

INCLUSIVE



Curricula, Pedagogies, and Environments in the Social Studies Classroom

Accelerated globalization and increased human migration means that many schools worldwide are comprised of students and teachers from different races and cultural groups. Based on the 2015 U.S. Census report, William Frey, an internationally recognized demographer, stated that a “no majority” America is already here in the nation’s schools.¹

Worldwide, trends are similar. A 2017 United Nations report estimated that more than 250 million people were living in a country other than the one in which they were born,² and in 2019, regions in the world that hosted the most immigrants included Europe (82 million), North America (59 million), and Northern Africa and Western Asia (49 million).³

For this reason, teaching approaches must go beyond celebrating, tolerating, and accepting diversity toward cultivating deep understanding and fostering the inclusion of all students. Defining learning outcomes is a primary challenge in teaching and learning about diversity; thus, adopting and practicing culturally responsive ideology responds to all students’ needs by focusing on inclusive curricula, pedagogies, and environments.

A new vision for classroom education requires that teachers gain a better understanding of themselves and their students. Many of today’s students are personally connected to multiple cultures, in varying degrees, by race, ethnicity, religion, abilities, language, and other ways, making their individual identities consist of a series of layers. For example, it is difficult to categorize into one specific cultural group a biracial student or one whose parents come from different nations. Furthermore, teachers will find it difficult to interact with students in a culturally responsive way if they do not

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understand the students' cultural identity.⁴ Students' identities structure frameworks from which they interpret knowledge, beliefs, and associations taught and modeled in schools. Thus, when teachers understand how identity and culture affect teaching and learning, they will be better equipped to create culturally responsive pedagogies.⁵

Teachers are most effective when they are open to learning with and from students and families.⁶ When teachers embrace cultural humility, they will commit themselves to self-examination, critiquing, and diminishing the power imbalances in teacher-student, teacher-parent, and teacher-community dynamics.⁷ They will practice ongoing, humble reflection on how knowledge is fraught with bias and false stereotyping, and seek resources that build upon students' assets and sense of belonging, even cultivating this sense of belonging if it does not yet exist.⁸ In order for teachers to create positive and socially meaningful classroom environments, students' cultural and linguistic assets must be foundational elements.

A variety of sources can help educators begin to practice humble reflection. Psychologists at Harvard University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington created Project Implicit, a series of Implicit Association Tests, for testing hidden biases.⁹ Another important source, the Center for Nonviolent Communication, offers books, videos, and training sessions designed to help people understand how to interact with others based on the concept of *power with*, rather than *power over* others.¹⁰

Creating Positive Perspectives on Parents and Families

There is no shortage of research about how family involvement provides benefits for students. The phrase "family involvement," though, seems exclusive and one-sided. While invitations from school administrators to parents may appear to be calls for collaboration, they are often requests from people seeing themselves as experts, or sometimes the product of compulsory policies linking parents and communities (Home and School Associations) to school-improvement initiatives. The provider-receiver scenario places families in a subordinate position even when the communications are intended to increase parental involvement.¹¹

In contrast, cultural humility practices build upon the strengths and assets of a community's disenfranchised members. "Through self-reflection, students and practitioners are encouraged to relinquish the role of expert, work actively to address power imbalance in communication to create respectful and dynamic partnerships with the community, and ultimately become the student of the community."¹² While it is important for school administrators and community liaisons to reach out to communities, teachers can also create personalized opportunities that highlight and value families.

The *Family History Museum* is one example of a personalized opportunity for students of any age to share family traditions and values in the classroom. The museum assignment allows each student to identify one or more items important to his or her family. Students learn about concepts such as heirlooms, ancestry, descendants, and more complex

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concepts according to their age or grade level, when they are asked to bring an item or a photo of an item important to the family (e.g., button, coin, recipe, grandfather's vest, hat, Bible, and or other artifact). Teachers help students understand that an heirloom does not need to be expensive or of museum quality.

Getting Started

Teachers should obtain assistance, if necessary, in sending bilingual letters or making multilingual telephone calls to parents and guardians, explaining the new museum and asking them to submit suitable items to be placed on display, along with captions describing each one. Some parents will send in items for display. Make sure to have a system in place for labeling all items received so that they can be returned. Some families might prefer to send photos of artifacts, especially if the heirloom is very expensive or one of a kind. In this case, photos should also be labeled so that they can be returned. For display, photos can be glued to *museum cards* that briefly explain each heirloom, and then mounted on a large bulletin board as an alternative to displaying tangible items. Invite families, students, school staff, faculty, custodians, and others to view the museum and leave positive comments on teacher-made *comment cards*.

