
Using Poetry in Social Studies Classes to Teach about Cultural Diversity and Social Justice

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As a teacher educator committed to raising issues of racial, economic, and gender equality and those related to an appreciation for diversity, I find poetry to be a powerful resource in social studies methods classes. When preparing preservice teachers for elementary and middle school levels, I find that poetry can often capture their attention and address controversial issues in a meaningful, less-threatening manner. Poets frequently share their personal experiences with cultural diversity, racism, sexism, or classism in short, potent phrases. Poems often affirm women and cultural groups that are less valued in our society, praise individuals who resisted oppression, or portray the harm resulting from prejudicial comments or discriminatory actions. For example, in my social studies methods class, when we read "Harriet Tubman" by Eloise Greenfield (Hudson 1993), we discuss Tubman's spirit and courage to resist slavery through her leadership in the Underground Railroad. When we read "Honor" and "Farmworker" by

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Alma Flor Ada (Ada 1997), we consider the importance of farm workers who, for little pay and at great personal risk, provide many of our foods. After a decade of using poetry appropriate for children and youth as a social studies resource, I continue to be impressed with how much teacher-education students are moved by poetry when they seem untouched by more objective resources. I hope, of course, that those students will consider the power of poetry when they address multicultural social studies themes in their own classrooms.

Achieving the Goals of the Social Studies Methods Course through Poetry

As a methods teacher, I emphasize Sleeter and Grant's (1999) conception of a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach to social studies. That orientation affirms cultural diversity, fosters equal opportunities, and challenges social stratification. The poems "I, Too, Sing America" and "Merry-Go-Round," by Langston Hughes, document and challenge racial segregation and inequality during the first half of the twentieth century (Clinton 1998). *All the Colors of the Earth* (1994) and *I*

Look Like a Girl (1999), by Sheila Hamanaka, affirm children's cultural diversity and girls' strength. With a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach in the methods class, I also address such social issues as racism, sexism, and classism; integrate the experiences and perspectives of women and men from different cultural groups; include students' life experiences, especially those that revolve around issues of oppression; and encourage students to think critically and analyze different perspectives. The poetry in Janet Wong's *Good Luck Gold and Other Poems* (1994) and Jane Medina's *My Name is Jorge: On Both Sides of the River* (1999) provide personal perspectives of racial prejudices, discrimination, and blatant racism. Readers of those poems consider the racism inherent in teasing, stereotyping, and labeling.

Another important goal of the course is to encourage preservice teachers to read critically and develop critical literacy. As the teacher, I recognize that my students' individual experiences, as well as their gender, social class, and culture, influence their responses to poetry and other reading and their participation in discussions (Edelsky 1999). I encourage critical literacy by

asking preservice students to consider the social issues in their readings, even if they prefer to ignore them. Although I avoid imposing my own critique (Edelsky 1999), I select readings, including poetry, that specifically raise those issues and affirm cultural diversity. Poems from *Wachale! Poetry and Prose about Growing Up Latino in America* (Stavans 2001), *I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry* (Clinton 1998), *Pass It On: African American Poetry for Children* (Hudson 1993), and *Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans* (Hirschfelder and Singer 1992) are excellent catalysts for class discussion of such topics.

Why Read Poetry in Elementary Social Studies?

For elementary teachers who must meet the national social studies standards (National Council for the Social Studies 1994), emphasize literacy within the curriculum, and face limited time for teaching social studies, I recommend poetry to address those demands. The contents of many poems incorporate at least one of the ten thematic strands of social studies (see Vardell 2003 for suggested poems for each thematic strand). Teachers committed to a multicultural, social reconstructionist approach may select poems that are not only congruent with this orientation but also address the thematic strands of culture; time, continuity, and change; individual development and identity; individuals, groups, and institutions; power, authority and governance; and civic ideals and practices.

Teach the Social Studies Standards

The poems in *Thirteen Moons on Turtle's Back: A Native American Year of Moons* (1992), by Joseph Bruchac and Jonathan London, and *The Earth Under Sky Bear's Feet: Native American Poems of the Land* (1995), by Joseph Bruchac and Thomas Locker, reveal the important similarities and the diversity among Native American cultures. They address the thematic strand

of culture by expressing various Native American nations' beliefs about the natural world.

