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# Social Action Teaching: Engaging Middle School Students in Knowing and Doing in the Social Studies Classroom

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# SOCIAL ACTION TEACHING:

# ENGAGING MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KNOWING AND DOING

# IN THE SOCIAL STUDIES CLASSROOM

A Synthesis Project Presented

by

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Critical and Creative Thinking Program

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL ACTION TEACHING:

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May 2009

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For the past three years I have had countless opportunities to engage in rich thinking around teaching and learning. As a member of the Critical and Creative Thinking Program (CCT) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston I have been able to reflect on these experiences in the context of my own teaching, applying what I have learned to enrich my own craft. Over the past eight months I have devoted this thinking to a teaching method I call Social Action Teaching. This method has helped to engage and motivate my seventh grade students and I believe, if applied elsewhere, can have a similar impact on other students.

This Synthesis describes the four elements of Social Action Teaching: *Classroom Core, Community Connectedness, Civic Awareness, and Global Responsibility.* The foundational core of the classroom and the three branches of Social Action Teaching reflect each of the communities that students should be able to effectively navigate. This work describes a two-part process by which this navigation can occur. First, students need to possess the knowledge set associated with each community, whether it be the local, national, or global community. Second,

teachers must provide opportunities for students to act upon this knowledge as they develop skills necessary for the 21st century.

Any reader of this Synthesis should feel free to use the specific method described in this work or simply use their own thinking to design another, equally engaging, motivating, and empowering method. My intention with this work is not to convert the disbeliever into a fanatic who will then walk around wearing a sandwich board that displays the many successes of Social Action Teaching. Rather, the wider purpose of this work is to provide a fresh lens with which we can each view our teaching, identify problem areas, implement a new creative method, and critically reflect on its impact on our students.

LIST OF FIGURES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

> The miracle, or the power, that elevates the few is to be found in their perseverance under the promptings of a brave, determined spirit.
>
> -Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Engagement. Motivation. Empowerment. These three seemingly simple words are the impetus driving the work that almost every educator commits herself to. Whether it is a workshop on classroom management or a professional development meeting focused on differentiated instruction, we all seek out ways to engage students in our lessons, motivate them to complete high-quality work, and empower them to take what we have taught them beyond the four walls of our classrooms. Additionally, the focus of public education in our country has shifted dramatically in the past decade. I came of age in this field amidst these changes that have proved to become challenges in their own right. I had just begun my training in education when the extensive No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) legislature swept through educational systems across the country. Many of my undergraduate courses at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst focused on the four "pillars" of NCLB: stronger accountability, flexibility in spending for local and state education systems, effective methods of teaching, and increased parent choice. When I was hired for my first teaching job, some of the most impassioned discussions I was privy to focused on the impact of the law on our classrooms. Standards-based education was the focus of most of the professional development workshops I

attended during my first few years of teaching as my school building worked to improve its Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) scores.

Around this same time I began pursuing my Masters Degree in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program (CCT) at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Through my CCT experience, I have had the opportunity to critically and creatively think, speak, write, and act, both independently and within a diverse group of professionals. My classmates in these courses were teachers, as well as members of a variety of other fields, which has been both supportive and stimulating. During the past three years I have experienced a wide variety of learning opportunities. From collaboratively working through an important problem-based learning question with a team of colleagues, to participating in rich dialogue and debate with my peers, to exploring the challenges and joys of teaching Gifted and talented students, I have been encouraged to stretch and reflect on my thinking repeatedly through the years. Through these graduate courses, I have been challenged to think outside the box. I distinctly remember experiencing much anxiety over a project I was forced to do in my first CCT course, Creative Thinking. We were to choose a creative person, research the individual, and then perform an in-role presentation taking on the persona of that person. Though I am not sure anyone ever knew, I was terrified. For weeks, I practiced the voice of my individual each morning during my commute to work, experimented with different facial expressions in front of a mirror, and contemplated what in the world this individual would do in front of a group of CCT students. As soon as I started my presentation I became very relaxed in my new role and actually really enjoyed this once-in-a-lifetime experience. This memory is but one of many of its kind. Through my CCT degree, I have had the opportunity to participate in a plethora of learning

exercises and activities. These experiences have enriched my craft as I have continued to think outside the box when it comes to my own teaching.

