

What is the Soul Cap and Why Was it Rejected for Olympic Use?

Compelling Question: What does the FINA ban of the soul cap in the Olympics say about inclusivity and representation, especially in competitive swimming?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	45–60 Minutes	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1, R2 Writing: W1, W5 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL3, SL5 Language: L4, L5	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Relationship Skills Responsible Decision-Making
MS	HS			



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [Emojis and Me](#)
- [Hair, Identity and Bias](#)
- [Microaggressions in Our Lives](#)
- [Student Dress Codes: What's Fair?](#)
- [Who Am I? Identity Poems](#)

Other Resources

- [Helping Students Make Sense of News Stories about Bias and Injustice](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)
- [Safe and Inclusive Schools for All](#)
- [Swimming Pools and Segregation: A Long History](#)

Key Words

accommodate
backlash
ban
barrier
competitive advantage
contention
discrimination
elite
galvanized
inclusivity
policing
predominately
racist
representation
sacrifice
visible
voluminous

LESSON OVERVIEW

The “Soul Cap,” invented in England by two friends, Michael Chapman and Toks Ahmed-Salawudeen, provides Black swimmers with a swim cap with extra room to fit more voluminous hairstyles like braids, dreadlocks, weaves and afros. The creators applied to register the soul cap with FINA (the International Swimming Federation) for use in the 2021 Tokyo Olympics. Their application was denied certification and they were told that “athletes competing at the international events never used, neither require to use, caps of such size and configuration,” and that the soul cap does not follow “the natural form of the head.” FINA’s decision sparked considerable outrage and backlash from numerous people and groups, with many commenting on the long-standing problems of racism and lack of inclusivity in the world of competitive swimming.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the Soul Cap and FINA’s decision to ban it in the Olympics, reflect on the backlash sparked by that decision, and express their point of view on this issue through writing and delivering a speech.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about the “Soul Cap” and why it was created especially for Black swimmers.
- Students will reflect on quotes and statements about FINA’s decision to ban the soul caps from being used for the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo.
- Students will explore and express their point of view about the soul cap and FINA’s decision by writing and delivering a speech.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- [Background Information on the “Soul Cap” and Olympics](#)
- “How a Ban on a Swim Cap Galvanized Black Swimmers” (*The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/style/olympics-soul-cap-ban-swimming.html?referringSource=articleShare>, one copy for each student)
- Choose and prepare 5–8 of the [Sit Under Quotes](#) on chart paper (or slides for online learning) and place around the room in advance of this lesson
- [Speech Graphic Organizer](#) (one copy for each student)

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing

1. Start the lesson by asking, “Do you know what kind of swim cap competitive swimmers typically wear, and why? Have you heard of the Soul Cap and the controversy surrounding it getting banned to use in the Tokyo Olympics?”
2. Share some or all the [Background Information on the “Soul Cap” and Olympics](#), depending on what students already know.
3. Ask students if they have any additional questions about what was shared and explain that they will learn more in the reading activity.



Reading Activity

1. Distribute the article, “[How a Ban on a Swim Cap Galvanized Black Swimmers](#)” to all students and give them 15–20 minutes to read it silently or read aloud together with students taking turns reading.
2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions:
 - What are some of the big ideas discussed in this article?
 - What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you were reading it?
 - What is FINA's perspective?
 - What is the perspective of people who disagree with FINA's decision to ban the soul caps at the Olympics?
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - Did the article shift or change your thinking in any way? How so?
 - Some call the decision by FINA racist. What do you think? What is the difference between FINA's seeming “intent” and the “impact” of their decision?
 - What does the banning of the swim cap convey about representation and visibility for Black swimmers?
 - How does this topic relate to the issue of race-based hair discrimination in schools and workplaces? Have you heard about that kind of discrimination happening?
 - What do you think FINA should do next?
 - What more do you want to know?

Sit Under Quotes Activity

1. Point out the quotes posted around the room. Explain to students that these quotes are all about the soul cap and FINA's decision to ban them from the Olympics. Read them aloud or ask a volunteer(s) to read them aloud. Then, invite students to sit near the statement that most resonates with them, or the quote they most want to discuss with others.
2. Instruct students to sit near the quote that most resonates with them, or the one they most want to discuss with others. Give them 5–7 minutes to discuss among themselves why they decided to choose that quote. Have each group assign a recorder/reporter to take notes on their discussion to report back to the class.
3. When the time is up, reconvene the class and have each recorder/reporter share a little bit about what was discussed in each group.
4. After hearing the reports, engage students in a brief discussion by asking the following questions:
 - What do you notice?
 - What do you wonder?
 - Did what anyone said challenge, shift or change your thinking? How so?