The theme of time, continuity, and change is illustrated in the collection of poems *All By Herself: 14 Girls Who Made a Difference*, by Ann Whitford Paul (1999). The poems commemorate brave actions taken by fourteen famous and ordinary young women who lived during various eras from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries in the United States. The poems compiled by Lillian Morrison in *More Spice Than Sugar: Poems about Feisty Females* (2001) also honor the accomplishments of women in U.S. history, such as Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, Sojourner Truth, and Molly Pitcher.

The theme of individual development and identity is explored in Francisco X. Alarcón's bilingual English and Spanish poems in *Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems* (1997), *From the Bellybutton of the Moon and Other Summer Poems* (1998), and *Angels Ride Bikes and Other Fall Poems* (1999). Alarcón's poems describe his childhood memories of his family, family activities, their visit to Mexico, and their daily life in Los Angeles as Mexican Americans. The poems in *Meet Danitra Brown*, by Nikki Grimes (1994) also address individual development and identity by celebrating the friendship between two African American girls who affirm one another when others disparage their skin color, body shape, and eye glasses.

The thematic strand of individuals, groups, and institutions is incorporated in the bilingual English and Spanish poems from *My Name Is Jorge* (Medina 1999), which describe a Mexican American boy's struggles in school in the United States. The poems raise awareness of the harmful effects of school on English language learners when teachers mispronounce their names, other students make prejudicial comments about ESL class, and others disparage the students' first language.

With power and authority, poems from *Under the Quilt of Night* (Hopkinson 2001) illustrate escaping from slavery on the Underground Railroad, the legalized racism inherent in slavery, and

the conflicts between slave owners and slaves and the abolitionists who broke the law by helping slaves escape. The poem "Midway," by Naomi Long Madgett (Hudson 1993), also depicts a slave's determination to escape from legalized slavery, and the poem "Harriet Tubman," by Eloise Greenfield (Hudson 1993), is a powerful illustration of Tubman's commitment to disobey the law and risk her own safety to escape from bondage and lead others to freedom.

Poems that illustrate civic ideals and practices include *Elegy on the Death of César Chávez* (Anaya 2000) and *I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry* (Clinton 1998). The book-length poem about César Chávez treats Chávez's resistance to injustices endured by farm workers and his efforts to organize migrant farm workers to fight for better conditions. A number of poems from *I, Too, Sing America: Three Centuries of African American Poetry* explore the injustice of slavery, legal racial segregation, and racial inequalities in the United States. Langston Hughes's title poem, "I, Too, Sing America," and "Merry-Go-Round" are especially powerful in their protest of racial segregation.

Use Social Studies Instructional Time Wisely

The 2002 No Child Left Behind Act has a negative influence on social studies instruction. As elementary teachers teach the tested subjects of reading and mathematics, attention to social studies is frequently diminished (Howard 2003). Some elementary and middle school teachers report shortening social studies lessons or integrating reading and writing with social studies (Editors 2003). Elementary teachers with whom I have contact regularly complain about the lack of time to teach all of the requirements. Poetry can be a valuable teaching tool for helping them solve that problem. Fortunately, reading poetry consumes less time than reading trade books and frequently is more engaging and offers more insight than reading a textbook. Although poetry should remain a supplemental rather than a primary resource

for social studies, poetry's strength lies in its brevity, focus, rich vocabulary, emotion, imagination, and various perspectives (Vardell 2003). Poetry may show human reactions to historical or current events, historical complexities, and the shared consciousness of an era (Meadows 1999). Poetry can provide unique insights and descriptions of the world around us, increasing our understanding and awareness of our world (Donaldson 2001). Carefully selected poems can be read, reread, and discussed during brief instructional periods but still promote students' engagement and learning of significant multicultural, social reconstructionist social studies concepts.

Develop Literacy during Social Studies

Reading poetry is also appealing to elementary social studies teachers because it promotes literacy, an important life skill for students and one of the tested subjects mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act. Reading poetry aloud provides opportunities for elementary students to read for meaning, discovery, and enjoyment; develop fluency and expression; and acquire an appreciation for poetry as they learn about important social studies content. During group discussions about poetry, children practice summarizing important ideas and explaining their interpretation of the poems in light of their own experiences and prior knowledge. Rather than ask students for a "correct" interpretation, the teacher can help students build plausible, personal interpretations of poems related to the social studies topic under study.