The professional development workshops that have been offered through my school district and the pursuit of my Masters' degree through the CCT program have complimented each other nicely. I have been able to merge the technical ideas introduced in the professional development workshops with the critical and creative thinking and learning strategies that I have nurtured in my graduate experience. These two learning opportunities have taught me that reflective educators can prepare students for standardized tests such as Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science/Technology MCAS while also truly engaging them in learning, motivating them to seek out further learning opportunities, and empowering them to act as leaders in and outside the school community. These learning opportunities encouraged me to ask myself and others, "How do we achieve these three coveted results of education- engagement, motivation, and empowerment- while also making our subject-specific standards come alive and adequately preparing our students for the mandatory standardized tests that determine their future as well as that of our school community?"

A teacher in my fourth year, I find myself in the same community where I first began as a fresh-faced first year teacher. I have taught my students of the ancient civilizations that surrounded the Mediterranean Sea each year in the same classroom that I stumbled into, arms laden with brightly colored posters and books, what seems like ages ago. I have experienced incredible growth in the past few years, both professionally and personally, and feel that I am entering a new phase of my teaching. Confident now with my subject-matter, classroom management style, and the complicated inner workings of a school, I feel more confident taking risks.

The term "taking risks" is quite, I am sure, off-putting to some. "Taking risks" here is nothing like strapping a harness to yourself, stepping off a platform, and falling several stories before being snapped back by your bungee cord. Rather, I refer to turning a problem into an opportunity by first identifying the problem, implementing creative solutions, critically reflecting on the results, and finally, searching for other potential applications. In my modest experience, I have found that some educators, both young and seasoned, have become resistant to risk-taking in this form. However, when we are expected to serve a large, diverse population of children, how can we possibly be successful if we are unwilling to try new things? Our children come to us, especially at the middle level, with a multitude of needs, interests, and experiences. One simple, or even a few complex, formulas are simply not going to be successful with each and every one of our students. In an age of promising to never leave even a single child behind, educators like me must be willing to take a few risks here and there.

The plan outlined in this work is intended for those teachers and administrators who are willing to take risks in order to address the challenges that face us. On the other hand, there are plenty of people who would disagree with the approach contained in this work. Such an individual might find himself shaking his head in disagreement, commenting that these suggestions are unnecessary, require too much work, or the goals too lofty. My hope, however, is that even the disbeliever can find some inspiration or better yet some practical application of the method at the heart of this Synthesis.

Like many other dedicated individuals in this field I believe that we must proactively address any challenges that we come across. All too often I hear school personal complaining about the latest memo from administrators or the most recent initiative taken on by the school district. Of course, there are times that we all feel justifiably frustrated. However, taking on

these challenges and educating our children in the face of a multitude of odds is what we signed up for. We knew, as college sophomores in that psychology of education lecture or in our first few hours of student teaching, that we would be tested time and time again in this field. As teachers, it is our responsibility to take what is given to us and to creatively mold it into something great. Whether presented with a new, unproven curriculum, an ineffective administrative team, or a challenging student our duty is to take the approach of a problem-based learner. When we first encounter this ill-defined problem we must ask ourselves questions that allow us to understand the problem more deeply. We may then discover that the problem as we originally understood it is not that much of a problem at all or perhaps we begin to understand the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the administrative team or the issues that our student is facing at home which makes causes him/her to be a challenge. By fully investigating what is given to us, rather than just accepting problems for what they seem to be, we can then act effectively to change or adapt them.

Having said this, the work that I will share in the pages to come is not a comprehensive guide on how to implement an entirely new method of teaching. One will not find new methodologies, specifically tailored lessons, or freshly generated assessments. Rather, the purpose of this work is to share an approach to teaching that I believe will succeed in certain classrooms with certain teachers. Such a teacher would possess a disposition that is open to change, willing to take risks, and committed to supporting her students at all costs. As Shari Tishman, David Perkins, and Eileen Jay share in The Thinking Classroom (1994), teachers, like their students, must nurture a "strategic spirit". Instead of simply applying the well-thought out solutions of others, we must often act as problem-solvers ourselves when facing a difficult task. This "spirit" is alive in the "truly versatile thinker… who is able to construct, invent, and or

modify a thinking strategy to meet the unique demands of the situation at hand" (102-3). Substitute "teaching method" for "thinking strategy" and "students" for "situation" and you have what every committed educator needs to do in order to be successful with the largest number of students possible. When we utilize our "strategic spirit" we essentially use up every strategy in our bad of tricks until we are eventually forced to create new ones.

