

Essential Characteristics of a **Culturally Conscientious Classroom**

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The increasing ethnic and cultural diversity of American society demands that classroom teachers prepare students for national and global citizenship.¹ Students of the twenty-first century need to cultivate transformative and reflective knowledge, intellectual skills, and democratic attitudes and values needed to successfully navigate diverse cultural, social, economic and political contexts. Tomorrow’s adult citizens will need to reconstruct their communities and the world to become more just, humane, and peaceful.

Given the increasing diversity in today’s student populations, the traditional social studies classroom is no longer appropriate or capable of preparing all students, especially minority/urban students, for effective citizenship in a multicultural democracy. As research suggests, ethnically diverse students are often not motivated to learn because they do not see the relevance and meaningfulness of the curriculum content to their personal experiences.² Most preservice and inservice teachers of color that I have encountered explain this disengagement and lack of motivation to learn social studies as being due to how it was taught to them. Classroom teaching often excluded their culture’s history and the roles and contributions of their ancestors; the only related units of study in social studies were those on slavery or the civil rights movement, with a passing mention of famous Blacks such as Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. These young adults felt that the social studies curriculum, by excluding their cultural perspectives, had been disingenuous to them.

Personally, I can identify with the frustration over the lack of cultural relevancy in the social studies curriculum. I am often reminded of my own experience of being shortchanged as I studied social studies in my homeland—Nigeria. As a colony of Britain, my country’s educational system was a replica of the British system and the social studies curriculum was Eurocentric. I memorized names and facts about famous explorers such as David Livingstone, Vasco da Gama, and Lord Lugard, and about humanitarians such as Mary Slessor and Florence Nightingale, to mention a few. I knew little about my own Nigerian culture or pre-colonial history. No student should be shortchanged of his or her history and experience in this way.



In addition to the lack of cultural relevancy in the social studies curriculum, the mainstream content presented in the social studies emphasizes aspects of national loyalty, citizenship, civil and human rights, democracy, justice, and equality that do not match minority/urban students’ realities. As Geneva Gay, the popular African American educator at the University of Washington, explains, students see, in their neighborhoods, “daily, graphic examples of violations of the ideals [that are taught] in their social studies curriculum.”³ More importantly, some social studies educators contend that the way citizenship is taught has excluded and marginalized minority groups.⁴ These critics argue that, in a multicultural democracy, the concept of citizenship must be expanded to include all groups, that citizenship education must be reconceptualized so that it is inclusive and relevant to all. This means that all students—

including those of color, from low-income families, those who have immigrated, and those who have limited ability in the English language—must learn to develop an understanding of multiple perspectives. For minority students, research suggests that they need to be empowered to deconstruct oppositional views they have constructed as a result of their “disenfranchisement.” Teachers must recognize the incongruity between democratic ideals and the lived experiences of these students.

Consequently, social studies should be approached from



a transformative and culturally responsive perspective that involves integrating diverse cultural perspectives and students’ prior knowledge and experiences. Gloria Ladson-Billings, author of *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students*, describes culturally relevant teaching as an approach to integrating cultural perspectives into the curriculum, promoting high expectation for student’s work, and using of diverse strategies to make learning meaningful and motivational for students.⁵ This paper advocates the notion of culturally conscientious social studies as a pedagogy of possibility for meeting the needs of all diverse learners. This is a pedagogy premised on democracy, social justice, critical pedagogy, multiculturalism, social reconstructionism, active learning, and humanism. Hence, I define culturally conscientious teaching as a humanizing pedagogy in which the teacher

has an awakened consciousness of culture as a shaper of human behavior and action, and affirms students’ culture in the context of teaching and learning. Below, I discuss six essential principles of pedagogy exemplified by a culturally conscientious social studies classroom.

Principle 1: Provide Substantive Work within a Learning Community

In a culturally conscientious social studies classroom, the concepts of democracy, community and engagement are significant underlying principles that are lived out every day. Specifically, the teacher structures the learning community to empower all students to experience belonging, autonomy, and competence. Students develop both an individual and a collective sense of empowerment. A culturally conscientious classroom is inclusive; characterized by caring, support, high expectation, stimulation, kindness, and physical and psychological safety; encourages a collective working process; and presents students with a multitude of opportunities to experience the possibilities and challenges of democratic living. For example, in such a classroom, students will have a voice in developing the learning experiences they study and the norms and procedures that guide their behavior. In the process, they will learn about democracy, participation, compromise, consensus, decision-making, and ways to resolve conflicts between individual and group needs. To accomplish this, ample opportunities should be provided for students to work together consistently and systematically, through frequent partnership and cooperative learning activities—discussion, dialogues, debate, and role-play. These methods foster bonding, as students learn to give and take, appreciate each other, and develop a sense of interdependence. More importantly, the social studies content must be substantive, rigorous, and challenging. The teacher consciously integrates critical content that allows students to study about themselves, society, and the world. This is mostly accomplished by introducing critical controversial issues and multiple perspectives through relevant literature and community inquiry. For example, at the beginning of the academic year, students can be engaged in learning about themselves as a community: they interview each other and share family and cultural stories that help them understand commonalities in the human experience as well as differences that make each student unique.

