

Social justice in the social studies classroom: Using culturally relevant pedagogy to promote civic engagement

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Abstract: This study was aimed to address a history of neglect of diverse, culturally relevant material in social studies content areas. This issue should be one important to all educators, but especially those concerned with social studies because approaching their fields using culturally relevant pedagogy can help all students, no matter their age, gender, or race, see themselves in the content. I addressed this current shortcoming by teaching a four consecutive months of lessons that included diverse, culturally relevant historical figures in an eighth grade U.S. history class. This intervention was intended to help students engage more deeply with social studies in and out of the classroom. The results indicated that students' engagement and academic performance improves when they are presented figures in social studies with whom they can relate to based on a shared age, gender, race, or culture. This study is intended to help social studies teachers recognize the value of including diverse figures, themes, and narratives in improving their students' engagement.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, it has become fairly common knowledge in the academic world that students' personal and cultural identification with academic content improves their classroom engagement. However, the extent to which that practice is being fully realized in public schools is not entirely clear. Despite this uncertainty, one topic that has definitely occupied educational theorists and researchers is approaching this practice as a way to engage culturally diverse students in traditionally homogenous and ethnocentric content areas. Some evidence suggests that social studies has historically been a discipline that ignores culturally and personally relevant pedagogy, and in doing so often prevents minority students from successfully engaging and identifying with the content (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

This problem needs to be studied because it has the potential to inhibit students' engagement with academic content. In my own personal experience, I have seen students shy away from social studies based on their disinterest in the content, which often proves to be far-removed themselves, even portraying their native cultures as being lesser-than. In fact, researchers have increasingly found that secondary students from wealthier, non-diverse backgrounds tend to identify with the content presented in social studies classrooms more often than racially diverse students (Rubin, 2007). Additionally, research seems to indicate that students of lower socioeconomic status and academic achievement are afforded fewer opportunities to practice civic engagement, in and out of the classroom (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008). It seems that students from non-White, non-middleclass backgrounds are far less likely to experience quality civic education in the social studies classroom (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008).

Other researchers have largely found that students who are taught as if the content is relevant to all ages, races, and cultures are more likely to engage with the content in and out of the classroom. Essentially, researchers have learned that when students are presented with individually and culturally relevant content they are more likely to more fully engage with it. Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that teachers should use students' individual and collective cultures as a means through which learning can occur. In a similar vein, Banks (2004) concluded, "We must nurture, support, and affirm the identities of students from marginalized cultural, ethnic, and language groups if we expect them to endorse national values, become cosmopolitans, and work to make their local communities, the nation, and the world more just and humane" (p. 297). Furthermore, Esposito and Swain (2009) suggest that engaging and relevant pedagogy should act as a conduit between the students' culture and their academic learning, and that it should integrate their various cultures into the curriculum. Using these findings, among many others, I found that culturally relevant teaching in the social studies classroom can improve students' engagement with the course content.

This study is intended to fill a gap in the existing literature on the subject by studying how students respond to a social studies curriculum that explicitly emphasizes cultural relevance. A general concern for *all* students' cultural identification with the content should guide social studies teachers' approach to their content. This study should inform practice by emphasizing the importance of students' individual and cultural backgrounds as valuable to their understanding of the content in and out of the classroom.

This study aims to address existing deficiencies in the study of culturally relevant civic education. Although educated guesses can be made about the importance of relevance to promoting engagement with social studies content by piecing together studies that have been done on issues that loosely relate to this larger theme, this study should illustrate the importance of emphasizing students' connection with the content to improve academic performance and likelihood of future civic engagement. A good deal of research has been done regarding those individual topics and how they interact with one another, but very little research has been done to show a correlation among the three. This study should illustrate the value of incorporating students' diverse personal and cultural experiences into the classroom by illustrating improvement in academic performance and engagement after the intervention has been implemented.

Social studies teachers, or any educators, who are looking to make their curriculum more accessible to their students will likely find this study useful. Teachers working with especially diverse students may find that the premise of this research resonates with them as a way to promote more involved interaction with the content. Finally, this research helps provide information to social studies teachers about practices to help engage their students and ultimately improve their understanding of the immense relevance of this content.

In the following section, I will discuss in-depth the previous research on this and related topics, and how that research will be applied to best support my own. The section will provide a greater understanding of how existing research on the topics of cultural relevance and civic education will work together to lay the groundwork for my research problem and questions.

Literature review

This section will address the existing literature on topics related to my course of study. The literature to come focuses on issues of culturally relevant pedagogy, civic education, and social justice, and are divided into sections based on those categories.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Culturally relevant pedagogy is defined as a way of teaching that uses students' cultures and lived experiences to promote learning within a classroom. Esposito and Swain (2009) provide a similar definition, arguing that culturally relevant pedagogy should serve two main purposes; it should utilize students' cultural experiences to increase their academic engagement and it should help students think critically about the inequities and injustices that exist in their schools, communities, and society in general. However, the means through which to practice culturally relevant pedagogy are far less concrete than the basic ideals it should promote. No matter the process, practicing culturally relevant pedagogy should ultimately help students become prepared to be responsible and considerate students of the world.

Though reluctant to prescribe how to practice culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (2006) writes that teachers who do it well recognize that there is an ever-present asymmetrical relationship between society and students of color or low socioeconomic status. Culturally relevant teachers should know that this symbolically racist system exists, but avoid sympathy for their students in favor of informed empathy (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As a characteristic of this recognition, teachers should help students reach a point at which they feel comfortable criticizing authority. Teachers should introduce their students to social inequities and present themselves as allies to the students for greater civic engagement and social justice, by seeing the inequity all around them, even in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995b; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Einfeld and Collins (2008) argue that culturally relevant pedagogy and civic education have an opportunity to work together to promote multicultural competence.

