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Social Studies in the Elementary Classroom: Culture Matters

SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION IS AN INVISIBLE subject in many elementary classrooms. With the educational thrust of accountability, testing has become an educational obsession. The testing movement continues to push the instructional agenda toward reading and math skills. Unfortunately social studies is not part of that national agenda. The instruction of social studies can be summed up by a third grade teacher who said, "I know I should teach more social studies, but I am under so much pressure to teach reading and math that I only teach social studies if I can fit it in. So that means I don't really teach social studies very often" (Pang, 1998). This comment clearly identifies the state of the field. Social studies education is taught "if it can be fit in."

Many educators have forgotten that social studies nurtures the cognitive, emotional, and social development of their students. The field is an interdisciplinary one integrating the study of the social sciences and humanities for the purpose of teaching civic competence (National Council, 1994, p. 157). The goal of social studies is to develop responsible citizens who understand their interdependence with others and can make reasoned and informed decisions for the good of a diverse public. At its best, the social studies curriculum also includes various procedural skills that assist students not just in acquiring the knowledge and values studied but in using them. In U.S. schools, social studies promotes students' understanding of democratic values and encourages their active participation in responsible citizenship (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

It is particularly poignant that so little attention, whether in social studies curriculum, materials, or teaching practices, is paid to promote the fundamental purpose of social studies. This is especially clear in relation to the education of culturally diverse students who historically have been denied full participation and citizenship.

What can teachers do to promote the goals of social studies so that all students feel invested in American ideals? How do teachers make critical connections between the standard social studies curriculum and the lives of their students? This article presents a framework for culturally relevant teaching of social studies in the elementary classroom. Our framework is grounded in sociocultural theory as introduced by Vygotsky (1978) and elaborated upon by Cole (1996) and Moll (1990), among others. Our framework is further defined by the integration of sociocultural theory with critical theory-based research pertaining to culturally relevant teaching (Darder, 1991; Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 1994) and the "ethics of care" described by Noddings (1992).

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This body of work makes clear that social studies is not a culturally neutral field. Social studies has a strong European American cultural foundation, and the tools used to interpret, write, and preserve the information found in social studies have a high cultural context that may be awkward and difficult to understand for culturally diverse students. Our framework weds the sociocultural themes of culturally mediated contexts and social interaction with the critical themes of equity and empowerment. In building our framework we draw on examples of culturally inclusive and relevant teaching practices from case studies of African American and Latino teachers. The teaching practices are presented to illustrate various principles within the framework and to provide educators the opportunity to reexamine their own teaching practices.

Defining Culturally Relevant Teaching

Culture matters. It is a key aspect of how students think, learn, and define themselves. As children come to school they bring with them cultural knowledge and its related values and understandings (Irvine, 1990). If their worldview matches that represented in the schools, they are more likely to "fit in"; they understand the language, values, and norms. If their worldview differs, they are more likely to find themselves in conflict with the curriculum being taught, the teachers who present the curriculum, and the other children in the class.

For example, because collaborative work is valued in some cultures more than others, some students may feel uncomfortable when told to work alone. Children whose culture emphasizes collectivism and interdependence can experience cultural and behavioral dissonance in classrooms that promote individualism and autonomy. Also, children whose cultural norms do not encourage mixed-gender groups may feel a conflict between wanting to please the teacher and following the practices they have learned at home.

Such discontinuities between the home and school culture can alter student motivation, behavior, and learning. Teachers need to know enough about their students' early learning experiences in their native culture so that classroom activities do not present learning environments that alienate students and possibly create a negative impact on their psycho-cultural development. In order for teachers to offer culturally relevant and child-centered instruction, they must understand who their children are culturally.

Various studies have explored the relationship of culture to teaching and learning and have proposed teaching practices that take into account the values and norms from the students' cultures in order to promote student engagement with school (Hollins, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mohatt & Erickson, 1981). Such teaching practices are referred to as *culturally harmonious, culturally synchronic, culturally appropriate,* and *culturally congruent.* Unfortunately, in too many instances, these teaching practices are not employed. Instead, teaching practices create discontinuities between the home and school environment.

We use the term *culturally relevant* in this article in order to point out the important connections between culture, teaching, and learning. By culturally relevant teaching, we mean instruction that incorporates interactional patterns, instructional methods, and social contexts for learning that are culturally compatible with students' primary cultures. Culturally relevant teaching also integrates cultural elements from the student's everyday experiences into the curriculum and classroom instruction (Pang, 2001; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Thus, in culturally relevant teaching, teachers help students access culturally relevant prior knowledge and then guide them as they build conceptual bridges between their prior knowledge and new information (Au, 1990).

