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## **Fostering Social Justice in the Social Studies Classroom**

How can social studies educators foster social justice in the classroom by teaching global issues? Can we close the social studies curriculum gap and make history class equitable for students? These questions present several issues that must be addressed in public education in the state of North Carolina. Educators in the North Carolina Public School System must make global learning, tolerance, and equity primary initiatives in the classroom. As of statistics compiled in 2016 from the largest 100 cities in the country, Raleigh and Durham rank 92nd and 96th respectively in education equality. This demonstrates two of the widest achievement gaps in the United States between students with polarized socioeconomic statuses (EEI, 2018). For years, educators have battled the observed achievement gap between upper to middle-class students and middle to lower class students. The stratified achievement in the classroom may be caused by a curriculum gap. The social studies curriculum in North Carolina is defined by essential standards or overarching goals for understanding. Teachers have the freedom to choose specific content to meet the essential standards, but North Carolina provides suggested examples for teachers to use in the 'unpacked' essential standards, and these examples are frequently found on the end of year NC Final Exams. These suggested standards, as well as commonly used textbooks, do not emphasize global learning and promote ideals of social justice in the community beyond brief mentions of leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, women's rights movement, American Indian Movement, and the Chicano Movement. The goal for social studies education should be to foster social justice in the

classroom, empower students to take actions to promote equity in their communities and lessen the achievement gap between students in differing socioeconomic classes.

After reading NPR's recent article, *Why Schools Fail to Teach Slavery's 'Hard History,'* I was challenged to revisit my instructional methods and topics that I teach in my classroom curriculum. After a nationwide survey and numerous issues, and despite the work of the SPLC's Teaching Tolerance project, most schools throughout the nation teach a broken curriculum. Topics such as slavery are uncomfortable for teachers and students to discuss, and textbooks and state standards tend to accentuate the positives for concepts like slavery. Instead of emphasizing the varied, lived experience of enslaved people, and discussing the brutality and inhumanity of this institution, the state standards, textbooks, and educators fail to confront the injustices of many events in American history (Turner, 2018). In another study, researchers found that only 23% of adults in America engage in political discourse in which they hear and discuss opposing ideologies. This sort of political talk leads to people becoming more tolerant and better informed (Hess, 17). Private discussions lack analysis and critique about social issues about public policy, and because there is rarely deliberation, political action is not taken (Hess, 9). This statistic is particularly alarming in today's political climate, and residents of the United States need deliberation, critical thinking, and inquiry skills. It is critical for social studies educators to battle the decreasing political engagement, narrowing range of political views, and apathy (Hess, 21). Schools are the ideal environments for teaching students to effectively critique, disagree, and deliberate, which leads to students understanding diverse viewpoints, becoming more tolerant, and taking political action when facing injustice.

The majority of social studies educators teach history as a collective-memory narrative, emphasizing the national quest for freedom and progress, and missing opportunities to teach students how to think critically and challenge this narrative. In this curriculum, leaders and

national heroes like George Washington, Betsy Ross, Paul Revere, Harriet Tubman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. are lionized and students are indoctrinated into the national lore (VanSledright, 24). Students passively receive information as many teachers do not provide opportunities for investigation and deliberation. The collective-memory curriculum commonly spreads prejudicial perspectives, discredits agency for social justice activists, and students of color often feel marginalized and disinterested in learning history (VanSledright, 27). Similarly, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, first or second generation immigrants, and members of the LGBT community are marginalized by the curriculum through its nationalist agenda. There are five types of oppression found in society including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, and these must be identified in the social studies curriculum (Journell, 354). Through a curricular emphasis on tolerance, respect, compassion, community, and political involvement, rather than character traits like helping other and obeying laws, students will be empowered to take political and social action to fight these forms of injustice (Journell, 352). Educators in the social studies field, therefore, must restructure curriculum and pedagogy that fosters inclusion, tolerance, and social justice.

