Building a Framework for Classroom-Based Multicultural Democratic Education: Learning From Three Skilled Teachers

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Recognizing the increasingly racially and ethnically diverse politically disengaged population along with the central role of schools in preparing democratic citizens, this study investigated how 3 skilled secondary social studies teachers taught about and for multicultural democracy to prepare students for active and effective citizenship through a collective case study. The article discusses their pedagogy, the ways in which they provided their students with "codes of power" and skills for effective citizenship, and how they extended the curriculum beyond "official knowledge." In addition, it presents a framework for classroom-based multicultural democratic education, which incorporates critical pedagogy, building of community, and thorough disciplinary content and based on a combination of the theoretical frame and the practice of these 3 skilled teachers.

There exists a gap between multicultural and democratic education when addressing the question of how to educate members for democracy in a multicultural society. According to Parker neither field has been able "to mount the larger perspective and embrace the big picture needed to educate a diverse student population for democratic living" (p. 12) because multicultural and democratic education have developed as distinct topics, literatures, and professional communities. This separate development has led to a clash over the aims of public schooling. Gutmann (1995) believes that this clash between securing civic values and respecting cultural aims has led to many of the contemporary controversies about public schooling.

This study is an attempt to bridge the gap between these two fields. As Gay (1997) astutely notes, the relationship between multicultural and democratic education is a natural, healthy, and complementary one. The classroom-based multicultural democratic education (CMDE) framework presented in this article shows one possible way that these fields may be combined to prepare a thoughtful, active, and effective citizenry. This framework provides an initial model of how to bridge this gap by incorporating principles from both fields to transform a racially and ethnically diverse, politically disengaged population into such a citizenry.

It is important to note the CMDE framework discussed in this article is the result of a combination of both theory and practice. A theoretical frame was used to guide observations and interviews with three practitioners, recommended for their excellent teaching. On the basis of both, the CMDE framework was formulated. The next section discusses research questions and the theoretical frame that guided observations.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The primary research question posed was: How do three skilled secondary social studies teachers teach about and for multicultural democracy in their U.S. history courses? In answering this question through an instrumental collective case study (Stake, 1995), I was able to generate an initial framework for how teachers can teach about and for multicultural democracy. The secondary question for this research focused on impediments: What factors serve as obstacles in working toward classroom-based multicultural democracy?

OBSTACLES

Recall that the primary research question asked: How do three skilled secondary social studies teachers teach about and for multicultural democracy in their U.S. history courses? The secondary question asked: What factors serve as obstacles in working toward classroom-based multicultural democracy? This section examines how the obstacles of class context, limited conceptions of diversity, and lack of promotion of social action affected teaching about and for multicultural democracy for these three teachers.

CLASS CONTEXT

Class context served as an obstacle to teaching about and for multicultural democracy. In Ms. Westphalen's class, which consisted of upper-middle class White students, this demographic makeup strongly influenced her practice. Ms. Westphalen felt that if her students were more "multicultural," her curriculum would have been more multicultural (Interview 3). She would have used more multiple and critical perspectives to reflect her students' demographics. Such an opinion ignores the importance of preparing all students to be thoughtful, active, and effective citizens in an increasingly diverse United States. Subsequently, by placing more importance on her individual class's context to determine her practice, Ms. Westphalen did not incorporate critical pedagogy and thorough disciplinary content beyond political viewpoints in her practice.

LIMITED CONCEPTIONS OF DIVERSITY

The teachers' limited conception of diversity also served as an obstacle as they worked toward multicultural democracy. In their first interviews, all three teachers were asked if their students were diverse. All three teachers determined the diversity of their students based on race/ethnicity. This limited conception of diversity marginalizes other forms of diversity (diversity in socioeconomic class, gender diversity, linguistic diversity, diversity in sexual orientation, religious diversity, etc.). For example, Ms. Westphalen wished Morningside's students were more diverse: "And here I am again with no diversity. It's more diverse than the rest of the state, but not as diverse as I hoped" (Interview 1). When asked what she meant, Ms. Westphalen focused on the lack of ethnic and racial diversity, particularly in her classes. Ms. Jensen also felt students at Townsend in the past were more diverse than they currently were. In response to a follow-up question, she explained that Townsend had a more racially and ethnically diverse student body when she started teaching there.

These three teachers' beliefs about diversity were limited because of the focus on racial and ethnic diversity. The teachers placed primary importance on race and ethnicity at the expense of diversity in socioeconomic class, gender diversity, linguistic diversity,
diversity in sexual orientation, religious diversity, and so on. For example, Ms. Jensen aimed to teach about "invisible people," and she did to some extent by focusing on the role of women in U.S. history, along with an examination of class issues. However, the scope of this examination was far from thorough. Ms. Westphalen felt that her students were not diverse, ignoring forms of diversity other than racial and ethnic that might have existed among her students.

By focusing on race and ethnicity, these three teachers unintentionally marginalized other forms of diversity. As a result, this limited conception of diversity served as an obstacle as they taught about and for multicultural democracy. Multicultural democracy aims to incorporate socioeconomic, cultural, and political diversity. By focusing on race and ethnicity, teachers ignore other forms of diversity (i.e. diversity in sexual orientation, diversity in socioeconomic class, gender diversity, religious diversity, etc.) found in their classrooms.

