1 The Challenge of Culturally Responsive Teaching

MEET HARRISON SONGOLO . . .

My friends call me Soso. I was born in Zambia in a city called Flura in an area called Kitwe. That's where a lot of Bemba people are from. I lived with my grandparents, their kids, and my mother and me all together. But now I live here in the United States with just my mother and father. In Zambia, I went to school on a bus, not like a school bus but a city bus. Here I take the school bus. I like going to the high school. It's really big and I get lost sometimes. I am in the tenth grade and I really have good teachers. They are a little bit strict but I can tell that they are going to be helpful. My English teacher is pretty interested in my background, my culture. Everybody in the class wrote an autobiography so I wrote about my life back in Zambia, mostly about family and friends. She was pretty surprised and she liked it a lot too.

My life here and back in Zambia is completely different. Here we have television. We also have television over in Zambia but not as many channels. But usually I spent most of my time playing outside with a bunch of friends of mine. During a certain season when the mangoes grow, we'd go in the trees, spend the whole day just eating mangoes. Sometimes we'd play soccer

Thombs_FINALCOLLECT.indd 1 5/13/08 6:59:30 AM

and other games. In history class when we talked about nations, the teacher asked each one of us about our backgrounds and I just mentioned things about Zambia. My dad, who just became naturalized, has kind of shown me more things about Zambia and my cultural background using the Internet but we really don't do much of that at all in school.

Soso is enrolled in Frank Parker's tenth-grade history class this year. Mr. Parker is looking for ways to motivate Soso and his other students, who make a diverse group. He knows that classrooms across the nation are becoming less homogeneous each day. Curious to know whether his classroom is typical of others across the country, Frank recently consulted the U. S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics Web site. What he found in viewing their Fast Facts tab and searching their articles did not surprise him; the importance of responding to immigrant students and students whose primary language is not English is supported by a number of important statistics.

- In 2005, 42% of public school students belonged to a racial or ethnic minority group, which is an increase from 22% of students in 1972 (2007b).
- For the 2003–2004 school year, 11% of students received English as a second language (ESL) services. California was the highest at 26%, followed by Texas at 16% (2006).
- Between 1979 and 2005, the number of school-age children (ages 5 to 17) who spoke a language other than English at home increased from 3.8 million to 10.6 million (2007a).

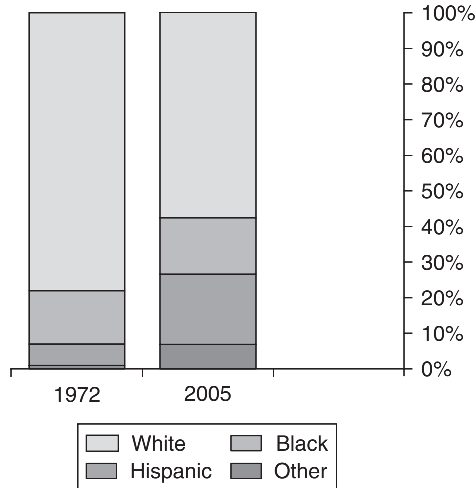
From 1972 to 2005, the number of students considered a racial or ethnic minority has nearly doubled. Figure 1.1 describes minority enrollment in public schools for grades K–12. For information on demographics and statistics for your region, consult http://nces.ed.gov/.

Statistics sometimes discourage Frank Parker. Various commissions and organizations continue to report increases in the rates of failing schools and failing children. What motivates Frank, however, is not so much the at-risk rhetoric but real children like Soso who have real needs—the kids he works with every day.

Frank Parker is a great teacher. He, like many of his colleagues, is competent and caring; his students can count on him to provide a secure and challenging learning environment. One characteristic that sets him apart from many of his colleagues, however, is his initiative—particularly

Thombs_FINALCOLLECT.indd 2 5/13/08 6:59:31 AM

Figure 1.1



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (CPS), October Supplement, 1972 and 2005, http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2007/charts/chart05.asp

when it comes to professional development. Frank is not content waiting for districtwide workshops, especially when he perceives an immediate need. He is impatient. He knows that Soso, like his other students, needs his attention now.

Earlier today, when Frank visited the school before the beginning of the fall term, he stopped at the main office to pick up his course rosters. As he read the names Robert Alipala, Elsa Chang, Diego Garza, Carrie Meeks, Antonio Silva, and Harrison Songolo, he thought about how he could engage this group of learners. *How can I be a more culturally responsive teacher? How can I help make history compelling for them? And how might technology facilitate my work and that of the students?*

How you would respond to Mr. Parker's questions?