One should feel free to use the specific method described in this work or simply use their own "spirit" to design another, equally engaging, motivating, and empowering method. My intention with this work is not to convert the disbeliever into a fanatic who will then walk around wearing a sandwich board that displays the many successes of Social Action Teaching. Rather, the wider purpose of this work is to provide a fresh lens with which we can each view our teaching, identify problem areas, implement a new creative method, and critically reflect on its impact on our students.

# CHAPTER 2

## SOCIAL ACTION TEACHING

For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.
- Sir Isaac Newton (1643-1727)

A conceptual change.

In its infancy, I fondly referred to this method as "Social Change Education". Inspired by the work of Myles Horton and others, I felt that the true focus of learning should be real and lasting change. Additionally, I was comfortable with the term "education" because I was in a very different place as far as my perception of my field then. I was thinking that a complete overhaul, a separation from the current model of education was absolutely necessary in order for any of us, teachers and students alike, to feel any success. In some ways, my current title for this method reflects an evolved manner of thinking about the current state of our system of education in our country. On a very specific and most immediate level, I truly see an incredible opportunity at this moment for the 7th grade Social Studies curriculum in the state of Massachusetts. I do not think of myself as being bound and restricted by these standards. Rather, I have been able to identify entry points with which to tailor the standards to enrich the lives of the students that I serve.

Through this evolution of thought I have moved from "Social Change Education" and have arrived at "Social Action Teaching". The term "social" remains because, like many others, I believe that one of our most important responsibilities as teachers is to prepare our students to be productive members of our society by training them to work collaboratively and communicate

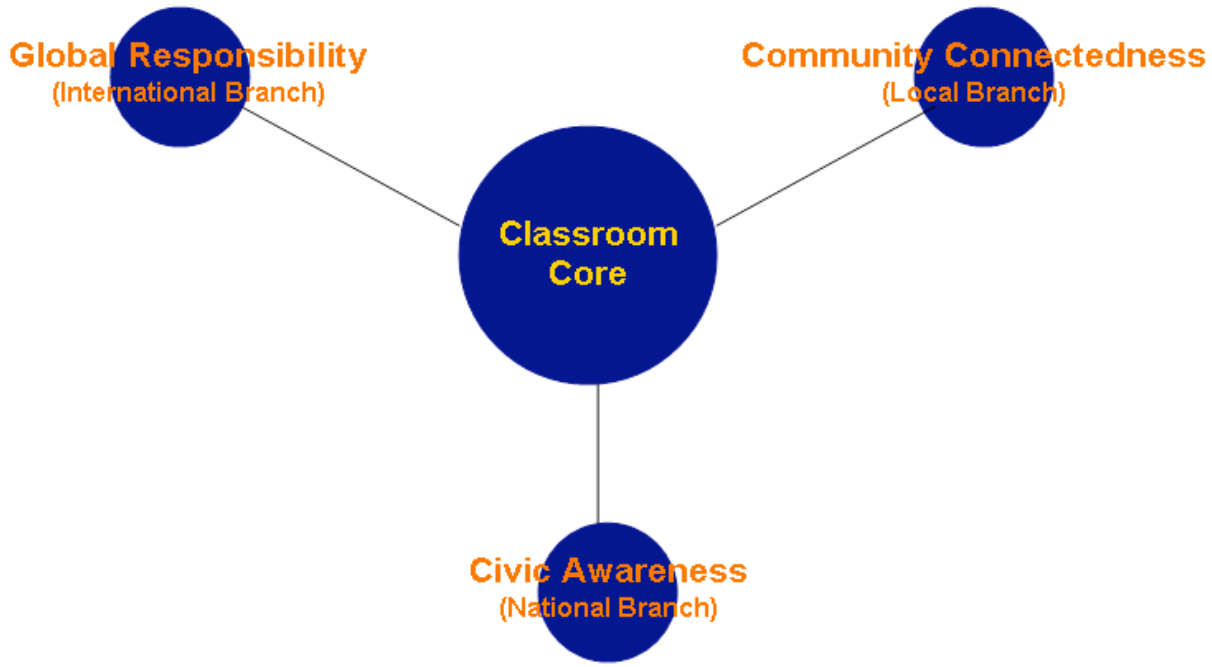
effectively with other members. The change from "education" to "teaching" reflects my current belief that the responsibility lies with me to continuously improve my teaching rather than to complain about the larger context of education in our country. "Action" replaced "change" because "change" reflects a very different expectation. If I expect my students to change or fix each problem or issue we dissect than I might end up with a room of disappointed kids and one very frustrated teacher. Rather, just as I value strong effort, I expect my students to act on problems and issues. The term "action" acknowledges that sometimes even our strongest efforts do not produce change in the manner in which we commonly think of it. Still, "action" expresses the expectation that students must first explore the problem at hand and then to perform based on this newly acquired knowledge.