**LACK OF PROMOTION OF SOCIAL ACTION**

The critical pedagogy element of the CMDE framework placed emphasis on teaching for social action. As discussed earlier, critical pedagogy works on a continuum by encouraging students to move toward human agency (Ball, 2000; Freire, 1990) by exercising agency through critical thinking, through individual social action, and through group social action. The practice of Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen stressed critical thinking, the first stage along the critical pedagogy continuum. However, none of these teachers promoted individual social action or group social action in their teaching. This raises several questions: Why were neither social action nor group social action promoted? What is the importance of social action or group social action in CMDE? This last question will be addressed when I revisit the CMDE framework. Now I turn to the first question.

These three teachers did not promote social action because they placed a higher priority on other pedagogical goals, such as critical thinking. Mr. Sinclair and Ms. Westphalen mentioned the importance of social action to their students but did not specifically design their pedagogy to promote it. During the third interviews, all three teachers indicated that they felt that social action was important. However, based on my observations, none of these teachers made teaching for social action an important goal of their teaching. As a result, none promoted social action in any real sense.

The lack of emphasis on social action by teachers raises the question: What role does teaching for social action and group social action play in teaching about and for multicultural democracy? I incorporated these two stages in the critical pedagogy framework because social action informed by social critique and structural analysis is closely tied to structural change of society (Westheimer & Kahne, 2002). The close relationship between social action and societal change reinforced my belief that schools can serve as transformative vehicles by emphasizing individual and group social action. However, Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen believed in schools as vehicles for social transformation but did not emphasize teaching for social action or group social action to accomplish this goal.

Data analysis shows that Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen taught for and about multicultural democracy, except they did not specifically teach for social action or group social action. Although these teachers felt emphasizing social action and group social action was important, they did not teach for social action, as defined in the literature (Bigelow, 1990; Freire, 1990; Shor, 1992). This finding was surprising for several reasons. First, given the prominence of teaching for social action in the literature of critical pedagogy
that aims to promote human agency and social transformation through schools (Freire, 1990; Goodman, 1992; Shor, 1992), I was struck by the difference between the theory and the actual practice of these three excellent teachers in teaching about and for multicultural democracy. This lack of evidence may mean that such teaching, as currently defined in the literature, may not be necessary for promoting human agency or for social transformation for these three teachers. As a result, I updated the CMDE framework to reflect this finding.

Second, the lack of promotion of social action was also surprising given my belief that the promotion of social action enables schools to serve as vehicles for social transformation. However, this finding may not be surprising to those who strongly believe that schools are by their nature conservative and thus sources of social reproduction. Based on my observations and interviews, these three teachers do not fall into the latter category. Instead, teaching skills for democratic living, discussed in the next section, may help Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen promote human agency or social transformation through their teaching.

**ADDING SKILLS FOR DEMOCRATIC LIVING**

Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen promoted other skills to help students achieve human agency and work toward social transformation. These skills can be characterized as skills for democratic living—skills designed to create and maintain a democratic and just society (Banks, 1995; Taba, Brady, Robinsons, 1952). These skills for democratic living aim to provide students with the skills required to be thoughtful, active, and effective citizens and extend beyond the realm of school and to the larger society. Discussion and deliberation skills are some examples. Data from the three teachers serve as examples of teaching students skills for democratic living.

For example, Mr. Sinclair expected his students to actively engage with other citizens in the various communities in which they participated. Mr. Sinclair believed citizens must be willing to engage with each other even when it may involve disagreement and difference. He felt that discussion skills helped students to better understand others' viewpoints because such skills can help young people develop the group discourse skills and dispositions for participatory citizenship (Hess, 2002):

> You know the journal entries I got yesterday and actually, one of them was from Candice. She felt that people's voices were being stifled. She, you know, she thought that there definitely were voices being stifled. And I thought about it and it's just that these are the things you don't see all the time when you're sitting in one of those discussions. And I'm going, "Wow. I wonder who it was?" I wrote back to her and I said, "You know . . . this . . . yeah, that might have happened. You know, I don't disagree with you." Overall she said it was a good discussion but she just said that. I said, "You know, what can we do to make sure those voices are heard? How can you do it?"

I suggested asking that person a question . . . or ask them . . . or getting back if somebody's voice is kind of being drowned out by another group of faction or something . . . how can you get that out there and maybe ask that person a question, "What were you saying when you meant this, then?" to kind of help them out. But you know those are democratic type values so to speak that . . . we see in class. So, hopefully be a model of what goes on in there and take it outside of class.

By emphasizing this skill for democratic living and based on my observations of his students, Mr. Sinclair may have prepared students to engage with others on the difficult path of democracy.
As another example, Ms. Jensen prepared students with the skills to critically analyze democracy in the United States, aiming to help students create and maintain public spaces of lively debate that contest the status quo. Ms. Westphalen also prepared students with skills to engage with others of different perspectives for in-depth examination of issues. This is important because, as Gutmann (1999) posited, students who aim to gain in-depth knowledge of issues learn deliberative skills such as an appreciation of other people's perspectives.

