DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP THROUGH CLASSROOM DISCUSSION IN

HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This action research project includes the topics of democracy in education, citizenship

education, critical thinking, perspective-taking, and class discussion in the social studies,

culminating in the practice of engaging students in critical discourse. The question

explored in this action research project is: How can student-centered practices and

citizenship education promote critical discourse in a high school social studies

classroom? The data were collected in four 11th grade U.S. history classes in a racially

and culturally diverse, urban high school in western Washington. Utilizing qualitative

methods, the teacher-researcher collected and analyzed lesson plans, post-lesson

reflections, video recordings, and a student survey. The findings and implications address

the role of the teacher in student-centered practices, the importance of culturally relevant

curriculum in critical discourse, and gender norms that are present in classroom

discussion.

Keywords: social studies, democracy, critical discourse, high school

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1—REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Problem Statement

A purpose of education in the United States is to reflect the democratic society in which it exists (Dewey, 2004). Dewey (2004) explains that "education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life" (p. 2). Classrooms should reflect democratic values in order for students to be informed citizens and function in a democratic society. However, this is not always the case. According to Banks (2008), in classrooms today "there is a gap between the democratic ideals in Western nations and the daily experiences of students in schools" (p. 132). Teacher-centered practices such as lectures, textbook memorization, and recitation of facts are undemocratic in nature, yet are common in public schools today. By moving away from teacher-centered practices and towards student-centered instructional strategies such as discussion, democratic ideals can be reflected in the classroom.

The social studies education is an integral part of a democratic society. The social studies include not just the study of history, but also anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology. Integrating these studies in a way that gives students an in-depth understanding of the world and how it operates promotes "civic competence", or an understanding of how to participate as citizens in a democracy (National Council for the Social Studies). The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) states that "social studies educators teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy" (NCSS). Saxe (1992) explains that "social studies emerged to cultivate reflective citizens

amid a context of problems associated with rapid urbanization, massive immigration, social unrest, and other political, economic, and cultural issues" (p. 260). The purpose of social studies education is to provide students with the intellectual tools that they will need to be active citizens in a democratic society.

Context

Mary Todd High School[1] is located in a racially-diverse, urban community of western Washington. Mary Todd High School has implemented an academic acceleration and rigor policy, where all students performing at or above grade level are automatically enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. The purpose of implementing this policy is to prepare students for college life, and life after graduation in general. Overall, this school fosters a culture that is focused not only on the importance of graduating from high school, but on being successful in college and life outside of the classroom.

The classroom at Mary Todd in which I taught was an 11th grade Advanced Placement United States history classroom. This course was based on the AP U.S. History Curriculum Framework, and much work was done on preparing for the AP U.S. history exam. This preparation work included test-taking strategies, the study of facts and concepts, and historical thinking skills. My goal as a teacher was to foster a democratic learning environment that is student-centered. Student-centered classrooms create an environment for "problem-posing education," as described by Freire (2000), to thrive. Problem-posing education breaks down the oppressive teacher-student relationship and enables teachers and students to be co-learners and co-creators of knowledge (p. 83). By participating in classroom discussion, students were to be not only be prepared for their

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[1] All names of people and schools in this paper are pseudonyms

senior year of high school but for their life as citizens of a democratic society following high school graduation.

Literature Review

Education is meant to socialize children, and should be steered toward particular purposes. In a democratic society this means an understanding of liberty and pluralism, citizen rights and responsibilities, and the rule of law (Parker, 2001). Teaching for democracy in public schools usually consists of teaching students to participate in democracy, but neglects to teach students to think critically about democracy (Parker, 2001). Parker (2001) argues that "participation is not an end in itself; knowledge and critical consciousness, too, are needed" (p. 10). Students must be taught not only about participation in a democracy, but how democracy actually plays out in society as well. Ladson-Billings (2002) writes that the work of social studies educators

> is to reveal and incite the power of democratic ideals for marginalized students in U.S. schools. Their work is not to recruit students into the current political, economic, and social order. It is not to continue to reproduce hierarchy and social and economic asymmetry. It is to prepare students to work to narrow the distance between what the United States says it stands for (through its founding documents) and what it currently practices. (p. 122)

Ladson-Billings (2002) argues that there is a disconnect between the abstract ideal of democracy that is taught in schools and how students are actually treated. Groups at the margins of American society struggle to close the gap between American democratic ideals and institutionalized democratic practices (Banks, 2008). As explained by Parker (2001), "the citizenship education field largely has assumed a defensive and

assimilationist posture, paying little attention to diversity or fearing it outright as a threat to unity" (p. 11). The purpose of the public school system in the United States, historically, has been to assimilate students into the status quo, despite the multiple cultures that exist within it. Students in a democratic society must be taught to be critically conscious of the system in which they exist.