The core and branches of Social Action Teaching.

Social Action Teaching involves action on several different levels. When I think about a typical day in the life of one of my 7th graders, I see them as navigating a number of different communities. The core and branches of Social Action Teaching reflect each of these groups that students should be able to effectively navigate. The core of Social Action Teaching is the foundation with which students can begin to develop the skills necessary for the the branches to grow. The core is the classroom community. Starting off at this place allows teachers to build a climate that is conducive for the discussions and activities that will follow. It is only logical to start off at this place where students have spent the majority of their learning lives. The microcosm of the classroom serves as a foundation of understanding that students can return to as we begin to develop the less familiar branches.

The first branch of Social Action Teaching, *Community Connectedness*, is the local community layer which fosters true connections between the school and the local community. The second branch, *Civic Awareness*, is the national layer which focuses on instilling a sense of civic awareness in students. This branch updates the concept of civics education which has received far less instructional hours in many American schools since the inception of standards-based education. The third branch, *Global Responsibility*, is the international layer which strives to develop a sense of global responsibility in students as they grow and become members of the larger, international community. Figure 1 depicts the core and branches of Social Action Teaching.

Figure 1.




As the figure above illustrates, I do not place a value on the individual branches. Rather, I see them as being equally important and mutually supportive of each other.

Social Action Teaching and NCLB.

Like the web of a spider, students constantly reach for and seek out connections between various facets of their life. Lately, I have observed a persistent method of sharing among my students. Many times when my students raise their hands to offer a comment they first introduce their words by saying, "I have a connection to share." I am always delighted to hear these relevant nuggets of information because students are, in essence, verbalizing their meta-cognitive thinking. When a student shares such a connection he/she is modeling the thinking that went into developing a connection between our classroom content and that of another subject or experience.

As teachers, we know that some of these connections are far superior than others. Sometimes, when certain eager students raise their hands we know that we are going to have to work a little harder as facilitators to find some relevance and connection in what they share. When it comes to Social Action Teaching, the responsibility lies with the teacher to make a connection between the state learning standards and the lessons incorporated into his/her classroom. While most would agree that lessons which guide students to become stronger citizens and more effective communicators are inherently good, some teachers are finding it more difficult to justify these life lessons in the face of state expectations. In a phenomenological study a researcher named Marjorie M. Krebs (2008) identified what motivates teachers to implement service-learning opportunities in their classrooms. Based on her research, Krebs identified that many social action teachers "see it as *their* responsibility to create links between learning and purpose, between students and society" (my emphasis, 146). Many educators find NCLB to be a deterrent to this type of teaching and connection building. According to the Department of Education's government website, NCLB espouses "four pillars"

of education that were mentioned in the introduction to this work: stronger accountability, flexibility in spending for local and state education systems, effective methods of teaching, and more parent choice. Some of the complaints of the legislature directly contradict use of such terms as "flexibility" and "effective". In many school districts there is an urgent emphasis to transmit the fundamentals to students. In many schools across the country teachers are instructed to teach the skills that state standardized tests hone in on, mainly literacy, writing, and mathematic skills. In The Essentials of Social Studies (2008) Kathy Checkley cites a study of 376 elementary and secondary teachers that demonstrates the frustration of this situation.