Principle 2: Build on Students’ Cultural and Linguistic Capital

A culturally conscientious classroom builds on the cultural knowledge and resources that students bring into the classroom. The teacher acknowledges, values, and integrates student resources into the “official” curriculum. A culturally conscientious curriculum helps students locate themselves in what they are studying and how they are connected to events and issues. For example, a teacher in Ladson-Billings’ study begins the teaching of U.S. history to her elementary students by engaging them in personalizing the content of the lessons, discovering how they and their families and culture are connected to events

in U.S. history. She asks students how long their families have been in this country and in the community. This question becomes an inquiry for students to document their families' experiences through family interviews and research. In this way, students become highly motivated, learn more effectively, and feel empowered as the school curriculum reflects their culture, experiences, and perspectives. A culturally conscientious curriculum uses a variety of resources such as relevant multicultural literature, biographies, poetry, and primary sources to help students explore concepts, events, and social issues. For instance, one popular unit of study in October is Christopher Columbus. This unit begins with the traditional approach that portrays Columbus as a hero. Using the book *Encounter* by Jane Yolen, students are introduced to a different perspective about Columbus and the Tiano Indians. To infuse multiple perspectives into the curriculum, the teacher and students should ask fundamental questions: Whose story or perspectives are we hearing? Whose story or perspective is missing? How would the story change if we looked through other "lenses," that is, from the perspectives of different cultural groups? Further, with a culturally conscientious curriculum, the teacher recognizes that standardized testing works against many culturally and linguistically different students and so uses a wide variety of assessment strategies and activities to assess students and gradually build their confidence and readiness for high performance on standardized tests.

Principle 3: Make Students' Lives the Starting Point for Learning

To motivate students in the social studies classroom, the teacher must begin from where the students are in their lives, and then connect this reality to the curriculum. Culturally conscientious teaching affirms the lived reality of the everyday life of students. In this case, integrating the everyday forms of expression becomes a critical resource to motivating students and helping them learn most successfully. For example, in a lesson on migration, the teacher could begin by asking: How many of you have moved from one place to another? Where did you move from and where did you move to? Why did your family move? How did you feel about the move? What was the experience of the move? Many students will be motivated to talk about their experiences. Once this attention-grabbing activity is done, the teacher can define the concept of migration, types of migrations, causes and consequences of migration, migration in history, etc. This is what Brazilian educator and proponent of critical pedagogy Paulo Freire meant when he stated that successful learning comes about only by starting from students' description of their daily life experiences, and moving from concreteness and common sense to a rigorous understanding of reality.⁶

Principle 4: Advocate on Students' Behalf

Doing culturally conscientious teaching in the social studies means to be aware of educational inequities and social injus-

tices that are embedded in schooling and classroom practices. A teacher who teaches from a culturally conscientious perspective is aware of inequities and social injustice in the curriculum, pedagogy, and classroom communication and interaction, and acts to confront and challenge such inequities. For example, in 1998, sisters Nadine and Pasty Cordova realized that the curriculum and materials mandated for their predominantly Latino students were unresponsive to the students' academic interest and need. They made a culturally conscientious decision, inventing a culturally responsive curriculum that used supplemental materials such as "500 Years of Chicano History." The Cordova sisters explained that their students' motivation and participation increased when the students were engaged in materials that they could identify with and had relevance for them.⁷ Although they were fired for supposedly using non-mandated curriculum materials, they fought for what they believed in, sued the district, and were awarded an out-of-court settlement of a half-million dollars.⁸ Bob Peterson, Bill Bigelow and Linda Christensen of the publishing house Rethinking Schools are also nationally known for making their curricular and instructional practices culturally conscious and responsive, and boldly advocating for their students.

Principle 5: Teach Social Activism and Self-Efficacy

A culturally conscientious social studies classroom emphasizes social activism and helps to create hope. Teaching for social activism helps students learn that people can make a difference when they recognize injustice and take action, and so learn to develop a sense of self-efficacy. It introduces students to the idea that human activities, not acts of nature, are both the root cause and the potential solution to social problems.⁹ High school teacher and author of *Education for Public Democracy* David Sehr explains that social action highlights the need for social justice. Social action can be a way to teach about the struggle for equality and justice, which helps students realize that society is not perfect.¹⁰ Teaching for social action calls for studying social issues, inequities, and injustice. In a culturally conscientious social studies classroom, the teacher explicitly guides students toward recognizing inequitable human conditions that exist in their communities and the world and provides opportunities for students to question and challenge these conditions. Through explicitly raising social issues in units of study and the use of primary resources, newsprint, quality trade books and other materials, the teacher introduces students to issues that exist in the everyday lives of people. This was the situation as set up by Craig Keilburger's teacher when, as a sixth grade student, Craig and his classmates studied issues of child exploitation, an activity that led him, as an adult, to champion the "Free the Children" Crusade. Later, he recalled how his passion for social justice and activism was nurtured in a social studies classroom.¹¹