Citizenship Education

The purpose of social studies education is to educate students for citizenship in a democratic society. Barth and Shermis (1978) explain that "the study of history and government… provides the background for participating as a citizen in government, and for solving 'present day problems' or 'problems that our nation faces today'" (p. 290). While social studies educators agree that citizenship education is an important factor, a major debate within the community of citizenship education is what type of citizen is to be fostered within schools (Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith & Sullivan, 1997). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three major types of citizenry focused on in different classrooms: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. The personally responsible citizen "acts responsibly in his or her community by, for example, picking up litter, giving blood, recycling, obeying laws, and staying out of debt" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 241). Those who subscribe to the participatory citizen school of thought believe that a good citizen is someone who is active in the community, in both civic affairs and social life, at the local, state, or national level. The third type of citizen, justice-oriented citizens, critically assess social, political, and economic structures and search to understand the root causes of social, political, and economic problems. The researchers found that classes in different communities reflected

different forms of citizenship. Varied priorities in citizenship education instruction were dependent upon the different settings in which the studies of this article took place. For example, students in the rural communities were more focused on personal responsibility and participatory citizenship, and students in the urban communities were more focused on social justice oriented citizenship. In this study, the students of the Bayside community, an urban high school on the west coast, were more interested in social justice because they were living within injustices and seeing them happen. Within this framework, students were encouraged to examine the root causes and broader ideological structures that lead to injustices within society. A rural east coast community, the Madison County Youth in Public Service, developed an identity of participatory citizens. Students were interested in addressing issues specific to their community such as community service and local government and elections. This speaks to the importance of relevance; curriculum can fluctuate due to the context in which it is taught. Students are going to be interested in issues that are present in their lives. This is an important aspect of social studies and citizenship education because students should be given opportunities to be involved in topics that matter to them (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Teachers' personal beliefs regarding citizenship are likely to affect how they teach for citizenship in the classroom. Cultural settings also influence what type of citizenship education the teacher chooses to focus on. In a national survey conducted by Anderson, Avery, Pederson, Smith, and Sullivan (1997) of social studies teachers, it was revealed that all of the teachers agreed that citizenship education was important in the teaching of social studies. However, social studies teachers differed in what type of citizenship education to focus on in their classrooms. Teachers who work in school

systems with culturally diverse student populations subscribed to the cultural pluralism

perspective. Teachers who held this perspective expressed a deep commitment to

multicultural education, in which students are exposed to various cultures and ideologies

(Anderson, et al., 1997). Furthermore, teachers who identified as politically liberal were

more likely to focus on critical thinking or to teach students to question the status quo

(Anderson, et al., 1997). While a school can require a certain curriculum, it is important

to note that what is emphasized by the teacher will differ depending on what is culturally

relevant to the classroom environment and teacher bias. Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh

(2006) examined the effects of a specific government curriculum, CityWorks, and found

that it supported civic and political engagement. The CityWorks curriculum included the

use of simulations, role models, service learning, learning about problems in the

community, learning how local government works, and personal relevance to students

(Kahne et al., 2006). However, not all government courses will have this outcome of

supporting civic and political engagement. The researchers found that teacher practices

and curricular content matter a great deal. Effective teaching strategies include

experience-based strategies such as simulations, and curriculum that is personally

relevant to students.

Perspective-Taking in the Social Studies

An essential part of teaching for democracy is practiced through students taking

on multiple perspectives. The transformation of student thinking when taking different

perspectives occurs gradually over time, rather than during just one lesson. In a study

done by Thein, Beach, and Parks (2007), students displayed a willingness to try on

different perspectives. From a macro level, it looked as though students did not make a

change. However, researchers acknowledged that transformation of student thinking is something that happens on a small scale and gradually over time, and all that they could observe for now were instances of perspective-taking. What was important was not what beliefs the students had, but that students thought about how their perspectives were formed and why others think differently. When teaching various perspectives in the social studies, the end goal is not to permanently change student thinking, but to encourage students to be open-minded to other perspectives. When teaching to promote citizenship, it is essential that students are able to consider other peoples' perspectives, so that they can consciously contribute to a democratic society.

Critical Thinking

Educating for democracy and citizenship involves fostering students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking is "the ability to engage in purposeful, self-regulatory judgment" (Abrami, et al., 2008), this includes not only critically thinking about content areas, but also thinking about larger issues that affect everyday life. In a meta-analysis done by Abrami, Bernard, Borokhovski, Wade, Surkes, Tamim, and Zhang (2008), it was found that if the goal of social studies courses is to foster students' critical thinking skills, then this must be made explicit in instruction. Often critical thinking is viewed as a by-product of content instruction and not the focus of lessons. In social studies classes (as well as other subjects) many students in the public school system have been trained to read texts to find the correct answer. In a case study done by Mayer (2006) in the classroom of one student teacher, it was found that students' lack of experience analyzing primary source documents made instruction difficult for the student teacher. The challenge in encouraging critical thinking in students' is that it is not the goal of the

lesson. If students are to be assessed on their critical thinking skills, then critical thinking instruction must be taught more explicitly by teachers.