> Results of a study of 376 elementary and secondary teachers in New Jersey, for example, showed that teachers "tended to teach to the test, often neglected individual students' needs because of stringent focus on high-stakes testing, had little time to teach creatively, and bored themselves and their students with practice problems as they prepared for standardized testing (Cawelti, 2006)." (2)

While courses in Language Arts and mathematics receive the most resources, including time, money, and effort, subjects such as Social Studies and science have received significant reduction in teaching hours. However, in 2002 NCLB was further extended to include science. Beginning in 2002, schools were mandated to assess student growth in mathematics, language arts, reading, and science while social studies and history continue to be ignored on most state standardized tests. Later in her work on the teaching of Social Studies, Kathy Checkley shares the observations of the president of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS), Peggy Altoff.

> In fact, says Altoff, since NCLB mandates have been in effect, "only four states report the same amount of time being spent on teaching social studies." (3)

What is perhaps more alarming is the implication of this when it comes to the experiences of students of color and/or students with a lower socioeconomic status. In some school districts with higher percentages of students of color, students receive fewer opportunities for enriching activities because there is a heightened urgency to train them in the more general skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. One specific area that students receive less opportunity in is the study of civics, government, or service-learning opportunities. Though more significant time will be spent on this in Chapter 5 which focuses on *Civic Awareness*, researchers Joseph Kahne and Ellen Middaugh reported some alarming statistics in an article published in Social Education (2008). In "High-quality civic education: what is it and who gets it?" the authors point out the disparities between the experiences of White students and students of color when it comes to receiving high-quality, enriching Social Studies instruction.

> [E]ven with other controls in place, students who identified as African American were less likely to report… having discussions of current events that were personally relevant, less likely to report having voice in the school or classroom, and were less likely to report opportunities for role play or simulations…Students who identified themselves as Latino reported fewer opportunities for service than others and fewer experiences with role plays and simulations.

Many would argue that this tendency completely contradicts what we know about teaching. It seems that we would need to employ our strongest and most enriching teaching in order to reach those students who are often labeled "disengaged" or "at-risk". However, some individuals believe that these students instead need more training in the basics and eventually, with this foundation in place, might be able to handle the more enriching opportunities. Like many others, I believe that this approach is completely prejudiced and instead, can further disengage students who are already feeling disconnected from school.

As the aforementioned cases illustrate there are serious limitations of NCLB. However, at the heart of the legislature is the idea that all children should attain certain knowledge benchmarks through out their K-12 years. To me, NCLB focuses more on the *knowing* while teachers should then extend learning to also focus on the *doing*. Many states mandate the minimum knowledge set or straight facts that teachers need to make sure all of their students master. However, it is up to us as teachers to decide how students attain, what students do with, and how they demonstrate acquisition of this knowledge. So far, most state frameworks have fallen short of this application step. Take for instance the Massachusetts History and Social Sciences Curriculum Framework of 2003. Titled "Massachusetts and Its Cities and Towns: Geography and History", the 3rd grade curriculum overview states that students should "learn the history of their own cities and towns and about famous people and events in Massachusetts' history" (19). Figure 2 contains some of the standards that pertain to this objective of the 3rd grade curriculum.

Figure 2.

"Cities and Towns of Massachusetts"

- 3.9 Identify historic buildings, monuments, or sites in the area and state their purpose and significance
- 3.11 Identify when the students' own city or town was founded, and describe the different groups of people who have settled in the community since its founding
- 3.12 Explain how objects or artifacts of everyday life in the past tell us how ordinary people lived and how life has changed
- 3.13 Give examples of goods and services provided by their local businesses and industries
- 3.14 Give examples of tax-supported facilities and services provided by the local government, such as public schools, parks, recreational facilities, police and fire departments, and libraries

With verbs such as "identify" and "explain" each of these standards pertaining to the local community would fall in the lowest category of Bloom's Taxonomy, Knowledge. It is up to the teacher to extend learning beyond this foundation and hopefully reach the levels that require higher levels of thinking, Application, Analysis, Synthesis and Evaluation.

Let us assume that most students in Massachusetts do attain this lower-level knowledge of their local communities in the third grade despite the all-important Language Arts and mathematics benchmark testing that is administered in the fourth grade. The social action teacher should build off this foundation of knowing and create opportunities for students to then engage in the doing that is required of true social action.