A second activity uses *The Iceberg Theory* and model to compare cultures. In 1976, Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist, developed the iceberg analogy of culture.¹³ Hall theorized that there were both visible and invisible cultural characteristics. The visible cultural expressions (e.g., art, music, food) are at the tip of the iceberg, while deeper

cultural dimensions (e.g., approaches to problem solving, gender roles, attitudes about age, importance of space) are concealed within the lower portion of the iceberg. Various *Iceberg Culture Models* are located on the Internet; this site shows one example of the model: <http://opengecko.com/in/terculturalism/visualising-the-iceberg-model-of-culture/>.¹⁴

Getting Started

At the start of the activity, select students from different cultures (U.S. cultures and/or international cultures), combining them into groups of two, and providing each pair with a copy of the iceberg model and a graphic organizer to use in recording comparisons. Ask students to discuss cultural differences and similarities, using the comparison organizer to record their observations, which they can then share with the class. Note that the one-on-one interaction and partner discussions are the most important activity parts because the process is a personal and social learning experience. Consider also using this activity during teacher professional-development sessions to model the strategy for teachers, as well as to engage them.

Reshaping the Curriculum

Gloria Ladson-Billing's theoretical perspective emphasizes culturally relevant pedagogy that "develops students academically, nurtures and supports cultural competence, and helps students develop a sociopolitical or critical consciousness."¹⁵ Let's consider this from a social-science perspective. Most curriculum standards mandated by U.S. states embed opportunities to include social-justice perspectives in civics (e.g., citizenship, laws, equity, common good, civil rights, voting) and history (e.g., European exploration, westward expansion, U.S. Thanksgiving, Christopher Columbus' discoveries).

By comparison, *everybody's history* confronts typical historical narratives taught in classrooms—those possibly found in textbooks or passed along from single dominant-culture viewpoints. Dominant narratives in education dismiss or ignore marginalized groups' perspectives and lead to superficial content and pedagogies. A social-justice approach to teaching history, as well as other disciplines, requires teachers to consider how children's and adolescents' identities influence their views of history and society as typically presented in schools and mainstream culture.¹⁶ Dominant-culture narratives build on status-quo conceptions accepted as natural and common sense, and close doors to rethinking missing, misleading, and/or inaccurate information.

For example, teachers often teach iconic individuals within hagiography contexts or suggest that they should serve as models for character education. Throughout the U.S., students' introduction to Helen Keller often includes donning blindfolds and earplugs and learning bits of Braille along with activities attempting to focus attention on human beings' ability to overcome challenges. Keller is acclaimed as one of the first total sight- and hearing-impaired individuals in the U.S. to understand, write, and speak the English language and attend college. What is often missing from classroom lessons is that Keller was a human being with eco-

nomical challenges and personality flaws as well as successes. She was a student, writer, lecturer, vaudeville performer, and activist. The real heart of her story is her central role in stimulating attitude changes around the world. Keller spent much of her adult life as an activist for the poor, African Americans, and people with disabilities. She was one of the first civil-rights leaders for people with disabilities, as she traveled the world raising money and advocating for change, acceptance, and equal opportunities for people with impaired vision and hearing.¹⁷ A limited and superficial focus on Keller's disabilities often ignores her important contributions to society.

Another example is the American holiday, Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims' journey to America and subsequent thanksgiving meal with local Native Americans is based in truth, evidenced by the primary source, Winslow and Bradford's *Mourt's Relation or Journal of the Plantation of Plymouth*.¹⁸ In numerous U.S. classrooms, though, the Native American experience remains untold. Many students would not be able to identify the tribe's name, culture, or history. The traditional story is comforting and safe for some, but hurtful to others. Similarly, shirtless caricatures of Native Americans with head-feathers, teepees, and totem poles are offensive to countless families and disregard differences among Native American cultures in the U.S., since more than 600 indigenous tribes are traced to this land.¹⁹

Teaching about Christopher Columbus's *discoveries* is another curriculum example that requires research and rethinking. Though it is appropriate to teach about Columbus's voyages, we misinform students when we tell them that he *discovered* America. While the Columbian Exchange enabled Western and Eastern Hemispheres to exchange ideas, animals, cultures, and plants, Columbus never actually stepped foot on the North American continent, and his personal actions while in Hispaniola were far from heroic. Native people known as the Taino, who numbered in the millions in 1492, inhabited most of Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola (presently Haiti and the Dominican Republic), and Puerto Rico, were forced into slavery. Not producing enough gold guaranteed punishment by loss of limb or death. Eventually, the Europeans' harsh treatment and diseases resulted in the Taino population's extermination.²⁰ Currently, students may see media reports about petitions, protests, and vandalism related to Columbus statues and monuments and wonder why this is happening.

Many U.S. elementary social-studies curriculum standards seem overly focused on military conflicts and leaders (from the American Revolution through the "War on Terrorism"). Helping students learn about the concept of *peacemaking* can be an inspiring way to incorporate balanced content, inclusiveness, and culturally responsive teaching within an international context. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) Notable Trade Book for Young People, *Great Peacemakers: True Stories From Around the World* by Ken Beller and Heather Chase,²¹ contains sections featuring 20 diverse lifelong peacemakers representing different genders, classes, races, ethnicities, and cultures—both contemporary and historic (see Box 1). Each section includes a

brief biography, a page of quotes, and one or more photographs. The framework is versatile, so students may jigsaw²² the biographies and study different approaches to peace (e.g., choosing nonviolence, living peace, honoring diversity, valuing all life, and caring for the planet). The journal *Social Studies and the Young Learner* published a full lesson plan based on this book, entitled “What Is a Peacemaker: How Do They Solve Problems?”²³ The plan is available to teachers at https://www.socialstudies.org/publications/ssyl/januaryfebruary2015/what_is_a_peacemaker_how_do_they_solve_problems/.