Classroom Discussion

Perspective-taking and critical thinking skills can be developed by students in classroom discussion. In order for valuable discussion to take place, students must feel a sense of community in which they are supported and feel safe to share ideas. A study done by Alvermann, Young, Weaver, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, Thrash, and Zalewski (1996) made the following assertions based on their analysis of data: students were aware of the conditions that they believe to be conducive to discussion and that these conditions "centered more on mutually exploring ideas than on following teachers guidelines" (p. 262). Alvermann, et al. (1996) also found that students see discussion as helpful in understanding text, and that their "analysis showed that these students constructed common expectations for text-based discussions and that they valued listening to each other as they expressed their opinions and argued about the meaning of what they read" (p. 263).

Larson (1999) also found importance in creating a sense of community in the classroom. A sense of community is "characterized by attributes such as trust and respect for one another, feelings of personal safety, common goals for exploring issues and course content together" (p.179). When teachers and students view the classroom as a community space to foster multiple points of view, they are more inclined to participate in discussion with one another. Creating a sense of community in which multiple perspectives and opinions are valued and respected is vital in fostering democratic ideals in the classroom.

As stated by NCSS, a purpose of social studies education is to promote civic competence, or teach students an understanding of how to participate as citizens in a democratic society. Ehman (1980) found a relationship between social studies classroom climates and high school students' political attitudes. If teachers promote the inclusion of multiple perspectives, rather than just one viewpoint, and if they promote the idea that each student has the freedom to express their opinion, the outcomes have a positive impact on students' political attitudes. Campbell (2008) found that "a classroom environment which fosters free, open, and respectful exchange of ideas is positively related to young people's level of knowledge about democratic processes" (p. 450). It is the nature of political discussion within the classroom, not simply the frequency of formal social studies instruction, which has an effect on civic knowledge.

Discussion in social studies classrooms is often avoided by teachers, although not always intentionally. In a study done by Philpott, Clabough, McConkey, and Turner (2011) on discussing controversial topics in the classroom, the researchers found that while teachers found this to be important they also had feelings of discomfort about it. In addition, many teachers felt that they lacked training in teaching controversial topics, and many teachers were told to avoid controversial topics altogether by their mentors (Philpott, et al. 2011). The teachers interviewed thought that teaching controversial topics was vital to social studies curriculum and would help to foster higher-order thinking (Philpott, et al. 2011). However, they were fearful of possible negative reactions from the school, students, or parents. While this is a common fear, research has found that the opposite is true. In a study of teaching controversial public issues in middle and high school social studies classes, Hess (2002) found that

teachers receive support for their controversial public issues (CPI) discussion

teaching from school administrators, the overall culture of the school, and the

school's mission. Thus, their CPI discussion teaching is aligned with, not in

opposition to, what is expected in the school (p. 33).

Students' abilities to effectively participate in CPI discussions improve when

these discussions are frequent in the classroom. Hess and Posselt (2002) explain how this

disproves the commonplace notion that "people are either verbally proficient or not—that

it is an inclination and skill impervious to instruction" (p. 313). Learning how to discuss

CPI is an important skill to develop in all students, and participating in quality

discussions routinely improves this skill.

In order for classroom discussion to be consistent with democracy, it must be

egalitarian and student-centered. Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) did a case study of a

classroom in which the teacher chose to conduct the Paideia (Socratic) Seminar style of

dialogic discussion, a collaborative dialogue guided by open-ended questions about a

text. While the Paideia Seminar is egalitarian and student-centered in theory, this was not

always the case in practice. Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) found that "although students

did a considerable amount of talking, the teacher talked a larger percentage of the total

time (from 62.4% to 69%) than the students (31% to 37.6%)" (p. 922). Billings and

Fitzgerald (2002) also examined the roles of the teacher and the students' during

seminars and the teacher found herself being more of a coach than a facilitator. The

researchers state that "student roles fell into two broad categories: helper roles that

supported the teacher as 'knowledgeable coach' and roles in which they carefully

opposed her" (p. 925). Overall, the teacher's classroom discussions represented some

tensions between features of dialogic discussion and teacher-centered discussions. Although the teacher intended for the classroom discussions to be egalitarian and student-centered, teacher-centered practices proved to be a hard habit to break.