# CHAPTER 3

## CLASSROOM CORE

> The only way to last a really long time is to build something useful enough that people will want to keep it going after you die, and to cultivate a sense of ownership in other people.
>
> - Lisa Williams, The Lessons of Nixon, May 19, 2006

### A core community.

Some educators have committed their careers to identifying the elements necessary for creating a true classroom community. In this work, I will highlight some of the classroom components that are necessary in order for this foundational core of Social Action Teaching to be established. A social action teacher, or any social justice educator, must strive to create a true community within the classroom. Establishing a genuine and supportive classroom community is essential to the success of any teaching method but the style of the community must be tailored to the specific type of method, the larger school community, the personality of the teacher, and the personalities that the students bring to the table. In her article "Engaging the Disengaged" (2008-2009), Heather K. Casey recognizes that a true classroom community must be unique to that specific classroom.

> A classroom community cannot be one that it "neatly packaged and reproduced across classrooms but instead is organic and emerges within each setting according to the unique characteristics of the participants and the content being considered." (292)

In the unique case of Social Action Teaching, there are several facets of the classroom that are crucial to the success of the students. First, the teacher manages the classroom in

cooperation with the students. Second, students are given some choice in the activities that drive the learning in the classroom. Third, student voices are genuinely heard and acted upon by employing evaluative measures. The presence of these three interconnected elements can create a classroom community that gives students ample opportunities to act as true leaders. This training in leadership becomes the core of the social action teaching and learning that follows.

Classroom co-management.

From the very first day of school, students need to be treated as important members of the classroom. This may seem like a given, but all too often students are subjected to the top-down management style that was once the ruling form of classroom management. Yet, in order for students to engage in social action, they need to possess genuine ownership over their classroom. Brian Schultz, an educator who participated in a year-long service learning experience with his fifth grade students, discusses the importance of this in his account of their year together. In Spectacular Things Happen Along the Way: Lessons from an Urban Classroom (2008), Schultz shares what it was like when he incorporated students into the important management processes of their classroom,

> I realized that I did not always have to be the dominant classroom voice and could share authority with students. By giving students opportunities to help run the classroom activities, I would be more respected, and the days would not nearly be as long. (19)

Schultz regularly made students co-creators of many of the processes of a classroom that are typically not experienced by students. Teachers like Brian Schultz who train students in the enforcement of classroom rules and expectations often find that students embrace this role.

Treating students as the most important element of the classroom community is essential to Social Action Teaching. Undoubtedly, as is the case with all adolescents there will be times

when misbehavior occurs. The social action teacher must deal with these instances in a unique manner. Traditional discipline techniques may not be effective in this case because of the role that students play in a social action classroom. In a social action classroom, the opinions of students are genuinely valued and they are encouraged to make use of these opinions to make strong decisions. When students choose to break the rules that they have helped to construct, they should be given the opportunity to explore the reasons behind this choice. Emotions and feelings that may have fueled the choice need to acknowledged and validated. Imagine a situation involving an employee who has worked for a company for years. The employee and his supervisor feel mutual respect for each other because they have been colleagues for quite some time. For a few days in a row, the employee has been coming into work an hour late, clearly against company policy. A reasonable reaction on the part of the supervisor would be to call the employee into her office, to acknowledge the tardiness, and then to make sure that everything is okay with the employee. The supervisor respects the employee and so gives him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps the employee has been tending to a sick family member who lives in another town, causing the daily tardiness. The two adults then have a conversation about how this can be successfully managed within the context of the company and the responsibilities that the employee needs to maintain. The discussion ends with the supervisor letting the employee know that he can feel comfortable going to her in the future if he needs to talk about the situation. The employee leaves the informal meeting feeling validated and supported.

Obviously, students are not adults. However, a similar situation is often handled much differently in the case of a student and a teacher. In most cases, a student would be given a generic, standard consequence for tardiness with virtually no follow-up. In Managing Your Classroom with Heart: A Guide for Nurturing Adolescent Learners (2006), educator Katy

Ridnouer tries a different approach. Ridnouer follows through with the official consequence of the school, but then acts as the caring supervisor did in the aforementioned situation. She suggests that teachers have a private conversation with students, giving them an opportunity to both share and then to explore the reasons for their behaviors. Most reasonable educators would acknowledge that there are probably many legitimate explanations for student tardiness. I know that many of my students face daily challenges and family circumstances that make, at the very least, getting to school on-time every day a bit of a challenge. These same students might then find it even more difficult to give their full attention to our various classroom activities. Though a teacher should not make excuses for the student or tolerate the undesirable behavior, he should take the opportunity to have a conversation with the student about the situation just as the supportive supervisor did. Ridnouer suggests pointing out the behavior in a non-confrontational or non-aggressive manner and then allowing the student to explain and explore the situation. Says Ridnouer, "By not judging the student for his particular behavior, you open the door for an honest response that is more likely to lead to the problem's resolution" (44). Ridnouer's approach is made possible because of the mutually caring respectful and supportive relationship a teacher has established with a student.