In this sense, culturally relevant pedagogy should be viewed as a means to help students become more interconnected and interdependent because all students have a stake in being able to better understand one another. Culturally relevant pedagogy is for everyone – not just the “others.” The intention of multicultural education is not to divide anyone along cultural lines, rather it is to unify and diversify previously segregated groups. In fact, common schools were born of this intention to create a well-educated, united American citizenry (Campbell, 2007). Under this same umbrella, culturally relevant pedagogy should provide students with knowledge that will help them become good citizens, concerned for other members of society (Banks, 1993).

The beauty of culture is that it can act as a bridge between home and society and can help students better understand and care for one another. “[Culturally relevant pedagogy] is a movement designed to empower all students to become knowledgeable, caring, and active citizens in a deeply troubled and ethnically polarized nation and world” (Banks, 1993, p. 23).

One of the most important intentions of culturally relevant pedagogy is that students should be able to recognize and analyze the fact that certain groups have privilege

over others. White students, especially, should be helped to acknowledge their privilege over other groups and understand that the existence of such perceived superiority requires they use that privilege to help improve the situation of others (Jay, 2008). Culturally relevant pedagogy should help students become aware of the inequity that surrounds them, no matter their race or culture, and present them with the necessary tools to change such systemic disparities. However, the point remains that “you can’t have a dialogue across differences when those differences remain largely invisible to you” (Jay, 2008, p. 268).

Teachers practicing culturally relevant pedagogy should help their students link economic disparities to their basic sources – race, class, and gender. Students should use the skills they learn through culturally relevant pedagogy to understand their social statuses. Essentially, utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy should help students see the social and cultural inequities that exist in society, while also presenting them with the tools to fight those inequities (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Several theorists have come up with excellent solutions for bridging this gap in cultural knowledge. Ladson-Billings (1995a) argues that teachers have historically attempted “to insert culture into the education, instead of inserting education into the culture” (p. 159). This statement seems simple on the surface, but in fact presents profound insight into what culturally relevant pedagogy should look like to its students. Culturally relevant pedagogy is committed to preparing students for eventual citizenship by asking them to think critically about the society in which they live (Ladson-Billings, 1995a).

Culturally responsive teaching exists as a facet of this ideal by asking teachers to get to their students’ cultural ideals and using them as a way to scaffold the content teachers present to their students (Gay, 2002). The general idea is that teachers can use all of their students’ lived experiences to help them become more globally aware. Ladson-Billings (1995b) interviewed teachers about their thoughts on culturally relevant pedagogy and found that they largely used it as a tool to achieve their goal of preparing students to recognize inherent inequities in society and fight for more democracy and social justice. Research on this topic consistently finds that the best way to prepare students to practice civic engagement and fight for social justice is to allow them a platform from which they can discuss and understand their ideals about equality early on.

As a case study of this type of civically-minded teaching, Milner (2011) studied a well-liked White science teacher in charge of a diverse urban classroom. Milner found that the teacher’s success with the students rested largely in the fact that he used the students’ cultural ideas to improve their engagement and ultimately maximize their learning opportunities. In short, the science teacher was deemed so successful because he built cultural congruence with his students and constantly demonstrated concern for being culturally competent. The teacher became an expert at demonstrating his recognition of each students’ social capital and, in doing so, helped empower and unite his students.

However, a key facet of culturally relevant pedagogy is remembering that some students of historically segregated groups, especially Black students, must navigate society knowing multiple views of their personal and collective cultures exists. This reality often means they are prejudged based on their race (Seidl, 2007). DuBois (1903) called such a perception of multiple views of one’s race a double consciousness. Teachers must remember that their minority students, no matter how young, are navigating society, and

even their classrooms, with the weight of that consideration on their shoulders, whether they are aware of it or not. Teachers should make their classes a safe space to discuss race and not feel the need to pretend that these biases and prejudices do not exist (Seidl, 2007).

Unfortunately, racially diverse classrooms and schools tend to present their students with fewer opportunities for discussion of social and political issues, ultimately correlating to the students' lowered interest in civic engagement and social justice issues (Campbell, 2007). Whereas classrooms and schools that promote political discussions, even broaching controversial and sensitive issues, see greater success for the students in their application of the content in and out of the classroom. In fact, a study by the Carnegie Corporation and CIRCLE, or The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, (2003) finds that when students are able to discuss issues important to contemporary society they tend to think critically about political issues and be more interested in civic engagement and social justice outside of school. In support of this idea, Campbell (2007) argues that discussion is one of the key factors in using culturally relevant pedagogy to effectively teach civic education. It stands to reason that students could be exponentially more involved students and future citizens if only they were given a forum to discuss their ideas and concerns.

“Culturally relevant pedagogy and social justice pedagogy both aim to combat negative messages by instilling in students cultural pride and critical consciousness. Empowered by positive messages about themselves and their heritage, students are able to exceed academic expectations and overcome the obstacles of social injustice placed before them. Teachers who promote the academic and social development of their students through culturally relevant and socially just pedagogies prepare them to make a tremendous impact on their communities and the world.” (Esposito & Swain, 2009, p. 46)

Civic Education

Civic education is often viewed simply as the practice of teaching the tenets of American democratic society, however, for the purposes of this paper, I will take on a much more modern and diverse view of the topic. Within the last fifty years groups marginalized on the basis of their race, class, or sex have begun to push for inclusion of their cultures in American society, including civic education (Banks, 2008). For too long these minority groups have been viewed as second class citizens and unworthy of inclusion in our democratic society, being explicitly and implicitly excluded. People living within the United States should be able to view themselves as American citizens, not as just occupying an address here.