Attempts at classroom discussion often reveal and enforce existing hierarchies (Hemmings, 2000). Hemmings (2000) did a study of democratic dialogues implemented in high school classrooms. One teacher implemented the liberal ideal of democratic dialogues, and another teacher implemented the radical ideal of democratic dialogues. According to Hemmings (2000), the liberal ideal is based on the preparation of students for participation in representative public institutions. Liberal themes in literature suggest that ideal practices educate students on public social relations. Public social relations in the classroom mirror those in public institutions; they are deliberative, impersonal, and civil. In the liberal ideal, all perspectives are morally equal. However, hierarchies are created by how well one can argue their point and how much knowledge one has. In this way, the teacher is usually the intellectual authority in democratic dialogues. The liberal ideal of democratic dialogues also values the language of power, or standard American English and specialized vocabulary of politicians and academics. Students are to support their arguments in the language of power with the knowledge of experts. According to Hemmings (2000) the knowledge of experts includes facts, beliefs, values, opinions, and meanings considered during exchanges. The liberal ideal of democratic dialogues as described by Hemmings (2000) enforces hierarchies in the classroom by valuing certain language and knowledge over others.

In stark contrast to the liberal ideal of democratic dialogues, Hemmings (2000) describes the radical ideal of democratic dialogues. The ideal type of radical practice

includes transformative social relations, which are egalitarian. In this practice, there are no social or intellectual hierarchies. Multiple languages and ways of speaking are valued. Students are free to speak in codes to which they are accustomed, and negotiate cross-cultural codes to create mutual understanding. As described by Hemmings (2000) personal and community knowledge is valued in radical practice of democratic dialogues. The radical ideal of democratic dialogues works to oppose hierarchies and potentially contributes to a safer, more egalitarian learning environment.

The two teachers that were observed by Hemmings (2000) in this study both had troublesome and undemocratic outcomes to their practices. The classroom in which the liberal ideal of democratic dialogue was implemented created hierarchies and gave power to privileged students. The teacher that implemented the radical ideal of democratic dialogues experienced a backlash because students did not find the instruction relevant to their community, which caused students to resist the teacher. It was concluded in this study that these attempts at implementing democratic dialogue were unsuccessful. However, it is not possible to conclude that the practices themselves were unsuccessful based on this study because they were not implemented correctly. Radical democratic dialogues are meant to reflect the knowledge and cultures of the students and their community. In this study, the students did not experience this, and resulted in students rebelling against the teacher's instruction. In both classrooms, teachers showed minimal reflection on their practice, only implementing either the liberal or radical method of instruction as described in theory. In practice, it is crucial that teachers reflect on their teaching in order to be effective. There is no one formula for truly democratic discussion; different groups of students are going to have different intellectual needs and strengths.

The alleged failings of the implementations of the liberal and radical frameworks for dialogue speak to the importance of reflection and intentionality on the part of the teacher. In order for discussion to be truly democratic, practices need to reflect the culture and community of the students.

Action Research Question

The purpose of social studies education should be to empower all students to take ownership of their learning and become active citizens in a democratic society. Freire (2000) states that, "apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot truly be human." (p. 72). Schools in the United States exist within a democracy, yet curriculum and instruction typically reflect the needs of those in power, rather than the majority of society. It is the purpose of social studies education to make students critically conscious of how democracy is enacted in the classroom and in society. Classroom discussion and dialogue enables students to become informed and active citizens of a democratic society through practicing taking on multiple perspectives and thinking critically.

The purpose of this action research project is to explore the following question: How can student-centered practices and citizenship education promote critical discourse in a high school social studies classroom?

CHAPTER 2—METHODOLOGY

Setting and Participants

This study took place in four 11th grade Advanced Placement United States

history classes in a racially and culturally diverse, urban community in western

Washington. According to the Washington State Office of the Superintendent of Public

Instruction (OSPI), the school's student population is 27% Black/African American, 27%

White, 24% Hispanic/Latino of any race, 35% Asian/Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian,

3% two or more races, and 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Seventy-eight percent

of students receive free or reduced-price meals (OSPI, 2013-2014). The four 55-minute

class periods of Advanced Placement U.S. history which I taught reflect the

demographics of the school as a whole. Due to the need for students to be prepared for

the Advanced Placement exam in the spring, there was a large amount of content that

needed to be covered in this class in a short amount of time. While some events were

focused on in-depth, this was not the case for all subject-specific content. Discussions

were used as a tool for students to gain a deeper understanding of facts and concepts, as

well as to strengthen their skills of analysis, in a limited amount of time.