Offering students choice.

Many teachers now embrace giving students opportunities to choose between different types of assignments which each aim for the same objective. Research on multiple intelligences and differentiated instruction has demonstrated the value in tapping into the various learning styles of students. Students need to have some choice in order to feel a sense of control. Heather Casey (2008-2009) describes how one teacher of adolescents achieves this, "Sharon strives to

incorporate management systems that place the students in control of their work" (290). Students engaged in social action will need to practice how it feels to be given real choice and then to decide what is the best fit for them as learners. In many cases, students are not used to this freedom and therefore need explicit training in how to make sound decisions on which activities they are going to choose to spend their time and efforts on. This opportunity of choice should be apparent within the assignments that students are expected to complete, but also in the manner in which they will be assessed. Overall, students are more likely to genuinely engage in activities when choice is offered. True engagement is an essential component to Social Action Teaching while, at the same time, is also a desired result of the style of teaching. Offering choice is often an effective way to accomplish this.

Within the variety of learning opportunities, the social action teacher should always provide activities that are constructivist in nature. Students are engaged in active learning, are making symbolic connections between what they are learning and the outside communities, are constructing meaning through their social interactions with others, and are motivated to learn in order to try to explain things they do not understand. Again this highlights the importance of the teacher-as-facilitator role. A teacher who believes in the constructivist model does not impose learning on students. Rather, the social action teacher focuses his/her energy on creating stimulating and exciting learning opportunities. Students, in turn, develop meaning and understanding through their engagement in the learning activities developed by the instructor. Students are expected to solve problems on their own, encouraged to develop and articulate their own ideas, and participate in deep and meaningful dialogue with classmates.

Offering students choice and engaging them in true constructivist learning can sometimes be frustrating. The social action teacher must maintain an attitude that supports students as they

work through this challenging learning, while also giving students the space to work through problems on their own. In the guide The Skillful Teacher, the professional development organization Research for Better Teaching (RBT) suggests how to achieve this balance through the articulation of three clear messages: "This is important. You can do it. I am not going to give up on you." RBT suggests to teachers that they continuously share these messages, both verbally and non-verbally, in order to encourage students. Creating a classroom community focused on student choice and steeped in hands-on learning and thinking will support and encourage students as they engage in social action.

Student evaluations.

Students are constantly evaluated by their teachers in the classroom in a variety of ways. Teachers evaluate student performance through daily homework assignments, participation in classroom discussions, regular quizzes and tests, long-term projects and papers, and through other mandated assessments. Teachers of middle school youth, on the other hand, are rarely evaluated by their students. Of course, teachers receive feedback from administrators and colleagues, but it is not necessarily standard practice to have middle school students evaluate their teachers. If students are to be truly treated as leaders than their ideas and opinions must be solicited. It is equally important that a teacher then use those collected suggestions as a means to improve his craft. Incorporating student evaluations into the classroom prepares students for the authentic learning that takes place in a social action classroom. Students receive practice in clearly articulating their ideas if they wish for those ideas to be acted upon. Admittedly, in the current climate of high stakes testing and strict learning standards, most teachers may not feel comfortable asking students to become part of the curriculum design process. However, teachers

can still allow students choice through the various systems that ensure classroom management. In an article titled "Ideas from the Other Side of the Desk: Student Evaluation" (1997) educator Todd Decker attempted just this through his quarterly student evaluations, "Student suggestions on discipline were discussed and eventually became class policy" (5). By doing this his students were "given a voice in creating rules they are expected to obey" (5). This reflects that commonly-held belief that students, and indeed people in general, are more likely to follow a rule if they have played a role in the development of that rule. Decker was also thankful for the ideas his students shared on evaluations because he, like many teachers, was not always aware of the various issues within the classroom. As Dana Mitra points out in her article titled Amplifying Student Voice for Educational Leadership (2008), "Youth need to participate deeply, not simply 'be heard.' They need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them" (24). The manner in which their classroom community is maintained would certainly be considered an issue that truly matters to students.