Skills for democratic living emphasized by Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen align closely with critical pedagogy's notion of preparing students to be transformers of their current life situations (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). Mr. Sinclair believed making better decisions would enable students to improve their own lives and those of others around them. For example, Mr. Sinclair prepared students with discussion skills to work through disagreement in order to make better decisions about school and life choices (Interviews 1, 2). His students were previously academically unsuccessful in other schools and had disengaged with school. These students, based on their demographics, were more likely to become disengaged citizens. He aimed to create thoughtful, active, and effective citizens and taught them to make good decisions. Mr. Sinclair's emphasis on learning skills for democratic living provided students with the skills to engage with others to make better decisions both in and out of school.

CMDE FRAMEWORK

Data provided evidence that the borders between critical pedagogy and thorough disciplinary content and skills were not clearly defined. These borders were more permeable than originally explained because the use of multiple and critical perspectives may help teachers teach about and for multicultural democracy by meeting the criteria for both critical pedagogy and thorough disciplinary content and skills. In addition, skills for democratic living needed to be added to this element. Figure 1 presents the CMDE framework.

In the CMDE framework, the borders between critical pedagogy and thorough disciplinary
content and skills overlap in the areas of multiple and critical perspectives. The borders may also be permeable between critical pedagogy and building of community insofar as positive peer relationships or building understanding may foster skills for democratic living. For example, building of community may have helped Mr. Sinclair and Ms. Jensen teach skills for democratic living, although the evidence is not sufficient to fully support this hypothesis. Further studies are needed to explore how other borders in my CMDE framework may be permeable.

IMPLICATIONS

The ultimate goal of this research is to uncover ways in which to transform a racially and ethnically diverse, politically disengaged population into a thoughtful, active, and effective citizenry. As a first step, I have investigated a conception of education, CMDE, designed to help students become thoughtful, active, and effective citizens. Teaching future secondary social studies teachers how to prepare such citizens is one way to address this problem. Teacher educators, then, have a responsibility to teach preservice students about CMDE. This section outlines two specific ways that teacher educators might profitably use this study to inform the teaching of preservice students.

First, teacher educators might want to share the updated CMDE framework in this study with preservice teachers to help them think about possible interactions among teachers’ rationale, instructional plans and strategies, practice, and contexts. By doing so, teacher educators would be working to help preservice teachers think about the purpose of teaching about and for multicultural democracy in complex ways. This might help preservice teachers grasp the reality that teaching students to become thoughtful, active, and effective citizens in these diverse United States is a challenging enterprise that requires intense preparation and focus.

Secondly, this study might help teacher educators make the link between critical pedagogy and implementation in actual classrooms for practitioners. As I created the initial CMDE framework, I undertook a literature review of the concept of critical pedagogy. Advocates of critical pedagogy press teachers to help students become critical thinkers, decision makers, and transformers of their current life situations (Giroux & McLaren, 1994). However, several scholars have criticized critical pedagogy for its lack of applicability to classrooms. The inaccessible language of critical pedagogy made it difficult for practitioners to make links between the rhetoric of critical pedagogy and its implementation within actual classrooms (Ball, 2000). Ellsworth (1989) also criticized the literature on critical pedagogy because of its lack of usefulness in assisting educators to think through and plan improvements in actual classroom practice. The classroom practices described in this study can aid teacher educators in operationalizing such a philosophy for their own students.

CONCLUSION

The present study confirms that teaching about and for multicultural democracy is difficult. Mr. Sinclair, Ms. Jensen, and Ms. Westphalen are skilled teachers whose practice illuminated for other teachers and teacher educators how to implement the three elements of the CMDE framework. Their practice also served to provide insights on how to revise my theoretical frame. The resulting CMDE framework, I believe, makes it more feasible to teach
about and for multicultural democracy in social studies classrooms by providing a model for implementation along with practical examples for implementation.

It seems unlikely that teachers will work toward multicultural democracy without evidence that teaching about and for such a democracy will actually help students become thoughtful, active, and effective citizens. Whether that occurred in the classrooms observed in the present study remains unclear and beyond the study's scope. Such findings may result from further studies that build from the conceptions of democratic education presented here.

Further studies that critically examine these conceptions are needed because, simply put, U.S. liberal representative democracy is in danger of continuing to foster a population that, though racially and ethnically diverse, is politically disengaged. Such a disengaged population threatens to jeopardize democracy itself. One can hope that schools can help overcome this trend. The present study showed engaged students in three classrooms who possessed the knowledge and skills to become thoughtful, active, and effective citizens. Again, it seems possible to be optimistic that follow-up research will help educators work toward a democracy that incorporates socioeconomic, cultural, and political diversity and helps prepare thoughtful, active, and effective citizens.

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Notes

1. For a more detailed explanation of multicultural democracy, please see Marri (2003a, 2003c) and Parker (1996a)
2. The names of the district, schools, and teachers have been changed.

References


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