In order to realize the goal of equitable treatment of all groups within a truly democratic society students must grow up recognizing and supporting their interconnectedness with their peers. The ultimate goal of this recognition of interdependency is to help students realize that many societal and governmental practices only exist to benefit a select few citizens. However, civic education in schools has long served to only teach the perspectives of those select few. A more modern, inclusive curriculum of civic education should help students realize that no matter the governmental and societal norms every person has an inherent responsibility to care for others (Banks, 2008).

Rather unsurprisingly, civic education, when done right, is rooted in many of the same principles as culturally relevant pedagogy. Comprehensive civic education should provide its students with tools to help them identify systemic inequality and symbolic racism, classism, and sexism that exist within even the most “civilized” societies (Banks, 2008). Furthermore, civic education should help students realize ways to challenge these inequalities.

As a way to promote these goals civic education should help build positive relationships among all students within a classroom (Banks, 2008). Unfortunately, researchers have found that the most diverse classrooms are often the ones that suffer the lowest levels of political discussions (Campbell, 2007). Although some have wrongfully argued that this negative correlation is based in the students’ incapability to engage in such discussions, research has found that it is only missed opportunities to educate the students on these topics that lead to a lack of engagement with such topics (Campbell, 2007). When teachers take the time and opportunities to discuss social and governmental issues with their students the students are more likely to demonstrate improved interest in politics, critical analysis, and discussion of difficult topics (Campbell, 2007). Simple exposure to social inequities does not prompt a concern for students in social justice; teachers must help guide their students in an association between the two concepts (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

Civic education should help students move past minimal citizenship and toward active civic engagement in society that means more than just voting in elections and includes personal research or soul-searching regarding social and political issues (Banks, 2008). Civic education should provide students with a degree of multicultural competence and understanding of the major disparities that exist between those cultures (Einfeld & Collins, 2008).

It is also important to recognize that a civic education disparity exists in many places across the country between students of different races, socioeconomic statuses, and academic tracks. One study on the topic found that in a high school of over 2,000 students civic engagement opportunities were disproportionately offered to students who had a higher socioeconomic status, were college-bound, and White over students who were not (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). The authors of this study use their findings and those of other researchers to argue, “Equal access to high school civic learning opportunities becomes more pressing when we consider that low-income citizens, those who are less educated, and citizens of color are under-represented in the political process” (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008, p. 3). The basic point therein is that students who are most underrepresented in American democratic society are the ones continuously short-changed in civic education opportunities. This fact portrays the correlation that exists between civic education and ultimate civic engagement.

In the same vein, it is important to teach White students about the privileged perspective they often hold in looking at other cultures and races; all students should be helped to see the valuable and sometimes shared perspectives they are exposed to in a diverse setting (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). With this understanding should come the recognition that White students should use their place of privilege to understand and work against the disparities that exist between themselves and other races (Jay, 2008). Teachers should also emphasize that these concerns are not ones that exist strictly in the world outside of school, but that they are generally manifested in schools and classrooms as well.

Civically minded educators can use this opportunity to recognize the sociopolitical concerns that their students hold and come up with ways to best teach their diverse group of students. When diverse cultures are not appealed to in civic education, students can be socially and politically “othered” and prevented from being civically engaged (Banks, 2004). Properly practicing civic education means recognizing that classrooms are microsystems of larger social systems, complete with their own diverse cultural concerns and political climates (Harwood, 1992).

Furthermore, this recognition can help teachers promoting civic engagement to inspire a long-term concern for civic engagement within their students. Comprehensive civic education provides teachers with a variety of opportunities to illustrate for the students the connection between civic education and social equality. Research on first-year college students has found that there is a correlation between civic education and the desire to learn about and seek social justice (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). Essentially, diversity and democracy are congenial when properly addressed by teachers of civic education (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004).

Social Justice

The concern for social justice is one that few people reach without having been exposed to quality civic education. Active citizens of a democratic society should approach their roles as members of a democratic society with concern for all the other members of it, no matter their race, religion, culture, class or sex. Social justice means a concern for equitable circumstances for all. The idea of social justice literacy means that people should be reflective, ethical, and active in their societies in an effort to promote equality among all citizens (Banks, 2004). Furthermore, students should be taught to recognize the oppression and social inequality that exists in society and be provided with the tools to seek social justice in those instances (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004).

Teachers should also impress upon their students the necessary steps that must be taken prior to serious activism for social justice. First, it is difficult to seek social justice without an appropriate level of multicultural literacy, or an understanding of groups that you do not identify with yourself; one cannot subscribe to ignorance about these groups just because he or she is not directly exposed to them (Banks, 2004).

Several recommended ways of teaching social justice are opportunities for reflection, written and oral, discussing perspectives of self and others, applying knowledge outside of the classroom (i.e. volunteering), interaction with diverse people and out of school, collaboration and cooperation with peers, and whole group discussions about diversity (Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007). Although it may be initially disconcerting, it is good for students to experience disequilibrium in social experiences so they may better understand what marginalized social groups feel and why social justice is such a worthy cause.