____

____

____

____

THE NEED FOR A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CONTEXT

All teaching is contextual. Powerful, *culturally responsive* pedagogy requires that curricula and instructional frameworks be based, at least in part, on students' actual experiences. Students of different cultural groups might encounter teachers who have "culturally blind" attitudes, teachers who teach under the "fallacy of homogeneity," or instructors who have preconceived notions, however innocent, about them and their culture. Or if they are lucky, they are assigned teachers who have concluded that teaching is "most effective when ecological factors, such as prior experiences, community settings, cultural backgrounds, and ethnic identities of teachers and students are included in its implementation" (Gay, 2000, p. 4). Unfortunately, not all teachers engage students in this way.

Mr. Parker (and you) might begin by reflecting on his (and your) teaching practices by asking the following questions, adapted from a discussion of culturally responsive characteristics in *Culturally Responsive Teaching* by Geneva Gay (2000, pp. 29–36).

- In what ways is my teaching **validating**? How am I using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them?
- In what ways is my teaching **comprehensive**? Am I using instructional approaches to help students maintain identity and connections with their ethnic groups and communities? How do I encourage them to develop a sense of community, friendship, and shared responsibility . . . to acquire an ethic of success? Are expectations and skills interwoven throughout the curriculum? Does my instruction help them internalize the value of learning as communal, reciprocal, and interdependent?
- In what ways is my teaching **multidimensional**? How can I better collaborate on content, learning contexts, classroom climate, student–teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments in order to provide a more integrated and interdisciplinary experience for the students?

Thombs_FINALCOLLECT.indd 4 5/13/08 6:59:32 AM

- In what ways is my teaching **empowering**? Do I enable students to become academically competent and confident? Is my instruction participatory, problem based, dialogic, active, and inquiring?
- In what ways is my teaching **transformative**? How do I guide students in developing the knowledge, skills, and values needed to become social activists?
- In what ways is my teaching **emancipatory**? How can I encourage students to find their voices, to contextualize issues in multiple cultural perspectives, to engage in multiple ways of knowing and thinking? Do I help them become more active participants in shaping their learning?

It is a lot to think about. So what might our first step to transform instruction be? How might we extend our thoughts concerning Gay's (2000) questions and link them to the larger narrative?

The Larger Narrative

"Dead head" history, unfortunately, is alive and well in our classrooms. Students in these classes are often taught using a "heroes and holidays" or "additive" approach to teaching (Banks, 2001). This perspective reinforces the notion that history is remote from students' personal experiences and therefore disconnected from their lives. More disquietingly, it teaches—in both subtle and explicit ways—that white, western history is at the center of how civilizations have unfolded, and everything else (though sometimes interesting and exotic) is extraneous and unimportant to *real* history. Unsurprisingly, when students feel excluded from their own history, they find it boring and useless. Further, instruction based on virtually all textbooks hinders students' capacity to see diversity—or themselves, for that matter—in history. Rather, teachers must cultivate a classroom community of learners, a classroom that embraces and affirms diversity (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Nieto, 1999, 2000). They must actively engage students and help them construct knowledge through inquiry and attach meaning to that knowledge through dialogue (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). The classroom must be based upon a vision of pluralism, participatory democracy, and relevancy where students make correlations with their own personal experience and histories (Barton & Levstik, 2004). So how can teachers activate students' interest in history given these notions? How can teachers connect students to the larger narrative in which they and their ancestors play a role?

We suggest that teachers might begin to think about their students as qualitative researchers—ethnographers of sorts—involved in activities that locate them as not just observers but, more importantly, as participants in the world. Students then become part of the "historical moment," engaging in "critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation-states, globalization, freedom, and community" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, pp. 2–3). If they are able to place themselves and their families *within* specific historical events, their understanding of the world falls into a meaningful context. Students then perceive history as situated in accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of people rather than simply of events. How do we begin to position students as historical actors, as people with real voices who can identify and connect with history?

Powerful Social Studies . . . Powerful Citizens

We can begin by thinking about our purpose as history teachers and social scientists. Our work should be "grounded in a single, overarching purpose—preparation for participatory, pluralist democracy" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 20). To achieve this, social sciences teachers need to engage their students in powerful teaching and learning. This notion is discussed extensively in the National Council for the Social Studies' (1992) position statement, *A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy.* The statement reaffirms "citizen education as the primary purpose of social studies" (p. 157) and suggests that this purpose can be achieved through teaching and learning that is "meaningful, integrative, value-based, challenging, and active" (p. 162). Like Frank Parker, we can begin with powerful social studies teaching and learning based upon our concern for the common good and the idea that citizen participation in public life is essential to the health of our democratic system. What experiences, then, should our social studies programs provide?