Action

The unit that I taught during this study is outlined by the Advanced Placement

curriculum framework as Period 3, which encompasses events that took place from 1754

to 1800. This timeframe includes the founding of the United States and events leading up

to it. The major themes included in this unit include causes of tensions between Great

Britain and its North American colonies leading up the American Revolution, political

philosophies behind the American Revolution, and causes and effects of the American

Revolutionary War. Students had opportunities to discuss issues of equality, democracy, republicanism, and human rights as they relate to the creation of the United States, as well as how they play out in their lives today. Lessons included students' analysis of primary source documents and discussion of themes in, and significance of, the documents and historical events surrounding them. Students were explicitly taught to analyze primary source documents by determining the following components: author, place, prior knowledge, audience, reason, tone, and significance. The significance of the documents as determined by students was typically what drove classroom discussion, since in determining the significance of a document, students were connecting material to current events. Class discussions were structured around the texts and guiding questions provided by the teacher. For example, in reading Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, students responded to the questions: How do people in our society become leaders? How is this similar or different from hereditary succession? The protocol of the discussions was loosely structured, with the intent being that the discussion would be student-centered, with students' ideas forming the content of discussion.

<div align="center">**Data Collection and Analysis**</div>

To answer my research question, three data sources were utilized: video observations, reflective journals of the teacher researcher, and a student survey given toward the end of the study.

Video Observations

Four lessons that included discussions were recorded, coded, and transcribed. Video recordings serve the purpose of allowing the teacher to step back and observe as an action researcher. By analyzing videos of my teaching, I was able to observe my practice

of engaging students in critical discourse in the social studies from another perspective as well as my first-hand reflections on the lesson being taught. This helped me gain a deeper understanding of my teaching of student-centered practices and students' reactions and involvement in classroom discussion.

Teacher Reflective Journals

In this study, teacher reflective journals included my planning process, including lesson plans and justifications for instruction. For each lesson, I wrote a post-teaching reflection about the instruction process in which I reflected on what I would change and what I would keep in my critical discourse practice. Also included in the post-teaching reflection was what I had observed about how students engaged or did not engage in critical discourse in the lesson. Analyzing teacher reflective journals served the purpose of strengthening my understanding of my practice, student engagement, and how my teaching methods were implemented in the classroom.

Student Survey

A survey was given to all students in the last week of the study and is provided in the appendix. The purpose of this survey was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of students on class discussion and critical discourse. Questions on the survey sought to determine students' thoughts and feelings on democracy, citizenship education, and discussion in the classroom. Data collected from this survey served the purpose of gaining an understanding of the student population, and to look at patterns across the population as a whole.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred through the process of coding. This entailed reading through raw text, including post-lesson reflections, video recordings, and completed student surveys. After reading through the raw text in the data sources, I highlighted text that was relevant to my research question. Throughout this process, I kept in mind questions outlined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) regarding the coding process, "Does this [piece of evidence] relate to my research concern? Does it help me understand my participants better? Does it clarify my thinking?" I then recorded repeating ideas and connected related sections of the relevant text. This enabled me to create themes by grouping together repeated ideas into coherent categories. From these ideas I was able to develop themes into findings.

Through video observations, student surveys, and my own reflective teaching journals, I was able to better understand the practice of critical discourse through for my research. First, I analyzed the student surveys given at the end of this study. Surveys were first reviewed for any student responses that I found surprising or different than expected. Then I reviewed the surveys for common responses, or student responses that occurred often. Student responses to the survey were then categorized by gender, as students are asked to identify their gender on the survey. This was done to see watch for any differences in responses based on student gender.

Teacher reflective journals were then reviewed for themes that came up in the student survey, as well as any other common themes. Ideas or phrases that occurred several times were developed into themes reflected in the findings. Then, classroom videos were reviews for common themes as well. Themes from the student survey that

were also present in classroom video recordings were noted. Themes that were present in all sources were solidified as findings. Some themes were only present in two data sources, but are included because they were significant to my research question.

Quality Indicators and Limitations

As a qualitative study, this action research project is subject to the bias of the researcher. To address the credibility of this study, it is important that I describe the quality indicators, limitations, and researcher lens in doing this research action project.

Quality Indicators

To address confirmability in this study I have provided my chain of evidence, making my process of data analysis transparent. In the appendices, relevant data sources used to determine my findings are available to the reader. This study has also gone through a peer review process, in which my data sources were available for my colleagues to review and interpret in a structured workshop. The data in this research were triangulated by using three sources of data: video observations, student surveys, and teacher reflective journals. This triangulation addresses the dependability of this study, as well as the rich thick description providing the time, place, context, and culture of the school and classroom. By providing sufficient detail, it was my intention to provide the reader with enough information to determine if this study is similar or different to another context, enabling the reader to determine transferability.