In order to effectively seek social justice, students should deepen their cultural awareness and competence and place themselves in situations in which they have an opportunity to demonstrate their understanding of these concepts (Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007). “We must nurture, support, and affirm the identities of students from marginalized cultural, ethnic, and language groups if we expect them to endorse national values, become cosmopolitans, and work to make their local communities, the nation, and the world more just and humane” (Banks, 2004, p. 297). In teaching social justice, teachers should help

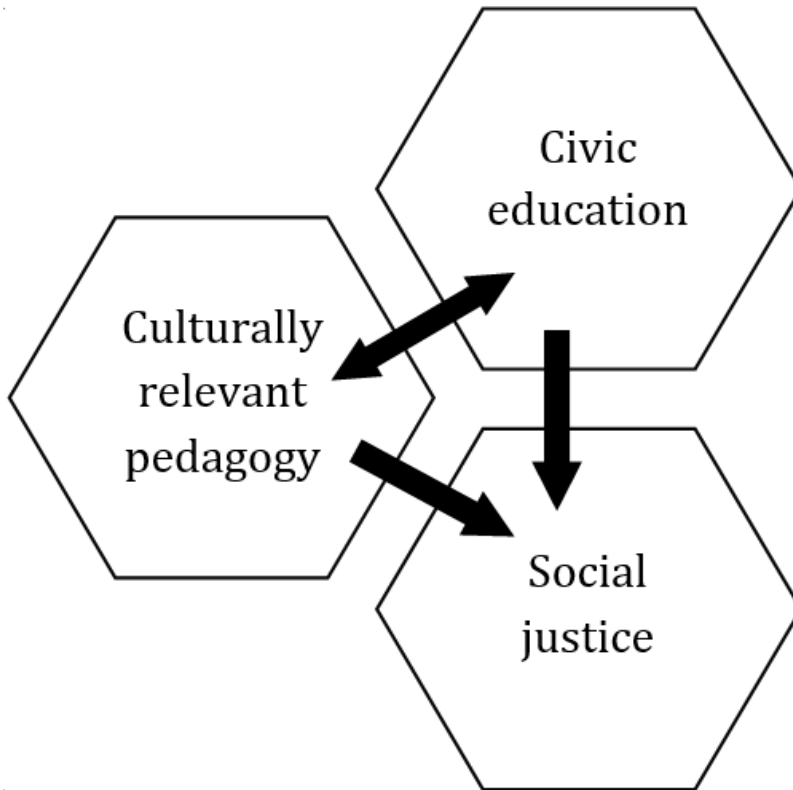
their students become more acutely aware of social injustices and provide them with the necessary tools to identify social injustices (Einfeld & Collins, 2008). Education that effectively promotes social justice should teach its students about prejudice, manifestations of discrimination, their role in society, and how they can be used to eliminate inequality and improve society as a whole (Mayhew & Fernandez, 2007). All of these understandings should work toward improving students' sense of self-efficacy in effecting social justice. In this respect, it is important that teachers encouraging social justice also remind their students that schools are smaller sections of a larger society and, as such, the systemic inequities that exist in communities and the nation as a whole also exists there (Esposito & Swain, 2009).

Second, Banks (2004) argues that, "When we teach students how to critique the injustice in the world, we should help them to formulate possibilities for action to change the world to make it more democratic and just" (p. 291). A key facet of social justice is a sense of personal agency and social responsibility developed within students, usually through comprehensive civic education (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). Esposito & Swain (2009) found that teaching for social justice includes teaching critical thinking practices, empowering students to see their place in society and act to effect change, and supporting students' academic achievement. Teaching students to think critically also helps them develop a greater sense of personal agency (Esposito & Swain, 2009).

Finally, students should be taught that social justice cannot be achieved without action on the part of people who have the capacity to take it; it is not enough to demonstrate charity for disparaged groups; active citizens must also commit to social action (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). Social justice for marginalized groups cannot be achieved if privileged groups only demonstrate concern for them in the forms of charity and sympathy. Social justice can only be achieved when privileged groups recognize their disproportionate advantage and use it to advocate for those whose voices are unjustly and systemically oppressed.

The principles of culturally relevant pedagogy and civic education complement one another well and have to work together to foster social justice by creating active citizens. Please see the following chart (Figure A) for a visual representation of the three areas of focus in this section:

Figure A
Areas of focus flowchart



The general goal of this study is to prove that students learn best when they can see themselves in the content they are being presented, and will consequently carry the lessons of what they learn with them beyond the classroom walls. To best meet these goals I employed the following research questions:

- Does including minority or underrepresented figures in everyday social studies lessons improve students' engagement with the content?
- Does utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in the social studies classroom improve students' sense of agency in civic engagement, as well as the likelihood they will be civically active citizens?

I have used these research questions to guide my understanding of what exactly culturally relevant civic engagement looks like in the social studies classroom. Furthermore, these questions have helped shape how I approach students' current and future engagement with key principles of social studies education.

Given all of this information, this project seeks to elaborate on the research that has previously been done on the topic of culturally relevant pedagogy in the social studies

classroom. The following section details the intervention I implemented as a part of my research that is aimed at incorporating diverse experiences and perspectives in the social studies. My research questions, as stated above, guided my action as well as the interventions I employed.

Intervention

This section details the intervention and corresponding plans I carried out resolve the issue of exclusionary practices in the social studies classroom. The intervention took place in an eighth grade classroom; this classroom sees six classes of eighth grade U.S. history daily, for a total of 145 students.

The intervention included three major components – an initial survey, a pre-assessment, and a post-assessment. The initial survey was aimed at gauging students' opinions of and engagement with social studies classes, specifically their current U.S. history class (see Appendix A); the survey was used as a baseline to determine students' feelings about social studies prior to my implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Next, the pre-assessment was issued as a means to determine students' understanding of the relevance of social studies concepts to their individual lives and experiences (see Appendix B). The pre-assessment asked students to answer open-ended questions, rate certain areas of the content using a Likert scale, and analyze why they do or do not relate to the figures, events, and themes presented in their U.S. history class. The pre-assessment also included me recording the students' grades prior to the intervention.