Teachers today use standards to inform their practice. Standards can be helpful, but teachers must be careful not to miss the point. For example, posting standards around the classroom does little to improve teaching and learning or to guarantee student achievement. Even citing standards as goal statements might add little to building social understanding and civic efficacy.

We believe the NCSS standards should serve as a guide rather than a rigid scope and sequence prescription. Think of them as conveying *how* ideas could be taught rather than *what* ideas should be taught. For example, look at the following strand and indicator and write down your ideas about how instruction might help Soso and his classmates meet the standard. (See Other Resources: A located in the back of this book to examine NCSS's ten thematic strands.)

II. Time, Continuity, and Change

Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the *ways human beings view themselves in and over time,* so that the learner can:

e. investigate, interpret, and analyze multiple historical and contemporary viewpoints within and across cultures related to important events, recurring dilemmas, and persistent issues, while employing empathy, skepticism, and critical judgment.

What do you think?

____

____

____

____

Challenging? Of course. Engaging students in powerful teaching and learning is exceedingly complex. Where should Mr. Parker (and we) start, especially with students like Soso and his classmates, who may never have been engaged in this way before?

IMAGINATIVE ENTRY

We believe that powerful social studies programs are grounded, in part, in "imaginative entry" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 26). In the traditional classroom, on any given day, instruction tends to start from where the lecture left off on the previous day. Little effort is made to intentionally "scaffold inquiry to distant times and places" (p. 60). But teachers can use a number of tools to *zoom* students from the present to the past and back. "Imaginative entry" could include the following:

- *Connecting contemporary issues and events to the past.* For example, students might compare and contrast details about Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath with accounts of the Great San Francisco Earthquake of 1907.
- *Reading great nonfiction.* For example, students could extend their understanding of the complexities of the adolescent stage by reading *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead.

- *Reading great fiction.* For example, students might gain further insights into eleventh-century Japan by reading about pilgrimages to the Ishiyama-dera temple in *Tales of Genji* by Murasaki Shikibu.
- *Interpreting historical and other documents.* For example, students could read George F. Kennan's *Sources of Soviet Containment* to build a primary source foundation for understanding the Cold War.
- *Examining maps.* For example, exploring population distribution and vegetation maps of India could stimulate an analysis of the proximity of humans to animal habitats.

Think about the content of your curriculum. Choose a concept, theme, era, or event. What might be some of your own points of imaginative entry? Be inventive.

____

____

____

____

To extend these points, think about how you and your students might explore the four principal "stances" or historical perspectives offered by Barton and Levstik (2004) in *Teaching History for the Common Good*. These stances provide a useful model for engaging students in a purposeful way—a "doing" history way (p. 7). Doing history requires active teaching and learning. Teachers must plan activities that help students (1) *identify* or make connections between themselves and the past; (2) *analyze* or engage in historical thinking to explain causes and effect, for example; (3) *respond morally* or make judgments about events of the past; and (4) *exhibit* or display what they have discovered about the past (pp. 45–128).

The Quest for Connections

Take a moment to look back at the interview with Soso. What hints does the interview provide us about connecting Harrison Songolo to the history (or geography, sociology, politics, economy, anthropology, etc.) of the world? How might the four principal stances inform Soso and other students about "doing history"?

Hint	*Identification*	*Analysis*	*Moral Response*	*Exhibition*

How might guiding students to make personal connections encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning? How might, for example, analyzing primary source documents help students think and act like social scientists? How might an opportunity to make moral judgments help students think critically about issues facing the world? How might helping students demonstrate their understandings in creative and exciting ways make learning more engaging, evocative, and enduring?

As we have previously indicated, there are many ways to engage students constructively within the historical and sociopolitical context of multiculturalism. Our intention here, however, is to limit our discussion of a single, detailed imaginative entry—the WebQuest—as a way to provide social studies teachers with an approach to connecting students' personal narratives to the larger social narrative. As discussed in detail in the following chapters, WebQuests are inquiry-oriented, collaborative assignments that focus on using Web-based information to enhance higher-level analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Activities are designed to pose authentic, motivating problems, to direct students to resources that provoke analysis, and to culminate in an achievable, measurable result.

Why technology? Why WebQuests? Chapter 2 features a review of what technologically literate teachers and students ought to know, and Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the WebQuest as a source of rich historical, cultural, and genealogical information.