

## **Educating Students for Change**

On January 27, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a somber speech at the Dinkier Plaza Hotel in Atlanta, Georgia, in which he criticized society for its inaction and failure to support the Civil Rights Movement. In his address, Dr. King lamented, “history will have to record that the greatest tragedy of this period of social transition was not the strident clamor of the bad people, but the appalling silence of the good people.”

As an educator, I believe that I am in a unique position to help my students understand the importance of being a bold, compassionate, and engaged citizen. With this in mind, I will strive to promote and instill respect, integrity, and tolerance for others.

### **The Importance of Social Studies**

The definition of social studies is quite wide and includes geography, culture, politics, religion, economics, psychology, movements, interactions, individuals, institutions, and of course, history. Because the disciplines within the overall field vary so greatly, it is difficult to give a succinct explanation as to why social studies matters. Why bother learning about the past? Why study the different peoples of the world and types of human interaction, when other subjects like math and language arts are deemed so critical for future success in the global economy?

I believe that social studies is a vital component of school curriculum because it has the potential to cultivate important values that may go a long way in preventing future apathy towards the suffering of others. Children are remarkably idealistic, and it is my hope that they will ultimately be able to express their knowledge of social studies, not by reciting the territories gained through the Louisiana Purchase, or the causes of World War I, but instead through their actions.

### **Multicultural Pedagogy**

How do we accomplish this? This may seem like a lofty goal, but I believe it all starts with respect and an emphasis on rigorous multicultural education. On the first day of school, I will ask my students their names, who they are, where they come from, where they are going, and what their interests are. I cannot expect them to thrive in my classroom if I do not take the time to build relationships with them. As we begin to explore our topics of study, I will make it clear that I value all of my students’ backgrounds, cultures, and knowledge as vehicles for learning. Furthermore, I will strive to support parents and families so that they can make meaningful contributions to the classroom and share their knowledge whenever possible.

At the same time, I will consciously create culturally relevant curriculum so that my students will be able to identify with the material they are learning. For example, I may have students who have part-time jobs outside of school or are expected to help their parents run family businesses. In order to acknowledge and respect this reality, I believe that it would be beneficial to provide a closer look at children in the workplace. In this particular case, I could use a collection of primary sources to draw parallels between the lives of my students and those of the millions of child laborers during the Industrial Revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century, approximately eighteen percent of all workers in America were under sixteen

years of age (“Child Labor,” 2009). A lesson like this has the potential to inspire students who face a similar situation and promote empathy and understanding among their classmates.

### **Thinking Critically Towards the Present**

Of course, I will help my students master the necessary content and curriculum in order to pass my class, as well as our state and national standards. However, I will also encourage them to shed any judgements, stereotypes, or prejudices they might have when they walk into my classroom. It will then be my duty to foster meaningful conversation, tolerance or others, cultural awareness, compassion, even courage, so they might be able to challenge social injustice in the world today. Ultimately, I want them to become true lifelong learners who will actively promote human decency and respect for all.

I do not believe they will be adequately prepared to do this unless they learn to think critically, work diligently with their peers, and tackle important, controversial topics from the past. Earlier, I quoted Dr. King’s speech, in which he denounced the millions of people who tragically chose to remain a bystander during the Civil Rights Movement, one of the greatest progressive crusades for social progress in history. It has been nearly fifty years since the official movement ended, and while amazing progress has been made, it is impossible to deny that we still have a long way to go. Over the past two years, dozens of racially motivated acts of violence have occurred in cities all across the country, including Chicago, Baltimore, Ferguson, Madison, Denver, Brooklyn, Phoenix, St. Louis, and New York (Slutkin, 2015). Most of the victims were young African American and Latino males. It is clear that issues that were at the forefront of national concern half a century ago are still incredibly relevant and important today. As our students see these senseless acts of violence on the television and in the headlines of the *Washington Post*, will they be moved to action? Will they seize the opportunity and courageously take the necessary steps to end racism, discrimination, and oppression in their own world?

### **Final Thoughts**

As I prepare to begin my lifelong dream of teaching, my thoughts frequently return to a novel I read as part of my English as a Second Language (ESL) licensure program, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Fadiman, 2012). This book is an ethnographic work that describes the tragic story of Lia, a young epileptic Hmong girl, who lived in Merced, California during the 1980s. Epilepsy can be incredibly difficult to treat, as every individual responds differently to medication. In this case, however, treatment was almost impossible because of vast cross cultural differences between Lia’s family and her doctors. Refusal by both parties to bridge the cultural gap resulted in tragedy.

This book serves as a reminder for me to learn as much as I can about my students and adjust accordingly. If I can help guide my students towards tolerance, respect, compassion, and a collective desire to help others, I believe that I will be a successful teacher.