Using what the students wrote on their initial surveys and pre-assessments, as well as the information I recorded myself for the latter, I created a series of lessons that featured historical figures and events with whom the students could identify based on factors like their ages, genders, races, and cultures. These lessons were implemented continuously from January through May of the 2014-2015 school year, and were shaped by the students' responses on the initial survey and pre-assessment, with the central goal of presenting the students with content that was relatable to them. The content presented in the unit was aimed at increasing student engagement with social studies content in and out of the classroom. These every day lessons were intended to help students see themselves in the content.

Finally, the post-assessment was issued following the lessons being taught. The post-assessment consisted of the same tools as the pre-assessment (see Appendix B). Again, student responses were coded and used to determine if their reactions to and engagement with the intervention were favorable.

These major components were used in an effort to determine if student engagement with social studies concepts improved when they are presented with content that is relatable to them. Student responses to the tools helped determine if their general performance and engagement were likewise improved by seeing figures presented in the content with whom they could identify, based on things like age, gender, and race.

Methods

To determine if my intervention was successful, I used several different strategies, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Methodological approach

This study was carried out using largely qualitative methods. In this study I analyzed my students’ individual and group engagement with the content before and after the intervention. To facilitate this research I implemented qualitative methods that analyzed the students’ academic performance prior to and following the intervention. These methods were the best to assess the intervention because they allowed me to look at students’ engagement with the content, rather than strictly statistical data regarding their grades. Using qualitative methods allowed me to determine if students’ engagement improved when I presented them with content that more closely aligned with their personal and cultural experiences.

Data collection

Using the methods described above I employed several different instruments that prompted my students to analyze the content they were presented in class, as well as their interest in and engagement with that content.

As a basic introduction to the intervention I had my students take a survey to see what type of figures and topics they would like to see incorporated in the intervention. That survey is in Appendix A of this paper.

This survey helped me better understand what my students think about the course and its content before I began the intervention. Furthermore, these questions were designed to all get at the same point of relevance, but allowed me to better triangulate student responses on the topic.

Next, to determine if my intervention improved students’ interest in and engagement with the content I conducted a more comprehensive assessment of students’ overall relationship with the content. This assessment consisted of some quantitative measures; I examined students’ average grades to determine if their grades improved when presented with more personally relevant content. However, the assessment was mostly qualitative, relying on student responses to questions on relevance, based on race, gender, age, and culture.

Table 1:
Research questions and data sources

	Initial Survey	Pre-assessment	Post-assessment
Does including minority or underrepresented figures in everyday social studies lessons improve students’ engagement with the content?	✓	✓	✓
Does utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in the social studies classroom improve students’ sense of agency in civic engagement?			✓

Data analysis

The quantitative and qualitative data sets were analyzed in multiple ways. I employed coding as a means to categorize student responses on the initial survey and pre- and post-assessments. The qualitative data yielded by the survey was coded so student

responses, ideas, and experiences can be categorized accordingly. The data from this survey helped me determine how I approached my intervention and how I gauged students' opinion of the content I presented.

The qualitative data yielded from both assessments was also coded, whereas the quantitative data from the assessments was compiled into a chart to determine if the intervention had a positive impact on the students' academic performance. This portion of research was carried out using descriptive statistical analysis. I analyzed five responses from each of the six class periods of qualitative data from the pre- and post-assessments to determine if students felt themselves becoming more interested and engaged throughout the intervention.

Validity concerns

I attended to validity concerns in this study by triangulating student responses wherever possible. The initial survey was designed to provide me with a baseline understanding of how the students related to the content prior to the intervention. Furthermore, I debriefed with my mentor teacher periodically to ensure that the intervention was indeed improving student engagement and not inhibiting it in any way. I asked my mentor teacher to ensure that I was not neglecting any aspects of the intervention or the content I needed to teach. Finally, I took my own biases into account by asking another student teaching intern to look over my coding before and after the intervention to ensure that I correctly analyzed student responses and classroom engagement.

The following section will detail the findings from this study and how I considered issues of validity in interpreting the data.

Findings and interpretations

In this section I will explain the data from the study and my interpretations of it. This section is organized into subsections based on the research questions I used to guide this study. In each subsection I will detail which instrument(s) correlated to each research question, what the findings from each respective were, and my interpretations of those findings.

Does including minority or underrepresented figures in everyday social studies lessons improve students' engagement with the content?

All three instruments used in this research were aimed at determining if students felt engaged by their current social studies class and, if they did, how they felt it was engaging them. Specifically, the initial survey was used to glean the students' opinions of their class and how they thought it could be improved. The initial survey yielded only qualitative data, which I coded and used to analyze overall patterns that emerged.

The first question of the survey simply asked the students if they liked their U.S. history class, and to explain why or why not. The thirty student responses indicated an overall pattern of disinterest in their social studies class; however, the reasons behind their opinions of the class were diverse. While more students stated they enjoyed the class than those who did not, it was clear from their supporting statements that nearly all of them listed aspects of the class they did not enjoy. For example, one student responded that her class was okay, but went on to say she often found herself "unengaged and wishing

different methods were used.” Another student said she liked the class because “it’s one of the easier subjects, but... it can get boring.” Only one student said they liked the class because “learning about history is fun.” Another pattern that emerged in the responses to this question was in the reasons why students claimed they did not like the class. Many students felt the content was uninteresting, or that the class itself was boring, one student even wrote that there was “no fun at any time in this class.”

These two patterns indicate that students, even those who said they liked the class, believed there was room for improvement. These data illustrate the array of differing opinions on this class and the content area itself and provides insight into the reasoning behind those views. Furthermore, the student responses to this item indicate that many students do not feel connected to the content, even if they enjoy it, because it feels too far removed from them and does not seem to have any bearing on their lives in contemporary society. My interpretation of these data led me to believe that the students had long been contemplating what they liked or disliked about social studies and were eager to express their opinions.