The Lens of the Researcher

As an educator, I believe that the purpose of school is to reflect the society in which it exists, and that society is constantly changing and reproducing. The purpose of teaching social studies is to create a more equitable learning environment in order for all

students to become active citizens and lifelong learners in a democratic society. Students should be treated by teachers in the classroom as though they are citizens of a democracy, and the classroom should be a place where democracy is not an abstract ideal but a reality. In order for students to become active citizens in a democratic society, they must feel empowered through self-efficacy to participate in a democracy beyond graduation.

Limitations

The scope of this study is limited to my perspective within this context. This study took place during my student teaching experience, which occurred over the course of ten weeks, beginning on the first day of the school year. My data analysis and findings are based on my understanding of this community, school, and classroom that I gathered over this specific amount of time. This study took place in a diverse, urban community, carried out by a white, female researcher of a middle-class background. Throughout this time, I was constantly reflecting on my position and cultural lens as an outsider coming into this community for a short period of time.

CHAPTER 3—FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings

Due to the rigorous nature of the Advanced Placement program, I was not able to

enact structured, Socratic discussions as outlined in the literature review. I decided to

shift my focus to the action of critical discourse in the social studies. This was practiced

through students analyzing primary source documents, and sharing their findings in small

groups and then with the whole class. Students were instructed to respond to teacher-

given guiding questions, with the intention of thinking critically about historical themes,

considering multiple perspectives of historical events, and connecting relevant, historical

themes and events to current times.

This action research project provides insight toward answering the question: How

can student-centered practices and citizenship education promote critical discourse in a

high school social studies classroom? To respond to this question, important themes that

will be further explored in this chapter are: the teacher's role in student-centered practices

and culturally relevant curriculum, and gender norms. The findings that were extracted

from the data analysis lead to implications for my future teaching and emergent questions

to consider.

The Teacher's Role in Student-Centered Practices

Creating a lesson that was mostly student-centered proved to be difficult, and I

found that students often expected the teacher to have a major role in lessons. My first

finding was that in the social studies, when new material is being introduced, it can be

beneficial for the teacher to play a larger role to guide students in their understanding of

concepts. In the beginning of a new unit, when so much new content knowledge is

required, I found it difficult to step back and have a truly student-centered lesson. To start the new unit, outlined by the AP US History Curriculum Framework as Period 3 (1754-1800), I began with a lesson on The French and Indian War that was meant to be student-centered. Students were able to share their initial thoughts, and then analyze documents to determine the causes and effects of The French and Indian War. The intent was for students to construct their own meaning of the causes and effects of the French and Indian War based on their interpretations of the documents. However, as seen in the video of this lesson, I directly responded to all of students' responses, which gave me more of a role as I stepped in during the lesson, making it less student-centered and more of a balance between teacher-centered and student-centered practice. In the end, I put content knowledge such as dates and facts in front of students, and they had to focus on the details. As shown in the teacher reflective journal written after this lesson was taught, I was concerned that I was not able to focus more on conceptual themes that I wanted to in the end.

On the student survey given at the end of this study, in response to the statement "The teacher should have a large role in class discussions", 42 students out of 87 responded with "Often" or "Always". Very few put "Never". During whole class interactions, it was the expectation of the students that I would step in and be a part of the conversation, that I was the primary holder of information. As in the lesson on the French and Indian War, I found myself consistently providing input to the discussion, rather than having students participate in critical discourse with each other.

In the classes that were involved in this study, critical thinking was taught explicitly as an expectation in the work that we were doing. Teaching an Advanced

Placement course put me in a dilemma. On one hand I wanted to encourage critical thinking and empower students to be in control of their own learning, on the other hand the Advanced Placement exam was looming and students knew that they had to learn certain information to get the correct answer on summative assessments.

In the survey that students took at the end of this study, in response to the statement "Getting the correct answer is more important than practicing critical thinking", 13 students responded with "Agree", and 4 students said that they were unsure. While the amount of students saying that getting the correct answer is more important than critical thinking is small, this response is curious. I stressed the importance of critical thinking and not just getting the correct answer and was very explicit about this. However, I still found students just wanting to get the right answer. I wonder if when students responded to this statement they were giving me the answer that they thought I wanted. In order to make my practice more student-centered, I often posed open-ended questions that had more than one possible answer to students. While students generally were engaged and responsive to these questions, the discussion often ended with students asking for the correct answer.