Elementary teachers may also promote critical literacy by introducing poetry that provides diverse perspectives on social studies topics and raises social issues. They can encourage students to examine poems for their point of view, biases, and issues of justice. During group discussions, students need to provide their own interpretations of the poems' meanings, justify those interpretations, and make connections between the poems and their own lives

(Creighton 1997; Edelsky 1999). Teachers may also raise ideas and issues that the students overlook during the group discussion, always allowing for diverse responses to those ideas and issues (Edelsky 1999).

Suggestions for Using Poetry in Social Studies

Select Poems Deliberately

When selecting poems, I recommend that teachers are careful to meet multicultural and social reconstructionist social studies goals, promote reading skills and critical literacy, and make wise use of instructional time. The most appropriate poems contain accurate historical facts and perspectives, provide authentic voices, are developmentally appropriate for students, and fit classroom time constraints (Danks 1995). Elementary teachers focusing on diversity among families as a social studies topic may choose "When Annie Was Adopted," "Half-Whole-Step," and "My Father" from *Fathers, Mothers, Sisters, Brothers: A Collection of Family Poems* (Hoberman 1991) and "Mom and Me Only" from *Meet Danitra Brown* (Grimes 1994). Those poems illustrate different family structures, including single-parent, adoptive, and blended families. In the bilingual English and Spanish poem "Mi Abuela," Christina Muniz Mutchler explores traditional and nontraditional roles of mothers and grandmothers. Carmen D. Lucca addresses family structure in "I Helped My Mom Not to Be Late for Work," part of the collection called *Love to Mamá: A Tribute to Mothers* (Mora 2001). In *Daddy's Arms I Am Tall: African Americans Celebrating Fathers* (1997) contains poems that portray the various roles and qualities of African American fathers. Delia Spotted Bear, a teenage member of the Crow Nation, illustrates family closeness in her poem "My Family" in *Rising Voices: Writings of Young Native Americans* (Hirschfelder and Singer 1992). *The Way a Door Closes* (Smith 2003) contains several poems from the

perspective of an older son, addressing the challenges that families face when a parent loses a job. The family portrayed in the poems is a multigenerational African American family, but the challenges would be the same for any family. The poems are brief and portray various perspectives. (For an annotated bibliography of poetry resources appropriate for teaching about diverse families from different cultures to elementary and middle school social studies students, see my Web site, <http://www.socialstudies.esmartweb.com/>.)

Strategies for Reading Poetry

Before reading a poem aloud, the teacher needs to provide students with background information on the poet and the period when the poem was written. Books of poetry often contain brief biographies of the authors, or the book's publisher may have additional information about the author on its Web site. For more extensive author information, teachers can consult the Academy of American Poets Web site at poets.org or complete an Internet search. When introducing the time period in which the poem was written, I suggest that teachers encourage children to relate the year to themselves and their families and that teachers ask questions such as "How old were you when this poem was written and originally published? How old were your closest family members?" and "What was happening in your family when this poem was written?" With older elementary students, teachers can draw out their background knowledge of the important national, state, and community events of that time period and offer additional information on the historical and social context of the poem.

To ensure that all students engage in the poetry exercise, the teacher needs to vary the format for reading aloud (see Vardell 2003 for descriptions of different methods). In my social studies methods class, I read poems aloud to preservice teachers at different times during the semester as a means to introduce or reinforce a topic. We also read poems together, choral fashion, or I

divide the class into two large groups, with each group reading alternating stanzas. For large group readings, I usually display the poems through a computerized presentation program. The use of different colors for alternating stanzas helps the groups identify which stanzas to read. The students also read poems with a partner or read individually from a book of poetry. If they read with a partner, they decide how they will work together to read the poem to the rest of the class. When I ask preservice teachers to read poetry aloud, I allow them to prepare for the reading so that they are comfortable with word pronunciation or the meaning of a word or phrase.