The third question asked students if they felt more engaged in the class when they felt they could relate to the topics presented. The trend of these data was that students felt more engaged when they could somehow see themselves in the content. Many students wrote that the content was easier to understand, remember, and connect to real-life experiences when they felt they could relate to it on a personal level. One student wrote, “When I can relate to the topic of people presented in class I feel like I can learn better and understand.” This opinion is representative of the majority of the responses. However, some students even hit directly on the premise of this study with their responses; one student wrote, “Yes, because it gets me more engaged and makes me want to change our country now.” Both types of responses are indicative of a larger pattern of students’ willingness to improve their engagement with social studies.

Nearly every student wrote that they felt more engaged in class when they could relate to the topics presented. Those few students who disagreed wrote that relating to topics presented in class did not influence their levels of engagement or interest in the class. This overall pattern indicates that students would feel more engaged by the class if they could see themselves in the content, something research on this topic overwhelmingly backs up (Banks, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1995b). The pattern of this set of data is crucial to the intervention and the study as a whole because it echoes findings discussed in the literature review of this paper. The responses to this item indicate that students’ ability to relate to the content correlates to their classroom engagement. Additionally, student responses suggest they understand why they are more engaged when they relate to the subjects studied in class.

In a similar vein, the fifth question on the initial survey asked students if they felt the class devoted enough time to people with whom they could relate. The overall pattern of these data indicated the majority of students did not think their U.S. history class studied enough diverse figures with whom they could relate. Furthermore, many students did not believe the figures they studied were at all diverse. In one instance, a student responded, “No, we really only learn about presidents.” Another student wrote she learned about the same adult, White males in her social studies classes every year; other students indicated there were not enough young people or women represented in their U.S. history class

content. These students were many of the same who wrote they did not feel engaged by their U.S. history class.

These data show that the eighth grade U.S. history curriculum does not lend itself to diverse or culturally relevant pedagogy. The majority of students did not feel that the content taught in their U.S. history class was diverse enough, but felt that they were more engaged when they were presented with diverse figures with whom they were more likely to relate. This set of data reveals that students are being alienated from the content because they are not being shown the individual or cultural relevance it.

In order to effectively engage students I utilized student responses to items two, four, six, seven, and eight on the initial survey (Appendix A) to determine what types of topics and activities I should include in my intervention to increase the chances the students would find someone to relate to in the content. For example, some of the most common responses from that set of qualitative data indicated students were more likely to relate to people based on their age, gender, race, personality, or experiences.

Overall, the data suggest a number of doors remain closed for young, diverse social studies students. The data gathered from the initial survey indicate that students do not feel engaged by their current U.S. history class, or social studies in general, but clearly see the barriers preventing a deeper engagement with or relationship to the content. Given the responses to these questions, culturally relevant pedagogy seems the perfect solution to improving student engagement in class and their overall relationship with the content.

The pre- and post-assessments also answered this research question and yielded similar quantitative and qualitative data from the beginning and end of the intervention. The quantitative data gathered from the eight Likert-type scales on the pre-assessment indicate that students felt largely indifferent to their social studies class and felt generally unengaged by the class. However, a t-test run with those responses and responses to the same scales on the post-test revealed there was a statistically significant increase in the students' engagement in and overall enjoyment of class (see Table 2).

Table 2:
Quantitative data yielded by t-test of Likert-type scales

	Pre-assessment Mean	Post-assessment Mean	T-Test
Item 1: I find my U.S. history class engaging.	3.26966	3.71910	0.00026
Item 2: I enjoy my U.S. history class.	3.30337	3.60674	0.00744

A t-test was also run on items seven and eight of the pre-assessment, but did not reveal any statistically significant data. However, items one and two provided invaluable information about the intervention and student responses to it. Furthermore, a t-test run on the students' grades as part of the pre- and post-assessments showed a statistically significant improvement in their academic performance as a result of the intervention (see Table 3).

Table 3:
Student grades prior to and following the intervention

	Pre-assessment Mean	Post-assessment Mean	T-Test
Average grade	82.48	85.32	0.00981

Similarly, the qualitative data from the pre- and post-assessments also indicates students felt the intervention provided them with more diverse figures across a variety of categories. On the two qualitative items on the pre-assessment over half the students argued diverse figures were not studied enough in their U.S. history class and that they could not relate to the people presented in class. Typical responses to the first item about the level of diversity in the topics they studied included concerns that not enough different people of different genders, ages, or races were represented. In a spirited response one student wrote, “We mostly learn about Caucasian males. When there are many White and Black females, along with Black males who have impacted us significantly. Like honestly I have learned about Thomas Jefferson since fifth grade. I don’t care about him anymore. What about everybody else!?!?” This quote directly addresses the overall trend of culturally exclusive social studies I tried to address throughout the intervention, as many of this student’s classmates expressed similar thoughts on their pre-assessments, albeit less emotionally. However, the overall tone of the responses improved from the pre- to post-assessment.

On the same items on the post-assessment students generally indicated that their relationship with the class’s content had improved after the intervention. Most students now wrote that their U.S. history class studied a wide range of diverse figures, the only major complaint being that not enough people their age were studied in class. However, the students also revealed that they now felt they were more likely to relate with the figures presented in class if they shared traits like their age, gender, or race. For example, one student who had responded negatively about the number of diverse figures on the pre-assessment wrote that the class now studied a wide variety of figures, adding, “History really seems more interesting when I can relate to someone.” This quote represents the overall pattern of student responses on the post-assessment by illustrating the change in opinion many students experienced during the intervention.