Culturally Relevant Curriculum

My second finding was: to engage students in historical thinking, I found that the most effective lessons involved subject matter that was culturally relevant or responsive for students. Ladson-Billings (1995) describes culturally relevant pedagogy, "beyond those individual characteristics of academic achievement and cultural competence, students must develop a broader sociopolitical consciousness that allows them to critique the cultural norms, values, mores, and institutions that produce and maintain social

inequities." (p. 162). Since school is about preparing students for active citizenship, students must be given the tools to critically analyze society. In a similar way, Vavrus (2008) describes culturally responsive teaching as "an educational reform that strives to increase the engagement and motivation of students of color who historically have been both unsuccessful academically and socially alienated from their public schools." (p. 49). In teaching students about the founding of the United States, issues of democracy and equality were often the topic of discussion and the overarching historical theme. This offered students many opportunities to critically analyze these themes and how they connect to students' lives today.

The unit that I taught was on the founding of the United States. Issues of democracy, natural rights, and equality were very much present in my lessons. On the student survey, in response to the statement "American ideals (democracy, natural rights) are a part of my life", 20 students said that they disagreed, 6 said that they were unsure (meaning that they either did not answer, responded with both "agree" and "disagree", or wrote in "I don't know"), and 61 said that they agreed. This is significant because almost a quarter of the students understood that these were not a part of their reality. Students closely studied the American ideals that are supposed to be reflected in public schools (Dewey, 2004). As cited in the literature review, Ladson-Billings (2002) writes that the work of social studies educators "is to prepare students to work to narrow the distance between what the United States says it stands for (through its founding documents) and what it currently practices" (p. 122). Students are aware that this distance exists, and it is a purpose of social studies education to narrow the gap so that democratic ideals are enacted for marginalized students in U.S. schools.

When analyzing primary source documents, students were assigned to decide what the significance of the document was. When students thought about the significance of a document, they were expected to think about how this document related to today, and answer the question "why is this important?" In a lesson on the Stamp Tax, students read a public letter written in opposition to the tax. A video recording was reviewed of students discussing the significance of this letter. In this video, the students who shared said that it was significant because someone was speaking out against their government. In one class in particular, as observed in a video recording, a student made an analogy on their own to help their understanding, and the rest of the class took that analogy and elaborated to deepen their understanding. A student related the relationship between Great Britain and its North American colonies as comparable to the relationship between parents and their children. The student said "because I was gonna say it would have been easy to stand up to them but, like, with the analogy that we used yesterday you know they're like, children to their parents, and if I try to stand up to my parents it's not a good spot." It was a way for students to understand the concepts as they were developing by analyzing the information in front of them, and connecting it to their lives.

Another important component of this unit addressed the political philosophies behind the American Revolution. Students studied the ideas of John Locke and the Enlightenment, as well as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Within this lesson students were to learn the concepts of hereditary succession, natural rights, republicanism, and consent of the governed. This mini-unit on the political philosophies behind the American Revolution culminated in student responses to the following guiding questions: How do people in our society become leaders? How is this similar or different from

hereditary succession? Students identified the ways that people in our society become leaders: elections, reflecting the interests of the people. In response to the question of whether or not this was different from hereditary succession, many students pointed out that our election process still depends on money and status, as I noted in my post-lesson reflection. I was surprised by this outcome. For each class, the conversation went differently, but each one was rich in meaning. This question made this material and the concepts in it relevant to today.

Gender Norms

My third finding was, when looking at participation of students in critical discourse, I noticed significantly more boys speaking in class. Because of this, I found it necessary to use a lens focusing on gender. In the results of the student survey given at the end of this study of those who responded with "always" or "often" to the statement "I am afraid that my classmates will think my ideas are unworthy of consideration", 10 identified as female (out of 47) and 1 identified as male (out of 34). This reflects a larger issue of girls' self-efficacy in the classroom. This finding was also supported by observations made of classroom video recordings and post-lesson reflections. I often noted in my reflections that it was mostly boys who volunteered to speak. Noticing the imbalance of gender was unavoidable when observing whole class discussion.

Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) describe an archetypal form of girls' and women's development constructed by Carol Gilligan:

By early adolescence, according to the archetype, exuberant self-expression gives way to insecurity and self-silencing. This inward flight into hiding occurs in response to multiple layers of societal messages—messages that girls should be

supportive and accommodating and that 'appropriate' feminine behavior is neither

loud nor aggressive. (p. 103)

Further, Gilligan names this process of going into hiding as going underground.

According to Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) "many girls force parts of themselves into

hiding, thereby making themselves more acceptable to the local status quo. But going

underground to remain in relationship with others ultimately leads to disconnections from

oneself" (p. 103). A significant aspect of adolescent development is interpersonal

relationships between both teachers and peers. However, for many girls these

relationships are not equal and result in their stifling and sacrificing part of their

personality in order to fit into society's expectations. While this may benefit relationships

in everyday interactions, the long-term consequences are highly detrimental to female

students' development and sense of self-worth.