At its most powerful, culturally relevant teaching goes beyond both the children's lived experiences and standard texts by providing cultural and historical examples from the students' own cultural and ethnic groups. Levstik and Barton (1994), for instance, demonstrated that the teaching of historical concepts in the elementary grades was more effective when the lives of children were connected to the teaching of historical information. Using their own lives as a starting point, children were able to gain a deeper understanding of the context of history and the perspective from which it is written when they engaged in their own interpretations, interviews, and research (Barton & Levstik, 1994; Levstik & Barton, 1994).

The Sociocultural Context

Several constructs of sociocultural theory provide a developmental foundation for culturally relevant teaching. For the purposes of this article, we focus on the two principles that we believe play a critical role in teaching and learning in classroom settings: that development and learning occur within a sociocultural context and that social interaction is critical to children's development and learning. In addition we focus on the role of culturally mediated activities and scaffolding in the classroom.

For Vygotsky, the role of culture and the cultural context were central to human development (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985). Cole (1996) writes:

> The central thesis of the Russian cultural-historical school is that the structure and development of human psychological processes emerge through culturally mediated, historically developing, practical activity. Each term in this formulation is tightly interconnected with and in some sense implies, the others. (p. 108)

Thus, in order for culturally relevant teaching to occur, teachers must recognize the importance of culture and the cultural context of the classroom as an environment for children's development and learning. Culture is a broad concept. As Hollins (1996) wrote:

> Culture is difficult to define because it is the essence of who we are and how we exist in the world. It is derived from understandings acquired by people through experience and observation (at times speculation) about how to live together as a community, how to interact with the physical environment, and knowledge or beliefs about their relationships or positions within the universe. (p. 18)

As noted above, children's development and learning occur in a variety of sociocultural contexts. The first of these is the home, which may be entirely different culturally from the classroom, and there are a myriad of other voluntary and involuntary associations that constitute "context." Only after this recognition can teachers begin to understand the dynamic and diverse backgrounds of their students. Teachers too, are "cultural selves"—the products of their voluntary and involuntary associations. Culturally relevant teaching is a product of teachers' understanding their own cultural status and that of their students.

With this understanding in place, or more accurately "in process," the remaining constructs of sociocultural theory can be applied in culturally relevant teaching. The first of these constructs is the role culturally mediated activities can play in culturally relevant teaching. Culturally mediated activities are characterized by the use of symbols, thoughts, and mental processes derived from an individual's culture. In culturally relevant teaching, students are encouraged to engage in culturally mediated activities specific to their own experiences.

For example, immigrant students could be asked to use their primary language to speculate why a chicken bone immersed in vinegar eventually becomes soft. Children who are allowed to use their stronger language to express higher order thinking in learning events such as science demonstrations or in developing hypotheses have two advantages: They are able to demonstrate their ability to think and elaborate on their ideas at age-appropriate levels, and they feel that their language, which to many represents culture, is affirmed in a school setting.

The result is an additive process in which students and teachers develop an array of behavioral, cognitive, and cultural orientations. For example, Sarah, an African American fifth-grade educator who teaches in a school with a majority of African American students, observes that many of her students are kinesthetic learners. She states:

> They need the opportunity to get up, to move about. They need the opportunity to construct their knowledge, to construct those things that they're learning. We were learning about economics and different types of advertising. So what the kids decided to do was to make their own cereal boxes. They constructed their own cereal boxes and made prizes to go inside. They wrote riddles describing the prize that was inside the box and from reading the riddles their partners or classmates had to guess what the prize was. And actually because they measured how much the cereal weighed, they took percentages of grams of fat and things like that, so we tied math and science into the unit. (Pang, 1998)

In this activity Sarah engaged students in active learning based on their common interest in cereal. She also knew that students enjoyed demonstrating their wit with each other. Social interaction, wit, and active engagement are cultural elements that appeal to many children, but have been found to be particularly effective in the education of African American students (Irvine, 1990).

As the previous discussion implies, a constant flurry of social interaction is occurring in the classroom. From a sociocultural perspective, development and learning do not occur in a static environment. Instead, they occur within dynamic and ever-changing sociocultural contexts. It is the social interaction among individuals that continuously transforms the sociocultural context of the classroom. Thus, culturally relevant classroom instruction provides regular opportunities for students and teachers to interact with each other.