- What did you learn by doing this?



Writing Activity: Express Yourself Speech

1. Explain to students that they are now going to write a speech that brings together what they have learned in this lesson. First, have them decide on a statement they want to make about the soul cap and its use during the Olympics. You can have them turn and talk with someone sitting near them to discuss their statement and position, or you can just have them decide on their own.
2. Have students respond to the following prompt to get them thinking about speech writing: *When you listen to a good speech, what makes it effective? What makes it inspirational?*

On the board/smart board, record their ideas and include these if they are not stated:

- Engaging facial expression.
 - Warm and expressive tone of voice.
 - Emphasis on some words and phrases (slowing down and/or speeding up, raising or lowering voice volume).
 - Expressive hand and body motions.
 - Anecdotes or stories that illustrate the point.
 - A relaxed tone.
 - Authenticity (“be yourself”).
 - Use of visual aids.
 - Eye contact and movement in different parts of the room.
3. Give students 10–15 minutes (or more, time permitting) to begin working on their speeches, using the [Speech Graphic Organizer](#) as a first step. Have students complete the first draft of their speech for homework. If time permits, have students conference with each other to improve their speeches and practice delivering the speech with a partner. Assign students the completion of the speech for homework over the next day or days.
 4. When the speeches are completed, have students deliver them as class presentations. Consider having students record them and make available on your school or class website and/or social media channels.

Closing

Depending on time, have some or all the students read their opening statement of their speech.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- ["A Swim Cap Made for Black Hair Will Get A Second Look From Swimming's Governing Body"](#) (NPR, July 7, 2021)
- ["EU politicians urge Olympics to lift 'exclusionary' ban on swim cap for natural Black hair"](#) (CNN, July 19, 2021)
- ["FINA Media Statement"](#) (FINA, July 2, 2021)
- [Soul Cap](#)
- ["Soul Cap: Afro swimming cap Olympic rejection could be reconsidered after backlash"](#) (BBC News, July 5, 2021)
- ["Soul Cap's Ban from International Competitive Swimming Under Review by FINA"](#) (*Teen Vogue*, July 6, 2021)
- ["Swim Caps For Black Hair Banned At Olympics Because They Don't Fit 'Natural' Head Shape"](#) (*The Huffington Post*, July 5, 2021)

- "Swimming caps for natural black hair ruled out of Olympic Games" (*The Guardian*, July 2, 2021)
- The CROWN Act
- "The Olympic ban on Afro swim caps — and the backlash it has received — is a huge lesson for business leaders" (Business Insider, July 17, 2021)
- "Tokyo 2020 Olympics ban on Soul Cap designed for Afro hair "under review" following backlash" (Dezeen, July 16, 2021)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Self-Management: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Background Information on the “Soul Cap” and Olympics