Wood (2011) sets the context for why girls choose to go underground. She

describes how humans are constantly reflecting on themselves and that "we don't reflect

on ourselves from a purely personal perspective. Instead, we look at ourselves through

the eyes of others." (p. 160). How others view us becomes internalized, whether we

realize it or not. Wood (2011) describes monitoring as something that is happening "as

we engage in internal dialogues with others' perspectives that we have internalized" (p.

160). Society determines which behaviors are considered to be feminine and which are

considered to be masculine. In the context of class discussion, this is evident when female

students are rarely volunteering to speak or share their ideas, removing themselves from

the learning process. These societal expectations are a result of everyday interactions and

become viewed as natural and normal over time, therefore making it difficult for teachers and students to notice that they are occurring.

Implications

Hybrid classrooms consisting of both teacher-centered and student-centered pedagogies are a realistic and democratic alternative to teacher-directed classrooms with power dynamics that can be oppressive to students. In hybrid classrooms teachers do not hold all of the power, and students are given opportunities to actively test their ideas, building knowledge of their own. In my future classroom I plan to provide more opportunities for students to construct learning together, where students have more discussions and interactions with each other in learning activities. I want to make more of an effort to step back and give more power to students in their learning process.

I, as an educator, must provide students with opportunities to understand society through culturally relevant curriculum, and to think critically. To take this further, it would be interesting to see how these practices affect the political efficacy of students, in school and in life post-graduation. If teachers equip students with opportunities to practice and participate in collaborative dialogue and critical thinking, then these skills can be used by students in a democratic society outside of the classroom. As stated by NCSS, the goal of the social studies is civic competence. Social studies education should prepare students to participate in a democratic society.

It is important that teachers reject certain social constructs about gender as natural and unavoidable. Providing safe spaces for all students to express themselves will provide increased opportunities for optimal development. Nakkula and Toshalis (2006)

explain that if some of our students are hidden underground and restrictive gender roles are enforced, then

> our classrooms and our schools in general become partial learning environments… in this vein, gender identity work in our schools is the world of freedom fighting… it is the fight to help our students be fully present as learners, as classmates, as the people they see themselves to be. (p. 115)

Ideally, teachers would reject traditional constructs and reflect on their perceptions of male and female students, and students understanding gender expression as well. In my future practice, I hope to develop skills to intentionally create a safe environment that is supportive of female students. It is important to set clear and inclusive expectations and develop a strong and supportive learning community. As the teacher, I need to be mindful of who volunteers to speak, who raises their hand in class, who I am calling on, and student responses to each other.

The themes and findings of this study have implications for my future practice as a social studies educator. My student-centered classroom, in order to be a productive learning environment, requires an integration of the role of the teacher in an equitable way where the teacher does not hold all of the power. It is also important that I provide culturally relevant curriculum and materials for my students in order for students to participate in critical discourse. Providing students with opportunities to work with culturally relevant materials empowers students to engage with historical events. In my future practice I need to make sure that all students feel empowered to engage in critical discourse and classroom discussion with their peers, regardless of gender. Education is meant to reflect the society in which it exists. In the social studies, if I am to teach

students about democratic ideals that are supposedly present in our society, I need to

foster a truly equitable learning environment that is democratic in nature.

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APPENDIX A

The following survey questions are about your experiences in history/social studies class. **It is not required that you write your name on this.**

Gender (Circle one): Female   Male

1. I speak in class discussions (circle one)

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

2. I enjoy class discussions

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

3. I am afraid that the teacher will criticize or judge me based on my comments in discussions

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

4. I am afraid that my classmates will think my ideas are unworthy of consideration

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

5. Class discussions seem like a waste of time

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

6. I would rather sit back and hear what others have to say

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

7. I think that participating in class discussions helps me learn more

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

8. The teacher should have a large role in class discussions

Always   Often   Sometimes   Never

9. Getting the correct answer is more important than practicing critical thinking

Agree   Disagree

10. Every student in class has the responsibility to contribute to class discussions occasionally

Agree   Disagree

11. Being able to speak up in a group of one's peers is an essential skill for a person to have

Agree   Disagree

12. American ideals (democracy, natural rights) are a part of my everyday life

Agree   Disagree

13. Time to think before speaking:

Would cause me to speak more   Would cause me to speak less   Would have no effect
Not applicable

APPENDIX B

87 Surveys   f 2447 m/34
▬ Getting correct answer
▬ Democracy in everyday life
              (3)   (4)
Female + teacher or others
   always or often

others will Judge + female
      10
male   1

▬ M THL THL   y(n 11
   F THL1111   y/n 11
   other 1   y/n 11

▬ M THL1   y(n 11
   F THL1   y/n 1
   other 1   y/n 1

Teacher role Always/ often
F THL1 THLTHL THL11
M THL1 THLTHL 111