Many students from minority backgrounds have the potential to creatively confront inequities and injustice that abound in their communities. Teachable opportunities exist on a daily

basis to promote student consciousness of social injustice and inequities and the contradictions between the American democratic ideal and existing reality. For example, once I observed a fifth grade classroom engage in a lesson on immigration. As the teacher involved the students in discussing the reasons for immigration, one student mentioned the desire of immigrants to experience the “American Dream.” The teacher praised the student for the excellent response and moved on. To my disappointment, the teacher did not move students toward exploring the meaning of the phrase and examining the embedded contradiction between the ideal of the “American Dream” and lived experiences of some individuals and groups in our society. This was a perfect teachable moment for students and teacher to engage in exploring the following questions: How did the Founding Fathers envision Americans living the American Dream? Who has lived the American Dream? Who is living it today? Who is not? Why do some people appear to live the American Dream and some do not? What are the living conditions of those that live the American Dream and those that do not? How fair is it for some to live the American Dream and others not to? Are students or families living the American Dream? To what extent are homeless people living the American Dream? How can the gap between the ideal of the American Dream and social reality be reconciled? What would they suggest for bridging the gap? Could all Americans live the American Dream? If students were in leadership positions, what would they do to ensure that all Americans live the American Dream? What are some other inequities and injustices they have observed or experienced in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, communities, state, nation and the world? What plans of social action would they develop to reconcile the ideal and the reality? A culturally conscientious social studies classroom must be a place where students experience democracy in action, learn as a community, and engage in activities that help them explore interdependence with others, and exercise individual and collective responsibility and activism.

Principle 6: Work With Families and Communities to Contextualize Teaching and Learning

A culturally conscientious social studies teacher acknowledges, respects, and values students’ families and communities, views them as critical resources, and draws on them when making curricular and instructional decisions. What students learn should be relevant to the needs, values, and goals of families and the community. This is particularly important when working with culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities. I believe that those with the problems or issues also are the ones with the solutions.

The concepts and issues that students study in the social studies should be connected to the issues of students’ families and communities. Parents and other relatives are members of communities who are often subjects of study in the social studies. Whether the topic of study is family, careers, com-

munity workers, leadership, migration or immigration, interdependence, famous people, or citizenship, family members can make such units come alive. A grandmother may be able to talk about what it was like to work on a farm or in a factory 50 years ago. A parent may be able to describe his or her job or trade when the class is studying community workers. Immigrant parents may be invited as guest speakers to talk about their homeland as well as experiences they have had in their new country. People of different socio-cultural backgrounds can be invited to talk about their involvement in social activism.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have emphasized some fundamental principles and pedagogies for a culturally conscientious social studies classroom. Social studies is the most important subject in the school curriculum because of its focus on developing students’ knowledge, skills and dispositions for critical thinking and citizenship, both national and global. As the diversity of our student population increases and changes with the demography of the larger society, the need to promote students’ multicultural experiences becomes imperative. All students must be empowered to develop the participatory skills for living and functioning in a multicultural democracy and interdependent world. Doing business-as-usual in the social studies does not work for many culturally and linguistically different students; it is up to us to rise to the challenge. 🌍

Notes

1. James Banks, ed., *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Walter Parker, *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life* (New York, Teachers College Press, 2004).
2. Geneva Gay, “Social studies teacher education for urban classrooms,” in Susan Adler, ed., *Critical Issues in Social Studies Teacher Education* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004), 75-95.
3. Gay, 2004.
4. Banks, 2004; Parker, 2004; Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Culture vs. Citizenship: The Challenge of Racialized Citizenship in the United States,” in James A. Banks, ed., *Diversity and Citizenship Education: Global Perspectives* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004);
5. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Educational Research Journal*, 32, no. 3 (1995): 465-491; *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* (New York: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
6. Paulo Freire, *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood, Bergin-Garvey, 1985).
7. “New Mexico sisters suspended for teaching about varied struggles! What next?” *Tribuno de Pueblo* (April, 1997).
8. The Cordova sisters have since received prestigious honors from numerous organizations, including the 1999 National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Defense of Academic Freedom Award.
9. Ayers William, “Popular Education-Teaching for Social Justice” in William Ayers, Jean Ann Hunt, and Theresa Quinn, eds., *Teaching for Social Justice* (New York, Teachers College Press, 1998).
10. David Sehr, *Education for Public Democracy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997).
11. Craig Keilburger, “Children Speaking for Children,” (Global Citizens for Change), www.citizens4change.org/global/rights/children_rights_story.htm.

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