Controversial Issues

Rationales for including controversial issues in the social-studies curriculum include student outcomes such as “developing an understanding and commitment to democratic values, increasing interest in engagement in public life, learning important content, improving critical thinking, and building more sophisticated interpersonal skills.”²⁴ Teachers are gatekeepers of curriculum in their classrooms, and with this title comes much responsibility.

When addressing controversial topics in the classroom, it is essential to have a good understanding of the cultures represented and to anticipate how students and parents might respond. Some topics will require advanced notice to both administrators and parents. Taking the time to discuss curricular corrections with an administrator, or sending letters home to parents notifying them that a sensitive topic will be taught and giving them time to respond are good ways to open the discussion.

Much research tells us that teachers hesitate to approach curriculum topics perceived as controversial (e.g., Christopher Columbus’s entrance into the Americas, Andrew Jackson and the Trail of Tears, contemporary laws, current events) due to reasons such as personal discomfort, parents’ perceptions, and simply not knowing how. “Thanks to poor preparation, some teachers have not acquired the background knowledge or the pedagogical skills—or both—to lead in-depth discussions” or reasoned, informed debates.²⁵

In February 2017, the *Education Week* Research Center surveyed more than 830 K-12 U.S. teachers and other school-based instructional staff about their experiences teaching about controversial topics, particularly during a time of strong partisanship. While most educators said they could discuss controversial issues civilly, only 44 percent said their training adequately prepared them to handle those controversial or perceived controversial discussions with students. Twenty-three percent said they had not had specific training in this area, and most had not received guidance from their administrators on how to talk about such issues with their students.²⁶ Today’s media-intense world requires teacher educators and school administrators to provide pre-service and in-service teachers with the tools and professional development needed to answer students’ questions and engage them in honest, inclusive inquiry.

Inquiry is a form of teaching and learning that allows teachers to serve as facilitators while students research answers to big questions (also known as “compelling ques-

tions”) to form their own narratives. The teacher makes primary and secondary sources offering various perspectives available to students so they can (1) develop questions and plan inquiries; (2) apply interdisciplinary concepts and tools; (3) conduct evidence-based evaluation of the various sources; (4) communicate their conclusions to stakeholders (e.g., administrators, parents, students); and (5) take informed action. One example of such an inquiry structure is the College, Career, and Civic Life Framework (C3) located online.²⁷ Multiple teaching resources, including lesson templates for different student levels, may be found at <https://www.socialstudies.org/c3/c3lc>. Teachers can give students the option of using writing, art, role-play, and project-based learning in communicating their conclusions.

Culturally Responsive Teaching relies on creating inclusive learning environments, researching and rethinking the

Box 1. Resources for Seventh-day Adventist Teachers

Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education

A Christ-centered philosophy of education is built on recognizing God as the Creator (Genesis 1:27). Humanity’s quest for belonging and understanding is fulfilled in relationship with God. The greatest commandment is to love God wholly, and others sincerely (Matthew 22:36-40; Mark 12:28-34). Cultural humility, then, requires commitment to embracing a humble spirit (1 Peter 5:5; Philippians 2:3, 4) and learning to value and “respect the dignity of all human beings” (Seventh-day Adventist Philosophy of Education (Policy FE05, FE10): <http://circle.adventist.org/download/PhilStat2003.pdf>).

Articles

- *The Journal of Adventist Education’s* special issue on Culturally Responsive Teaching in Adventist Schools: <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2018.80.3>.

- Charity Garcia and Charissa Boyd, “Engaging in Culturally Relevant Teaching: Lessons From the Field,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:3 (July-September 2019): 17-23: <https://jae.adventist.org/en/2019.81.3.4>.

- Chris Blake, “Build Your Own Peace Week,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 75:5 (Summer 2013): 43-46: <http://circle.adventist.org/files/jae/en/jae201375054304.pdf>.

Online Sources

- Adventist Peace Fellowship Discussion Forum: <https://www.facebook.com/adventist.peace/>.

- Adventist Peace Fellowship Podcast and Radio: <http://www.adventistpeace.org/podcast/>.

- Historic Adventist Peacemakers: <http://www.adventistpeace.org/historic-peacemakers>.

curricula we teach, and using pedagogies that engage everyone's backgrounds and life experiences. Equitable education relies on a vision and conviction that all students have assets to contribute in democratic spaces within schools and communities. Teachers who embrace cultural humility honor students by helping them define personal and social identities and their places within the shared society. All students, of course, must be protected at school; however, protection that includes *all students* derives from teachers who practice fairness and equity. Every curricular discipline can be taught in authentic, culturally responsive ways. ✍

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