter skin.
- Skin tone is the result of a **genetic adaptation** to our environment.
  - If your ancestors lived someplace sunny (generally closer to the equator), they probably had darker skin to help protect their skin from the sun.
  - If your ancestors lived someplace without a lot of sun (generally further from the **equator**), they probably had lighter skin to make it easier to absorb Vitamin D from the sun. Humans need Vitamin D for healthy bones, teeth, and muscles.
- It took generations for our ancestors to develop the right amount of melanin for the different environments they lived in.
- Our ancestors adapted to their various environments, which ultimately resulted in the many skin tones found around the world today.



Source: [The Kid Should See This](#)

# FACTS ABOUT RACE & RACISM

Talking about race is important because everyone has a racial identity, and race is a defining construct of American life. First Book's Empowering Educators series offers *A Guidebook on Race & Racism* that's a great starting point for educators looking for more information about the history of race in the U.S. The Empowering Educators toolkit also includes a series of videos featuring subject matter experts and practicing educators, an *Unconscious Bias Self-Assessment*, and short guides on talking to students about race and racism. All these materials and more are available on the [First Book Marketplace](#).

## Race is not a biological distinction.

- Human beings are more than 99% genetically similar.
- Eighty to ninety percent of genetic variation is within the same race, so the percentage of variation between different races or ethnicities is very small.
- Most traits are inherited independently. The genes for skin color are not the same as those for eye shape or hair texture.
- Rather than having a genetic or biological basis, race is a social construct.

Source: [National Geographic](#)

## Skin tone has been and continues to be used to discriminate against certain groups of people.

- The enslavement of African people was the foundation of our country's economy, and beliefs about inferiority based on skin tone were used to justify the extermination of Native Americans, the exclusion of Asian immigrants, and the taking of Mexican land.
- Until the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, American schools were segregated based on race or skin tone.
- Before the segregation of public facilities was outlawed by the 1964 Civil Rights Act, there were separate water fountains, parks, pools, jails, and cemeteries for Black people.

Sources: [PBS](#) and [History.com](#)

## WHY WE SHOULD SEE SKIN TONE AND TALK ABOUT IT

- Everyone's skin tone is beautiful and different.
- We see and talk about hair color and eye color. Not talking about the color of our skin gives the impression there's something wrong with our skin tone or the skin tones of others.
- If we don't see or acknowledge skin tone, we can't talk about the beauty or purpose of our different skin tones.
- If we don't see or acknowledge skin tone we can't see or acknowledge discrimination based on the color of our skin.

## THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF TALKING ABOUT SKIN TONE

Talking about skin tone can be a sensitive subject. Understanding the history of racism and discrimination based on skin tone is essential. In the U.S., skin tone has been used to oppress, segregate, and discriminate against people of color for hundreds of years.

### Don't:

- Say you don't see color.
- *Only* describe skin tones that are not white, implying that white is the default.

### Do:

There are many ways to creatively and appropriately describe skin tone:

- Be clear and use basic color terms like black, brown, tan, beige, and white.
- Be descriptive and use paint color terms like umber, sepia, ochre, russet, sienna, terracotta, gold, tawny, taupe, khaki, and fawn.
- Be specific and use modifiers like dark, deep, rich cool, medium, fair, light, and pale.
- Be creative and use poetic descriptions like autumn leaves, sand, night, sunsets, and dusk.

Source: [Color of Your Skin](#) | [Racism](#) | [Skin Color Names](#) | [Teach Peace Now](#)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES & RELATED LESSONS

[How to Start Talking About Race in the Early Elementary Classroom](#) | [Edutopia](#)

[Teaching kids about race, and how it isn't skin color](#) | [WHYY](#)

[The Science of Skin Color](#) | [The Kid Should See This](#)

[What Gives Skin Its Color](#) | [aad.org](#)

[How to Teach Inherited Traits](#) | [SciencelsforKids.com](#)

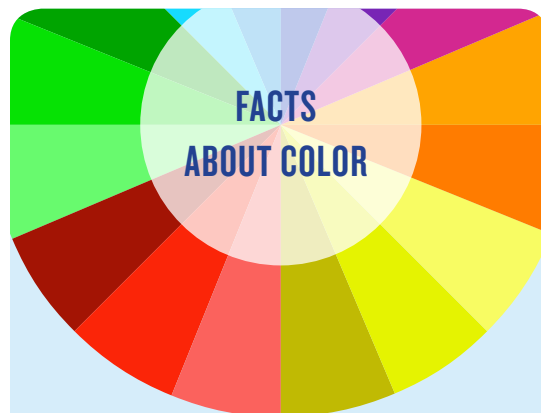
# USING PRIMARY COLOR PAINTS

This art activity was designed for use with washable skin tone tempera paints. If you don't have access to paint specifically intended for a range of skin tones, you can use primary colors (red, yellow, and blue) to make a range of shades of brown.