Tolerating diversity is an essential aspect of living and cooperating with others a working democracy. Students who practice political tolerance are willing to extend significant rights to people who are different than themselves, and they need engage in discussions with people who hold diverse opinions in order to build this tolerance (Hess, 16). Every person has a social perspective or a shared way of viewing situations based on social positions. Social position is unchosen and is designated by a combination of a person's birthplace, birth year, race, social class, language, and religion (Parker, 69). By alerting students of these social perspectives and teaching them to think critically, fight bias, and practice political tolerance, teachers can foster social justice in the classroom. Students can learn to seek out and comprehend other

viewpoints and be cosmopolitans who re-evaluate, critique, and defend the rights and treatments of others (Parker, 75). Social studies classrooms and curriculum provide opportunities for teaching these lessons and practicing these skills.

Social studies courses prepare students to practice democracy through enlightened political engagement. Teachers arm students to participate in the democratic society through actions like voting, campaigning, boycotting, and protesting. Students must have the knowledge and the ability to discern unjust laws and actions in order to fight inequality, deliberate public policy, and cooperate with others regardless of agreement (Parker, 68). The ideal democracy is self-governance among equals through listening and discussion, and students need to practice this in the classroom before becoming leaders and activists in society (Hess, 15). Social studies courses must provide opportunities for students to engage in controversial public issues discussions with ideologically diverse peers through activities such as seminars, simulations, and deliberation tasks. Teachers are skillful or can learn to be skillful, in teaching students how to participate in CPI discussions, especially in courses like many of those in the social studies field without high-stakes standardized tests.

One simple way to foster social justice in the social studies classroom is to teach students not to blame victims of oppression or abuse. Rather, identify the roots or causes of abuse and suffering and judge those responsible for these injustices (Hinshaw, 227). In American History, educators often teach slavery by minimizing the suffering of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Americans by discrediting the abuser. They do not appropriately condemn institutionalized slavery and its brutality and discuss the suppression and fear inflicted on those who were enslaved. Likewise, educators must stop minimizing the agency of enslaved Americans. When teaching this topic, educators need to point out the ways that those who were enslaved fought against the institution through religion, education, slow-downs, escapes,

breaking tools, rebellions, and other attempts at insurrection. Teaching and modeling compassion for students reminds them that in this example, those who were suffering were not the cause of their own suffering (Hinshaw, 224). Teachers and students must also highlight and negotiate existing misperceptions, identify underlying insecurities, and overcome defensiveness when encountering new ways of thinking. Students are still emotionally developing, and as they grow and change throughout the semester, teachers need to build an environment of respect and communication in the classroom rather than simply changing students' mindsets and behaviors (Hinshaw, 232-233).

Social studies educators must commit to fostering social justice in the classroom, and through reframing content taught in the curriculum, emphasizing tolerance of diversity, preparing students to take action outside of the classroom to advocate for social justice. Encouraging public discourse on policy and controversial issues in the classroom while promoting reciprocity, accountability, liberty, and opportunity will give students tools for deliberation (Journell, 353). Challenging students to seek out examples of social injustice and oppression and tasking them to find a solution to the identified issues gives students agency to actively promote social improvements. Interweaving transnational or global citizenship education encourages students to seek social justice on an international scale, and lessons can be easily related to social studies curriculum and content. Favoring multicultural curriculum in the social studies classroom forces students to critically challenge preconceived values and worldviews. Finally, implementing cosmopolitanism further promotes compassion, cooperation, and international peace as universal virtues for all people living in the global society (Journell, 354). By providing students with deep content knowledge and teaching them how to investigate, research, and critique social, political, and economic injustice, teachers inspire students to take informed action in society to promote social justice.

Educators in all grades levels are responsible for fostering social justice in the classroom. The social studies curriculum and content are flexible and allow for educators to teach skills such as critical thinking, deliberation, cosmopolitanism, and cooperation in each lesson. Social studies teachers must also model compassion, effective political dialogue, and enlightened political engagement in the classroom. Students need to have opportunities to practice these skills and challenge their preexisting understanding of history and public issues. The C3 Framework is ideal for fostering social justice in social studies lessons, and students are responsible for taking informed action in society at the end of each inquiry.

## Resources

Education Equality Index. "North Carolina Has the Fastest Growing Achievement Gap in the Nation, New Index Confirms." News release, March 22, 2016. Accessed February 28, 2018. <http://www.educationequalityindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EEIRaleighDurhamPressReleaseFINAL.pdf>.

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