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Social Studies in Today's Elementary Classroom

Introduction

Students will absorb all kinds of social messages in the classrooms no matter what I do as a teacher. It is my goal to be deliberate in immersing them in quality content and responsible inquiry, and to put them on the path to discovering their voice and their sense of a social conscience.

Philosophy

Students experience many forces that *isolate* them. Schools emphasize individual high stakes test scores. Students turn to media devices over in-person interactions. They must begin to understand what it means to live as a member of a *society*, to belong to a group with a shared identity and responsibility. They must embrace the idea of the public good. Teaching social studies can stir students to consider their personal and group identity and act for the good of the many, not just the one. But inspiring this kind of civic engagement is extremely complex, and assessing it proves more difficult than measuring a student's knowledge of reading and math or the facts of history. This complexity makes social studies all the more important to teach deliberately rather than incidentally or haphazardly.

To achieve civic competence, teachers use Social Studies state standards to shape their teaching. The standards cover specific content that students must know in order to contribute to society in intelligent ways. Students who confuse World War I with World War II will have credibility problems and limited influence when trying to change the

world, no matter how eloquent or passionate they are. The standards also ask students to develop skills that will serve them well in any content area: distinguishing fact from opinion, using primary sources, learning how to carry out and present research, among others. To really understand the standards, teachers immerse their students in the 10 big ideas named by the National Council for the Social Studies. If every procedure, activity, bulletin board, discipline plan, and project trace back to one of these themes, students will likely emerge from classrooms empowered to make informed decisions about their world (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010).

As I guide my students in their integrated study of the social sciences and humanities, I anticipate focusing on culture, global connections, and civic ideals and practices. Often, students grow up encountering foreign cultures only by observing the holiday celebrations of those cultures. While this kind of exposure provides a good starting point, we must quickly move past a shallow representation of others which casts them as highly exotic. When trying to grasp *multiculturalism*, my students will become adept at recognizing and exploring their *own* culture as well — family, regional, and national. Looking at language yields especially fruitful avenues for finding out which ideas matter to people and how people accommodate changes and challenges to those ideas.

With an understanding of the idea of culture and the ability to identify parts of their own and others' cultures, students begin to see that they are not the center of the universe. Developmentally, children cannot yet empathize with and fully comprehend multiple perspectives, but they can begin to see relationships and make connections that allow them consider a wider range of consequences of their civic action or inaction.

Methods

I am committed to using research-based social studies practices in my classroom. This commitment begins by recognizing that students come to class with a range of perceptions of the world. Effective teaching depends on my ability to engage the students' existing understanding of the topics at hand and co-construct their schema from that point. That way, they are prepared to integrate new information that may challenge their understanding (McGuire & Cole, 2010). Regarding assessment, students perform better when they are given multiple ways to demonstrate their growth (tapping into multiple intelligences). Creative assessments hinge on students' knowing what is expected of them, and what pieces are assumed and which are of central importance. A rubric should always accompany assignments and assessments (McGuire & Cole, 2010). Another essential practice that must become automatic is interdisciplinary instruction—addressing multiple objectives and subject areas in a single lesson.

My classroom will experience several methods rooted in these and other best practices. One active, whole-body method that takes students beyond a dry reading of history is a role play in talk show format. Students fully take on the role of another person, endeavoring to act, speak, and think like that person. A moderator and perhaps the student audience listen and ask questions. Nothing is scripted, which prompts students to identify with the character at a deep level. This speaking from the heart allows students to reflect on their own identity and make connections between cultures and between the past and the present (Obenchain & Morris, 2011).

Another method is service-learning. More than service alone or learning alone, service-learning develops moral intelligence and improves the chances that students will

participate in improving their communities as they grow up. True service-learning is an authentic inquiry in which students work on all phases of the project: identifying a need, researching and planning, and taking action. They deal with real joys and frustrations. All of this spans several weeks, during which students constantly reflect on the reasons for their actions. The story *Give a Goat* shows how a class can impact individuals far away. On a local level, a class prepares for a few minutes each week to perform for, serve food to, and distribute collected supplies at a homeless shelter on Christmas Eve. This tradition continues to draw dozens of former students who have caught the spirit of service-learning as something more than charity (Esquith, 2007).

The children's book *Give a Goat* illustrates another method: teaching social studies through literature. This story (and many others like it) can be used to efficiently teach reading and economics (or geography, anthropology, government, etc.) at the same time. Teachers must plan experiences which ensure that students capture the social studies lessons associated with the books; otherwise students will simply enjoy the book and possibly miss the point (Rodgers, Hawthorne, & Wheeler, 2007). This method demands direct teaching.

Conclusion

Standards based social studies instruction is potentially one of the most personally applicable experiences in a student's school career. Using proven methods, I awaken students to wonder about and connect with people and institutions, so they ask productive questions that apply history, culture, and values to current issues in a meaningful way.

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