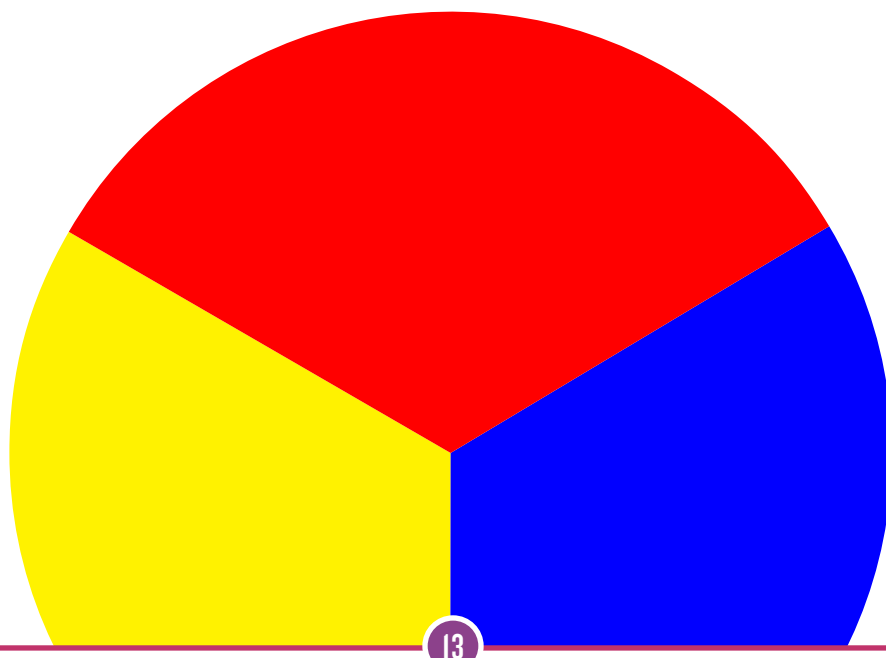
How to blend primary colors to make shades of brown:

- Put the same amount of red, blue, and yellow paint on a palette or thick piece of cardboard and mix small amounts together.
- Have white and black paint available for **tinging** (using white to lighten a color) and **shading** (adding black to darken a color).
- You should now have a shade of brown.
- If you'd like to make the brown lighter, add white. If you'd like to make the brown darker, add blue or black.
- If your skin has a yellow, blue, or red undertone, you can add a little bit of that color.
- If your mixture looks more gray than brown, add a warm color like yellow.

Source: [Books and Brushes FOR KIDS!](#)



- Color is all around us in nature.
- Seeing color is a daily experience.
- Color impacts our moods.
- Color can be used to describe our feelings. We get the blues or feel a little green.
- A color wheel can be used to organize and describe color.
- Watch a video about creating and categorizing colors [here](#).



# VOCABULARY

## **ADAPTATION:**

a change that helps a human or animal become better suited to its environment

## **ANCESTORS:**

our relatives that lived a long time ago

## **COLOR:**

the natural appearance of something, including how bright it is and what shade it is

## **EQUATOR:**

an imaginary line around the center of the earth that divides the earth into northern and southern hemispheres

## **EXPLICIT BIAS:**

attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs that affect how we treat other people and that we are aware of and express directly

## **GENETIC:**

relating to genes or traits that are inherited

## **IDENTITY:**

the sense people have of themselves, who they are, and what they feel is most important and defining about them

## **IMPLICIT BIAS:**

attitudes, stereotypes, and beliefs that affect how we treat other people and that we are not consciously aware of and express indirectly

## **MELANIN:**

a pigment in skin that gives your skin its special hue and protects your skin from the sun

## **PIGMENT:**

a substance that imparts black, white, or a color to other materials

## **RACE:**

the grouping of humans based on physical and/or social qualities

## **SELF-PORTRAIT:**

a picture you draw of yourself

## **SKIN:**

the outer covering of a human or animal body

## **SKIN TONE:**

the coloring of a person's face and skin

## **TRAIT:**

an inherited characteristic



# VOCABULARIO

## ADAPTACIÓN:

cambio que ayuda a un ser humano o a un animal a estar mejor acoplado a su entorno

## ANCESTROS:

nuestros parientes que vivieron hace mucho tiempo

## COLOR:

apariciencia natural de algo, incluidas la claridad y tonalidad

## ECUADOR:

línea imaginaria alrededor del centro de la tierra que divide la tierra en hemisferio norte y hemisferio sur

## PREJUICIO EXPLÍCITO:

actitudes, estereotipos y creencias que afectan la manera en la que tratamos a otras personas, de las cuales somos conscientes y expresamos directamente

## GENÉTICA:

relacionado con los genes o rasgos que son heredados

## IDENTIDAD:

sentimiento que tienen las personas sobre sí mismas, quiénes son, qué consideran lo más importante y característico de ellos

## PREJUICIO IMPLÍCITO:

actitudes, estereotipos y creencias que afectan la manera en la que tratamos a otras personas, de las cuales no somos conscientes y que expresamos de forma indirecta

## MELANINA:

pigmento de la piel que le da una tonalidad particular y la protege del sol

## PIGMENTO:

sustancia que colorea otros materiales de negro, blanco u otro color

## RAZA:

agrupación de humanos basada en las características físicas o sociales

## AUTORRETRATO:

dibujo de uno mismo

## PIEL:

cubierta exterior de un cuerpo humano o animal

## TONO DE PIEL:

coloración de la cara y piel de una persona

## RASGO:

característica heredada







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