- The “Soul Cap” was invented in England by two friends, Michael Chapman and Toks Ahmed-Salawudeen. While taking an adult swim class, they realized that Black swimmers would benefit from an extra-large swim cap to fit more voluminous hair like braids, dreadlocks, afros, hair extensions, weaves, and thick and curly hair.
- On their website, the owners describe the Soul Cap as “an extra-large swimming cap created for swimmers who struggle with their hair” and it is seen as a tool for inclusion of a historically excluded group. Swim caps for these hair styles are difficult to come by, which many say is a barrier for Black swimmers, as typical swim caps are not made to accommodate natural Black hair.
- The founders of the Soul Cap applied to register their product with FINA (the International Swimming Federation), for use in the 2021 Olympics. Their application was denied certification for use at the Olympics. The founders say they were told that “athletes competing at the international events never used, neither require to use, caps of such size and configuration,” and that the soul cap does not follow “the natural form of the head.”
- FINA’s decision sparked a petition as well as considerable outrage and backlash from a numerous people and groups, with many commenting on the long-standing problems of racism and lack of inclusivity in the world of competitive swimming. Alice Dearing, the first Black female swimmer to represent Britain at the Olympics and who modeled the Soul Cap, speaks about “decades and decades of historical and cultural racism” in the sport.
- The Anti-Racism and Diversity Intergroup of the European Parliament have accused the global sports community, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC), of having “institutional structures and rules that exclude people of colour and Black women specifically” and that banning the soul caps “reflects stigmatisation of Black hair and leads to institutional inequalities, especially targeting Black women.”
- As a result, on July 2, 2021, FINA issued a statement saying they would reconsider their prior decision to ban soul caps from being used at the Olympics. Their statement said:
“FINA is committed to ensuring that all aquatics athletes have access to appropriate swimwear for competition where this swimwear does not confer a competitive advantage. FINA is currently reviewing the situation with regards to “Soul Cap” and similar products, understanding the importance of inclusivity and representation.”
- On July 21, FINA executive director Brent Nowicki apologized to swimwear brand Soul Cap for the dismissal of their certification application to have their swimming caps used for international competition, including the Olympics. FINA pledged to review its processes for all future applications and encouraged Soul Cap to reapply in the next submission window in September, offering their ‘full support’ throughout the process.
- Beyond the world of sports and Olympics, there is a long history of what is “acceptable” for Black hair in schools and workplaces. In 2019, California became the first state to ban race-based hair discrimination when the state passed the “Crown Act.” The CROWN Act, which stands for “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair,” is a law that prohibits race-based hair discrimination, which is the denial of employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or hairstyles including braids, dreadlocks, twists or cornrows. Similar legislation has passed in New York, Delaware and Nebraska, among other states.

Sit Under Quotes

Quote 1

"I don't want little Black boys and little Black girls to look at elite swimming and think it's not open to them, because that is completely the wrong idea. It is open to them. I'm really hopeful that, it being under review, that some agreement will come about."

—Alice Dearing

Quote 2

"The decision is an extension of these cultural barriers. It's another barrier which predominantly impacts Black people and predominantly women with longer or thicker hair."

—Michael Chapman, co-creator of Soul Cap

Quote 3

"We want to be included, all we're asking for is to have the option to have a piece of equipment that has been designed to cater to the issue of our hair, which is a significant barrier to participation in aquatics as a whole. If FINA was aware that that was a major barrier for our community, I think that decision would have been made slightly differently."

—Danielle Obe, founding member of the Black Swimming Association

Quote 4

"We hoped to further our work for diversity in swimming by having our swim caps certified for competition, so swimmers at any level don't have to choose between the sport they love and their hair. For younger swimmers, feeling included and seeing yourself in a sport at a young age is crucial. Fina's recent dismissal could discourage many younger athletes from pursuing the sport as they progress through local, county and national competitive swimming."

—Toks Ahmed and Michael Chapman, creators of Soul Cap

Quote 5

"We're always policed on what we can wear and what our bodies are looking like, and what our hair is looking like. They're just trying to make it difficult for us to have ease when participating."

—Erin Adams, physician who in college competed as a Division 1 swimmer at Columbia University

Quote 6

"Honestly, I'd like to say that I was shocked or surprised [by the FINA decision], but doing this for as long as I've been doing this, I can't say that I am. It's not a surprise, but it's so tone-deaf and a huge disappointment."

—Aydon Gabourel, founder Laru Beya, Rockaway Beach-based nonprofit initiative

Quote 7

"When we talk about something like the Afro cap not conforming to the 'natural shape of the head' — well, the natural shape of whose head exactly?"

—Tiffany Jana, founder of the diversity, equity, and inclusion consulting firm TMI

Quote 8

"It just shows misunderstanding and ignorance. For small swim caps you have to make sure you have your hair braided so it can actually fit in them. Then you worry about getting your hair wet because you'll have to go clean it, condition it, comb it out. It's like a full-time job. So to see Soul Cap come out with a hat that actually helps us, but then to be told: 'Yeah, we don't want you to use them,' it's just terrible."

—Tony Cronin, swimming coach

Speech Graphic Organizer

INTRODUCTION

Opening line to grab your audience

State your main point or thesis

MAIN POINTS

What is the issue?

What is your stance on the issue and why?

What problem are you trying to solve?

What facts, quotes, statistics or other information can you provide to convince your audience?

CONCLUSION

Summarize your main points

Review central ideas of your position

Call to Action: What do you want people to do and what do they need to do it?