Strategies for Discussing Poems

After we read a poem aloud, students try to explain the meaning of the poem's important vocabulary and significant ideas. Because so many preservice teachers have had experiences with giving only the "correct interpretation" of poems and their symbolism, I stress that they are free to offer their own interpretation. To encourage greater participation, I ask them to share their ideas with a partner before offering them to the class. When addressing the issue of inequality and struggles for equality in social studies, I have the students read "I, Too, Sing America" and "Merry-Go-Round," by Langston Hughes (Clinton 1998), both of which illustrate racism and racial segregation during the first half of the twentieth century. I encourage students to explain their understanding of the phrases "darker brother" and "sit at the table" in "I, Too, Sing America." I have them describe the location of the "Jim Crow section" on a merry-go-round, bus, and train in "Merry-Go-Round." I advise the preservice teachers that they should build on the ideas that the children offer and should add a brief explanation of Jim Crow laws and racial segregation before the 1960s civil rights movement.

One can find racial inequality for Native American people portrayed in the poem "Indians," by Ophelia Rivas, a Tohono O'odham teen, in *Rising Voices*:

Writings of Young Native Americans (Hirschfelder and Singer 1992). After reading the poem aloud, young students need to review their knowledge of Columbus, the Pilgrims, and Vikings and their roles in U.S. history. They also need to explain the meaning of the phrases "we are treated as though we don't belong here" and "we are treated as though we just got here."

What did you learn about the issue of equality in the United States?

How do these issues affect your own life?

During the discussion, the teacher may add his or her own ideas, guarding against those ideas receiving more attention than the students' views.

Another aspect of critical literacy is a

To develop their critical literacy skills, students can investigate the poets' backgrounds and assess their ability to write realistic poetry about social issues.

To promote critical literacy and an understanding of significant multicultural and social reconstructionist themes, a teacher can have students offer their interpretations of the poems, the issues or themes raised in them, poetry's contributions to understanding social studies content, and the connections between the issues in the poems and in the students' own lives (Creighton 1997; Edelsky 1999). For example, the teacher may select poems that portray women's challenges to racial and gender inequality—"Ain't I a Woman," by Sojourner Truth, "Harriet Tubman," by Eloise Greenfield, and "From Elizabeth Blackwell," by Eve Merriam, which are in *More Spice Than Sugar: Poems about Feisty Females* (Morrison 2001). After reading the poems aloud, the children can explain what they learned from the poems and what led to their interpretations. The teacher needs to encourage different explanations and reasoning from the students. Once students express their initial responses to the poems, the teacher can have them focus on the issues raised in the poems and their relevance to social studies and students' lives. For example, the teacher may ask the students to discuss the following questions:

What rights were the three women fighting for, and what is their importance?

careful analysis of the poets, including their backgrounds, for writing realistic poetry about the poem's theme or social issue, the author's purpose for writing the poetry, and the point of view and biases portrayed in the poem (Creighton 1997). When we read poems portraying racial stereotypes and discrimination, such as "Waiting at the Railroad Café," "Math," and "Noise" from *Good Luck Gold and Other Poems* (Wong 1994), I explain to the preservice students that the author is Janet Wong, whose father immigrated from China and whose mother immigrated from Korea. The poems reflect Wong's experiences growing up in Los Angeles. Given that background, I encourage students to question if we can believe that the author is describing real experiences and can explain why Wong might have written about them. We discuss problems of a teacher's stereotyping students on the basis of race, gender, or family background; the harm resulting from racial discrimination through teasing; and strategies for coping with racial discrimination. Finally, I ask the preservice students to identify the author's perspective and any biases they notice in the poems. Sometimes we address the possible bias against European Americans and the advancement of the status of Chinese-Korean-Americans in some of Wong's poetry.

Conclusion

For elementary teachers who have limited time for social studies but must address the national social studies standards and promote their students' literacy development simultaneously, poetry is a valuable resource. Teachers can read and discuss poems during brief instructional periods, while still engaging children and helping them learn significant social studies content. From my decade of experience reading poetry aloud in my social studies methods classes, I concluded that it captures the attention of preservice teachers and motivates them to think about multicultural, social reconstructionist ideas. They are often surprised that poetry is a credible supplementary social studies resource. Most preservice students appreciate the engaging language, personal tone, and deep emotions found in poetry that are missing from social studies textbooks. Poems make abstract issues of cultural diversity and racial, economic, and gender injustices real. Poetry definitely offers rich learning opportunities. I hope that the poetry read in my methods class will inspire the preservice teachers to address those issues later in their own classrooms and challenge injustices in their daily lives.

Key words: poetry and cultural diversity, poetry and social justice, poetry and the social studies

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