

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION in Social Studies

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Critics of National Council for the Social Studies have recently labeled curricular materials found in its publications “mushy multicultural nonsense.” They say the lesson plans only preach tolerance and understanding instead of the facts students need to learn about the past or present. They say that multicultural social studies is unpatriotic, claiming it promotes globalism over nationalism. They also maintain that the sole purpose of multicultural pedagogical approaches is to make students feel good about themselves. This is absolutely not true.

The purpose of this column is to describe the aims of multicultural education, to suggest that it does promote thoughtful patriotism, and to illustrate multiculturalism in powerful social studies instruction. Because multiculturalism rests on the assumption that the United States is a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world, we conclude by noting the connections of multicultural education with global education.

James A. Banks sums up the aims of multicultural education clearly:

Education . . . should affirm and help students understand their home and community cultures. . . it should also help free them from their cultural boundaries. . . [and to] . . . acquire knowledge, attitudes, and skills they will need to participate in civic action and make society more equitable and just.¹

As pedagogy, multicultural education acknowledges the aims of social studies education—to provide students with a foundation in history and the other social sciences, and the skills needed to become critical decision makers. Its content for instruction is derived from our pluralistic society and membership in a global community.

Thoughtful patriotism is promoted in many ways in social studies to encourage students to be proud of their country and work to improve their communities and the world community. To play out these roles, citizens must possess self-knowledge and knowledge of their immediate environments and beyond.

A multicultural framework in a K-12 social studies program rests on this country’s motto, *E Pluribus Unum*. Its objectives are to develop students’ critical understanding of ways in which

diversity has both contributed to society’s common civic ideals and values and to students’ sense of responsibility at addressing issues of democracy, equality, and social justice.

Multicultural social studies instruction helps students understand that we can all play positive roles in our environments by understanding the principles and values of American democracy and the purpose of government. As engaged citizens, we should strive to ensure that all Americans are protected by their government and that all individuals are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Engaged citizens are the patriots, heroes, and heroines who make up the American experience. A section of the position statement of the NCSS Task Force on Revitalizing Citizenship Education states clearly what it means to be an effective citizen:

For our democracy to survive in this challenging environment, we must educate our students to understand, respect, and uphold the values enshrined in our founding documents. Our students should leave school with a clear sense of their rights and responsibilities as citizens. They should also be prepared to challenge injustice and to promote the common good.²

By integrating multiple perspectives, multicultural education encourages the inclusion of lesser known individuals and groups into the curriculum; broadens the knowledge base and encourages students to value the importance of making informed decisions; and, by chronicling the actions and behaviors of Americans addressing social injustices and environmental concerns, highlights the experiences of patriotic Americans who have attempted to make a difference in their communities.

High school teachers who use multicultural education in social studies, for example, may integrate silenced voices and multiple perspectives as a way to help students leap beyond their own cultural boundaries to gain a better understanding of the American experience. One example is the approach used by some teachers to examine late nineteenth and early twentieth century immigration to the United States. Typically, this event has been described as an east to west phenomenon. Chinese and Japanese immigrants, however, landed on the west coast, Mexicans and other Latin Americans

moved northward, and French Canadians immigrated into the northeast. By adopting a more multicultural approach that includes both California’s Angel Island and New York’s Ellis Island, teachers enrich instruction, pique student interest, and add greater intellectual rigor to the examination of a historical event that can then be compared to the present. And, as students become more knowledgeable of this event, they are more apt to understand why individuals from all walks of life came to this country and how they worked hard to protect and promote American democracy. The stories the students may read of the individuals who arrived during this period illustrate that many were patriots before they even became citizens.

For the middle grades, teachers stress student involvement as a way to address the aims of multicultural education. The goal is to have students gain a better understanding of the history of their own communities and those of others in their classrooms. By exploring the historical development of a local town or city, a teacher might begin a unit on contemporary housing and industrial/business patterns in the community and elsewhere. In this initial investigation, the students, working in groups, might address some of the following questions: What racial or ethnic groups and businesses arrived to this area to form our town? Why did groups of people migrate or immigrate to this area? Where did they live? Why did they live in that locality? Why did businesses come to this area? Once the students have gained an understanding of their own community, they could turn to an examination of contemporary residential and business patterns. Working in groups, they might develop their own set of questions and learn about their community. In a concluding activity, they could present their findings to the class.