Finally, culturally relevant teaching encourages scaffolded learning in the classroom. One form of scaffolding occurs when a more expert learner with a particular competence works with a novice learner who has yet to acquire that competence. While scaffolding is normally applied toward intellectual skills and competencies, it takes on additional meaning in the culturally relevant classroom. Students and teachers who have varying degrees of competency in one or more cultural orientations can gain insights and greater competency in each of the cultural orientations present in the classroom. Basically, scaffolding promotes social interaction and the development of multicultural competencies within a culturally diverse classroom.

While students and teachers alike benefit, the classroom truly becomes a child-centered environment in which caring and effective teaching can occur. Next, we describe how features of the ethic of care contribute to culturally relevant teaching and learning.

An Ethic of Care

In the context of culturally relevant teaching, an ethic of care is a theoretical framework based on a strong moral commitment both to teaching and to the development of reciprocal and respectful relationships (Noddings, 1992, this issue). These trusting relationships are at the core of building a community of learners. As a result it is critical that teachers not only build connections with their students but that they value and believe in their students. This in turn requires recognizing the importance of culture, cultural identity, and cultural communities. To capture the sense of commitment leading to action, we use the term, "ethic of care."

Mike, a fourth-grade African American teacher, explains how he seeks to create an atmosphere of caring in his classroom:

> In my room, I have Black students, Filipinos, Mexicans, and I have one White student. I know basically children are children, and there are certain things that they really enjoy. Before teaching ever takes place, for me, I think children need to be nurtured, they need to be loved, they need to be respected, they need to feel like you care. When they sense that, then you've got them, and then you can do anything with them. They are more open to learning then, even if it's difficult. If they think you don't care and they're having a problem, they're going to continue to have a problem because they may not even share with you that they're having a problem. They're going to withdraw and stay away, but when you touch them emotionally I think you can begin to do all kinds of things with them, and then you can try different things. (Pang, 1998)

Teachers such as Mike realize the importance of building trusting relationships with and among students, from the beginning of the class, in order to be effective and to reach young people. As Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory emphasizes, social interactions are key elements in the learning process.

Three Principles From Critical Theory

Three principles derived from critical theory are central to culturally relevant teaching: status equalization, bicultural affirmation, and codes of power (Jones, 1998). Like the principles of sociocultural theory and the ethic of caring previously discussed, these principles transform the elementary classroom into an environment in which children's development and learning is promoted through the utilization of cultural knowledge, behaviors, and values.

Status equalization

The first principle, status equalization (Mercer, cited in Mehan, 1997), affirms the value of children and their cultures. For example, if a student's home language is Spanish and the student has Mexican American cultural roots, both the primary language and culture of the student, as well as English and mainstream culture, should be valued in schools.

An example of status equalization more directly linked to social studies can be seen in the way some teachers model and promote democratic values in their classroom rules. Julie, a third-grade African American teacher, begins the school year by talking about some of the rules grown-ups have to follow. She asks the children why they think we have rules and why they're in the classroom:

> And they come up with answers such as "So we can learn," or "So that we can get the chance to work together." When I ask them what we can do to make our classroom a safe place and a place that we can learn, they'll mention "listening" and "following directions." We come up with rules that talk about keeping each other safe, like "your hands to yourself" and "respecting others." And those are just some examples of how we break it down to our level as our classroom being what you'd call a democratic place. (Pang, 1998)

Julie connects the abstract concepts of the rights and responsibilities of citizenship to the right to learn in the classroom. She points out that everyone must be responsible for making sure those rights are maintained. She explains that nobody has the right to interfere with the opportunity to learn. Children come to understand that everyone has the right to be treated with respect and that someone hurting or intimidating them will not be tolerated. In the classroom, no one is treated differently because of their skin color, height, weight, religious background, or gender.

Bicultural affirmation

A second aspect of culturally relevant teaching, bicultural affirmation (Darder, 1991), involves the positive interplay between the primary and mainstream cultures in the lives of students. Teachers use the values, norms, and expectations of both cultures to create a learning environment that fosters positive school engagement. By using their students' own lives, experiences, and communities from which to draw authentic and personally meaningful lessons, teachers utilize culturally valued knowledge and cultural norms as the context for learning academic concepts and social skills (Jones, 1998).

To illustrate, the sixth-grade social studies curriculum includes the study of ancient cultures for the purpose of understanding how writing, laws, and society as a whole developed. In addition, other social science disciplines such as anthropology and archeology and their importance in the study of ancient cultures are highlighted. Most textbooks, however, limit the scope of study to Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. With Latino students, the same concepts could be learned by studying the pre-Hispanic cultures of Mesoamerica and incorporating the legends, myths, and origins of current cultural traditions.