Overall, this change in student responses suggests many students who did not previously feel they could relate to historical figures based on those grounds now felt the opposite. The data indicate students felt more diverse figures were studied in class during the intervention and the students were more able to relate themselves to those figures following the intervention. Furthermore, these data also suggest that students recognized their ability to relate with the diverse figures presented in class based on things like gender and race, and were then eager to relate to figures based on their age.

These data support the student responses on the initial survey in which the students said they felt more interested and engaged when they could see their own individual or cultural experiences somehow reflected in the content. The data support previous research on this topics and gives credence to the students’ claims. Additionally, it reveals students’ enjoyment of class increased along with their engagement and their class

averages after being taught using culturally relevant pedagogy, suggesting a correlation between the three. It is clear that when students are presented with diverse topics with which they can identify, their engagement in class improves significantly. The quantitative data found in this study suggest that students perform better to the content of their U.S. history class when they can relate to the topics presented.

Does utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in the social studies classroom improve students' sense of agency in civic engagement?

Only the post-assessment was aimed at determining if students felt they could apply what they learned outside of class. None of the items on the assessment asked students specifically if they felt they were more likely to be civically engaged because they had not yet been exposed to that term. However, the quantitative and qualitative data gathered from this instrument were intended to determine if students felt they were engaged in class, could relate to the content, and could apply what they had learned to their life outside of school.

In order to determine the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy on teaching students the value of civic engagement, or applying what they learned in social studies to their life outside school, I ran a t-test. The t-test compared data from scales one, seven, and eight on the pre- and post-assessment. Item one, although not obviously related to this research question, determined if students felt engaged by their social studies class. The t-test indicated there was a statistically significant improvement in student engagement from pre- to post- assessment (see Table 4).

Table 4:
Quantitative data yielded by t-test of Likert-type scales

	Pre-assessment Mean	Post-assessment Mean	T-Test
Item 1: I find my U.S. history class engaging.	3.26966	3.71910	0.00026
Item 7: I think my U.S. history class is more engaging when I can relate to the people and topics we study.	3.50561	3.53932	0.38782
Item 8: I think I can apply what I have learned about people, events, and themes in my U.S. history to my life outside of school.	3.31460	3.37078	0.34020

According to research, students are more likely to apply what they learn in class to their lives outside of school if they are actively engaged. Furthermore, the data yielded by this scale help strengthen the credibility of the qualitative data generated by the latter half

of this instrument. In connection with the qualitative data, these data suggest students who are engaged in class are more likely to recognize the connections between the course content and their lives outside of school.

Items seven and eight, aimed at determining the student relationships to the topics we studied and if students thought they could apply what they learned outside of school respectively, did not yield any significant data on the t-test. Although there was an improvement on each scale from pre- to post- assessment, the improvement was not statistically significant. Despite not being statistically significant, this set of data indicates students were not provided with enough examples of how they could apply what they learn as students to their lives as citizens. The lack of significant data indicates I did not provide enough explicit instruction on the connections between being a student and being a citizen. Although culturally relevant pedagogy helps bridge the gap between those two concepts, it does not fill it entirely. Culturally relevant pedagogy inherently provides an element of civic education, however, the responses to these scales indicate students need more explicit instruction on the topic to recognize the relevance.

The qualitative data gathered from this instrument suggest most students felt there were more diverse figures with whom they could relate in the course content. Although this does not indicate students will be more civically active, it echoes previous research on the topic by suggesting students who develop a relationship to the topics will engage with it on a deeper level. These data together suggest students are more receptive to real-world applications of the content when they can see a personal relationship to the content.

Neither the quantitative or qualitative data provided a definitive answer to this research question. However, I believe the information gleaned about culturally relevant pedagogy improving in-class engagement can help fill the gaps about how teachers can translate that into civic engagement. These data indicate an overall pattern that suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy should be combined with more explicit civic education to increase students' agency in civic engagement.

Discussion of results

The results of this study provided information that both echoes and extends previous research on the topic of culturally relevant pedagogy and engagement. The data gathered from the three instruments align with the research cited in the literature review. Additionally, the interpretations of the data are similar to those made by other theorists regarding the link between culturally relevant pedagogy and civic education.

The theoretical framework of culturally relevant pedagogy guided the entirety of this study and lent itself to the U.S. history classroom in which I taught. Given the statistically significant data gleaned from the initial survey and the pre- and post-assessments, it is clear that students' overall relationship with their social studies class improved. These findings clearly echo those of Ladson-Billings (1995b) and Milner (2011). However, the findings of this study go a step further in revealing that when students have a say in the diverse figures studied in their class, they seem to feel greater interest in and engagement with the topic. The findings of this study extend those by other proponents of culturally relevant pedagogy in that they illustrate students' actual and perceived academic successes. The intervention featured in this study reveals that classroom engagement can be promoted through a variety of means. Furthermore, the

data uncovered in this study indicate students are more receptive to the content, and the class as a whole, when they feel it is personally relevant to them. The findings of this study affirm the basic tenets of culturally relevant pedagogy and emphasize its success when implemented in a social studies class.

I would speculate that students' engagement and academic performance would improve in any similar instance where they are provided an opportunity to personally relate to the content. The most striking finding from this study was how drastically students' perception of their own engagement improved when culturally relevant pedagogy was employed. Given the other research analyzed in the literature review, I believe this success in student engagement is the lynchpin between success within the classroom and an application of knowledge and skills outside the classroom. Engagement seems to be an indicator of academic success for students and a recognition of the transferability of that success to their lives as citizens.