In the elementary grades, children’s literature that chronicles the experiences, contributions, and perspectives of a range of cultural groups provides an authentic source for engaging students in social participation, developing the concept of civic efficacy, and addressing the aims of multicultural education. Consider the story of Ruby Bridges, a six-year-old African American girl, ordered by a judge to attend the then all-white William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans in 1960. Two recently published trade books provide teachers with creative insights

into the life of Ruby Bridges: *Through My Eyes* (1999), the 2000 Carter G. Woodson Award winner at the elementary level, and *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles (1995).³

The two trade books portray racial integration in the 1960s from the perspective of young Ruby whose life changes abruptly as she enters public schools. Her experiences included being surrounded by an angry mob that shouted racial insults as she walked to school; being accompanied by U.S. Marshals each morning as she walked to school; and receiving a segregated education because she was the only student in her first grade classroom for the first semester as white children were pulled out of the school by their parents. Guided by her faith, Ruby trudged on with dignity well beyond her age and helped shape the changes that led to desegregation.

Incorporating Ruby's story into social studies curriculum can help students better understand the issue of school desegregation in U.S. history and, equally important, how one person can make a difference. At the age of six, Ruby exhibits the fortitude to take action so that all children can receive a quality education. Ruby illustrates what people can do individually or working in groups for a moral good.

Another piece of multicultural children's literature that highlights the theme of civic participation is *A River Ran Wild* by Lynne Cherry (1992). The book describes the environmental history of Massachusetts and New Hampshire's Nashua River—from its valley's settlement seven thousand years ago by Algonquin-speaking Native Indians, to the arrival of Europeans, industrialization, and the successful cleanup efforts initiated by one individual, Marion Stoddart, in the 1960s.

Teachers who integrate this book into lessons can teach critical social studies knowledge, such as the social and environmental consequences of industrialization and the balance between economic development and environment protection. Teachers can also use the Nashua River story to build students' critical thinking skills and consciousness of the differences between Native Americans' and European settlers' concept of land ownership and use, as well as Native Americans' respect for nature and their belief in harmonious relationships between humans and their environment.⁴

Teachers can use this river recovery story to convey the significance of social activism and the importance of making a difference in one's community. They also might encourage students to find other stories about community heroes or initiate service-learning projects that address their local environmental and social concerns. Furthermore, teachers can integrate

technology concepts into this learning experience by having students explore the website of the Nashua River Watershed Association at www.nashuariverwatershed.org/index.html to learn how this environmental project started by one person has become a global organization.

Both of these examples show individuals who exemplify the behaviors of engaged citizens. By their persistence and actions, they remind us of the importance of continually revisiting the ideals and values of American democracy. Individuals such as these are patriots because they continued where many of us might have stopped. They exemplify the American spirit. They are heroes and heroines of this country.

Many of the issues described in these examples, such as ensuring water quality and protecting the environment and human rights, also are global concerns. Multicultural education and global education developed as separate fields—out of ethnic studies and out of area studies and international relations. However, there is a common denominator between them because of similarities as (1) a focus on cultural learning and an appreciation of difference, as well as similarity; (2) a stress on the importance of knowledge and an understanding of how knowledge is constructed and whose knowledge is privileged; (3) a commitment to recognizing the complexity of cultures and issues, confronting stereotypes, and working toward social justice; and (4) an emphasis on the human connection and a goal of providing cross-cultural experiences so that students learn to communicate across cultures and even, as Carlos Fuentes says, recognize themselves “in he and she who are not like you and me.”

So we ask our students to listen to multiple perspectives and voices—to all of us. We want them to learn about the past, a rich and rigorous multicultural United States and global history that sees cultures in motion, complex and changing. We want them to learn with and from other students—sometimes face to face, sometimes through the electronic media, talking and writing about tough issues like terrorism, religion, human rights, and the environment, and also sharing music, poetry and art. Finally, we recognize that we must prepare our students for what Carole Hahn has called “multi-layered” citizenship. Our students will be citizens and decision makers in their own communities and in the United States, to be sure, but they will also be citizens who act in the world.

Multicultural education is far from a lot of mushy nonsense. The aims of multicultural education are part of the overall purpose of social studies, to prepare individuals who are engaged and productive citizens who strive to create a better nation and world. Isn't this what patriotism is all about? G

Notes

1. James A. Banks, *An Introduction to Multicultural Education* (Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1994), 1.
2. Task Force on Revitalizing Citizenship Education, *Creating Effective Citizens*, April 2, 2001 (Approved by the NCSS Board of Directors in May 2001). Published in *Social Education* 65, no. 5 (September 2001), 319.
3. Ruby Bridges, *Through My Eyes* (New York: Scholastic, 1999); Lynne Cherry, *A River Ran Wild* (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Brace, 1992); and Robert Coles, *The Story of Ruby Bridges* (New York: Scholastic, 1995).
4. Omiunota Nelly Ukpokodu, “Multiculturalism and Critical Thinking,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 14, no. 4 (March-April 2002), 20-23.

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