Bicultural affirmation teaches respect for cultural diversity. This is important in building trusting relationships in a learning community. For example, potential sources of conflict are present when two or more ethnic groups hold biased views of each other. These prejudicial attitudes can act as obstacles for children in forming friendships and collaborations.

At a school with large numbers of African American and Latino students, boys argued and fought about whether the field would be used for basketball or soccer (Pang, 1998). Girls could not participate in either because the boys were accustomed to dominating sports activities. The male physical education teacher reorganized *all* (male and female) students into teams that rotated between playing soccer and basketball. In this way the African American students learned to play soccer, and the Latino students learned to play basketball. And girls learned to play both sports.

The two sports were important culturally to both groups and prior to the reorganization had come to represent cultural and gender differences. However, once the teacher recognized the problem and resulting conflicts, he was able to create a biculturally affirming environment that also addressed status equalization in terms of culture and gender. In other words, bicultural affirmation was achieved by coming to understand how basketball and soccer were touchstones of identity for African Americans and Latinos as well as by learning to play both sports. Status equalization was achieved when the teacher reorganized students into teams that played each sport in equal measure and assured that girls had equal access to playing time in addition to learning both sports.

Codes of power

A third component to culturally relevant approaches to social studies education, codes of power, consists of explicitly defining mainstream practices and rules, that is, translating mainstream social behavior into understandable contexts in order to sensitize students to the demands of the system (Delpit, 1988). Codes of power also applies to the "discourse styles, and spoken and written language codes that will allow [students] success in the larger society" (Delpit, 1988, p. 285). In terms of social studies, students must learn not just the content knowledge but also the oral and written discourse features of the social sciences if they are to attain the level of competency they need at the high school and college level.

Alisa, a fourth-grade Latina teacher, and her teaching team emphasized developing the academic processes and products their students will need in the future. They began by envisioning their students as future college students: "Let's get them started right now, in fourth grade, on how to do a report, how to do research. We feel that this is very important" (Jones, 1998). With this in mind, Alisa designed a curriculum that engages students in the comprehensive process of writing a research document. She prepares students to investigate a higher order question of their choice, find multiple background sources, read for meaning, make careful analyses, and write coherent papers. Alisa is preparing her students for academically rigorous work in their future school careers.

To explore the themes of equality, civil rights, and racial prejudice, Alisa provided an array of materials about Martin Luther King, Jr., which students used as sources for a biographical essay. Throughout the month, Alisa introduced different works (books, newspaper articles, posters, videos, personal memorabilia), developed comprehension, vocabulary, and metacognitive strategies through them, and modeled the research process. At the beginning of the unit, she scaffolded students' learning by helping them develop a matrix of the important aspects of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, life and then guiding them as they filled in details, adding or deleting other elements as they read additional works. Students used this matrix to organize and inform the content of their essays. They learned how to use multiple sources of information, organize facts along main ideas, and write expository essays—all components of research reports they would need in their future years in school.

Preceding the unit on Martin Luther King, Jr., Alisa had carefully planned each phase of exposure to the genre of biography. The first time students were exposed to the genre, Alisa introduced some cognitive strategies useful for classifying information through graphic organizers such as webs and Venn diagrams. These strategies were used again each time students worked with biographies and other expository texts. By the middle of the year, when the Martin Luther King, Jr., unit was introduced, most students could use such structures on their own.

What was evident in Alisa's classroom was the consistently high level of cognitively demanding literacy tasks. She gave no busy-work assignments. Each day's work was part of a planned, sequential building toward one important product at the end of the month. Students in Alisa's classroom became empowered through her effort to prepare them to participate fully in future academic endeavors. Alisa's vision of her fourth graders as college students resulted in an academically challenging curriculum that moved them from carefully guided lessons to independence.

Conclusion

To restate the point with which we began, culture matters. Social studies, in particular, is embedded in cultural contexts and content. It is not culturally neutral; the tools used to gather historical information, the subjects studied and discussed, and the social problems described all have high levels of cultural context and content. Indeed, social studies classrooms are laboratories of cultures. It makes sense, then, to think carefully not only about the ways in which culture is taught in social studies but about how children make sense of the social world using their cultural knowledge.

In creating culturally relevant social studies, we suggest drawing on sociocultural theory, an ethic of care, and critical theory. Teachers need to understand how learning takes place through carefully designed social interactions and that children are more likely to become empowered learners when they are treated as equal participants in trusting relationships. Finally, children need access to the "codes of power," and to learn how to empower themselves in the mainstream system to fully and more thoughtfully participate in today's world.

Culturally relevant social studies scaffolds children's entry into the larger marketplace of ideas and actions.

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