Conclusion

The lack of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies curricula is a missed opportunity to engage students of diverse backgrounds as both students and citizens. In order to better understand this disparity, I looked at the inclusion of diverse figures and promoting civic engagement using culturally relevant pedagogy in the social studies class. Through my research I learned that culturally relevant pedagogy improves students' engagement with the content, as well as their academic performance. Although I did not find any significant improvements in students' tendency toward civic engagement after the intervention, the correlation between classroom engagement and civic engagement is evident. Given the findings of other research and the qualitative data gathered from this study, further investigation should be made into the benefits of using culturally relevant pedagogy to create active citizens.

Limitations

There were several limitations in conducting this research. First, the students experienced different learning environments prior to the intervention and during it. My mentor teacher and I had very different styles of teaching and teaching pedagogies. Furthermore, I only graded about half of the student work prior to the intervention, whereas I graded all of it during the intervention. Therefore, the students' levels of engagement or academic performance may have changed because of my different teaching or grading styles, not because of the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy.

The second limitation is that students were not as prepared to learn about or embrace the concept of civic engagement as I had imagined. The students were receptive to the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy and were eager to make suggestions of who they wanted to learn more about in their class, but they could not make the abstract connection between this and civic engagement. During the intervention I learned that eighth grade students need much more explicit instruction to recognize the merits of civic engagement, let alone its connection to the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy. Essentially, the study ended up focusing more on what was happening in the classroom than how the students could relate it to their lives outside of class because that was most practical for these circumstances.

The limitations of this study only ended up illustrating the direct correlation between student engagement and employing culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. In conclusion, the limitations were slight and ended up helping focus the scope of this study.

Implications

The implications of this study could potentially be wide-reaching, influencing practice and future research. The topic of culturally relevant pedagogy is one that deserves to be paid more attention by teachers and administrators, as does the issue of civic education.

This study could guide practice by offering teachers, specifically those of social studies, a way to appeal to a diverse audience, while improving their students' engagement and academic performance. I would recommend any social studies teacher facing the problem of disengaged or disinterested students to think about adopting culturally relevant pedagogy. By following the intervention presented in this study, teachers could allow their students to offer information about what groups of people they connect to best, as well as what groups of people they think deserve more attention in their class. Culturally relevant pedagogy, especially with democratic elements, should be a means to the end of creating an inclusive, engaging social studies classroom.

Additionally, future research on the topic of student engagement and its relationship between culturally relevant pedagogy and civic engagement could add to the findings of this study. Further research should be done, not only to test the validity of this study, but to determine if culturally relevant pedagogy and explicit civic education could be employed together to create students who recognize the value of being active advocates and citizens. Given the qualitative data produced by this study and previous research on the topic, there seems to be enough of a connection between engaged students growing into engaged citizens that more research should be done to determine if culturally relevant pedagogy can facilitate that transition.

The implications of this research are broad as long as others recognize their roles in the push for relevance and inclusivity in social studies classes. This research can be used to create classrooms focused on the overall goal of social justice or can help guide research that will promote the development of civic education to inherently include culturally relevant pedagogy. In short, this study should help students, teachers, and administrators more readily reap the benefits of socially-aware students and citizens.

The findings of this study indicate that students are more responsive to social studies when they are presented with diverse figures with whom they can somehow relate. Although I did not find a direct link between the use of culturally relevant pedagogy and an increase in civic-mindedness, more research should be done to determine if one can help foster the other. Despite the varied findings of this study, however, the improvement in student engagement and academic success was significant; this improvement could promote academic and civic growth for students. As a whole, this study should be used to help foster inclusive classroom environments that create engaged students. This research may also help students recognize their invaluable roles as citizens who can and should use their knowledge of social studies to promote social justice.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Initial Survey

1. Do you like your U.S. history class? Please explain why or why not.
2. What part of this class do you find most interesting? Please explain.
3. Do you feel like you are more interested in people and topics presented in class when you can relate to them? Please explain.
4. What characteristics help you relate to people and topics presented in the class? Please explain.
5. Do you think your U.S. history class studies enough people and topics you can relate to or identify with? Why or why not?
6. How can I teach the class's content so you can better relate to it?
7. Do you feel like you can apply the things you learn in this class to your life outside of school? Please explain.
8. If you could choose to include a certain group of people with whom you could personally relate in your U.S. history class content, who would you want to include? For example, would you want people included of the same age, gender, race, or culture as yourself? You may choose as many of those groups as you want, but you must explain your choices.

Appendix B

Pre- and Post-Assessment

1. I will record the students' average grades.
2. The students will rate several statements on a Likert-type scale from 1-5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. The statements are as follows
 - a. I find my U.S. history class engaging.
 - b. I enjoy my U.S. history class.
 - c. I am more interested in the people I study in my U.S. history class when I feel like I have something in common with them (i.e. age, gender, race, etc.).
 - d. I feel like I relate better to people I study in my U.S. history class when they are about the same age as me.
 - e. I feel like I relate better to people I study in my U.S. history class when they are of the same gender as me.
 - f. I feel like I relate better to people I study in my U.S. history class when they are of the same race as me.
 - g. I think my U.S. history class is more engaging when I can relate to the people and topics we study.
 - h. I think I can apply what I have learned about people, events, and themes in my U.S. history to my life outside of school.
3. The students will be asked to answer the following open-ended questions:
 - a. Do you feel like people of diverse ages, genders, and races are studied enough in your U.S. history class? Please explain your answer.
 - b. Do you feel like you can relate to the people you study in your U.S. history class based on things like their age, gender, or race? Why or why not? Please explain your answer.
 - c. Do you think you can do things similar to the people you have studied in your U.S. history class?
 - d. Do you feel like you can apply what you have learned in your U.S. history class to your life outside of school? Please explain. For example, using the example of a historical figure studied in class, what could you do to influence change in society?