Many times, I have envisioned what my ideal classroom would look like. I would keep my instructions thorough but brief because the students would be jumping out of their seats, excitedly anticipating what the day's lessons would have in store for them. I would then step aside and allow the students to carry out the lesson's activities, helping each other along during times of confusion, preserving during the difficult tasks, and occasionally asking for clarification from me. There would be the "light-bulb" or "ah ha!" moments instead of disrespectful or hurtful behavior and I would end each day eager for the next. There is, of course, no harm in dreaming and I think in some ways we have to keep alive these images of the ideal. If we lose sight of what we are striving to make of our classroom communities than we will never attain this high standard. As Jodene Dunleavy and Penny Milton, two members of the Canadian

Education Association, remind us in "Student Engagement for Effective Teaching and Deep Learning" (2008),

> Engagement in learning develops…when the ideas of each student are valued; and when the relationship between teacher and student, and among students themselves, is both reciprocal and generous in spirit. (8)

In order for students to act as leaders in the classroom they must believe that their ideas and their efforts are valued by their teacher as well as their peers. Giving students the opportunity to manage the classroom, offering choice in learning activities, and soliciting and acting upon student ideas provide training for students to act as leaders within the classroom. Establishing a classroom community in which students are treated as true leaders is the foundation of Social Action Teaching upon which much can be built.

# CHAPTER 4

## COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS

> "The relationship always comes first. It is more important than the problem," explains Kunip. (228)
>
> -Eric Weiner, The Geography of Bliss, 2009

Know thy community.

The first branch of Social Action Teaching, *Community Connectedness*, requires students to know the history and current issues of their local community and to also act on this knowledge. An informed citizen knows the issues of her community from watching, listening, or reading the news and then discussing these events with others. According to an article published in April 2007 by Ken Schroeder, Managing Editor of Education Digest, "News is used roughly 15% less in schools with high numbers of poor or non-English speaking students." This again, suggests the urgency of incorporating creative methods of teaching into all classrooms, not just those with students who are traditionally seen as "ready" for more enrichment activities.

Students cannot be expected to know what issues are of concern to their community when they walk into the classroom. Some students simply do not have access to a variety of sources of information or do not know how to interpret these sources to identify the most credible. Instead, it is up to the instructor to create these learning opportunities for them. Once students do know the most important question on the local ballot or are aware of the resistance to the building of the new community center, they can then begin to act.

The *doing* after the *knowing*.

Most would think of this local community version of knowing first and then doing as "service-learning". I am reluctant to use this phrase though because of some of the misconceptions that often cloud the true meaning of the term. First, then, it is necessary to clear up the definition of the term. According to Nick Longo, Assistant Professor of Public and Community Service Studies and the Director of the Global Studies Program at Providence College, service-learning should be linked to academic standards, should meet real needs in the community, and should be mutually beneficial to the students and the community they are serving. With this definition in mind there are a few, but essential, components that are required of a true service-learning experience.

Essential components of service-learning.

First, service-learning must be reciprocal. Longo's notion of the reciprocity involved with service-learning fits the true meaning of action as defined within these pages. Students first most know the actual needs of their community before they can act to improve upon those situations. A reciprocal and open dialogue between the student and the recipients of the service is necessary in order to have the desired, lasting impact on both the lives of the students and their intended target group.

Developing strong connections between all involved, including parents, administrators, the local community, others teachers, and obviously the students, is essential. Whether the participants are elementary school age or high school, parents should be incorporated into the process. Administrators, as another important shareholder in the process of service-learning, can often provide necessary financial backing and other means of support. Because some consider

the nature of service-learning controversial at times, this sponsorship can be particularly helpful. As was previously mentioned, linking up with other teachers, either within the school community or within another school, can also be helpful. Teachers within the same school can support their service-learning efforts through co-teaching or a general sharing of resources such as time and energy. Groups within the local community, especially those directly receiving the support of the students should be aware of the reasons fueling the student volunteerism and the classroom connections that it supports.

Additionally, service-learning is most effective when it is later reflected on and evaluated by the students. Students should be given adequate time to process what and how they have learned. This should not be deemed as an unnecessary extra. Rather, it should be imbedded into the regular sessions of project work. Reflection should be built into verbal discussions as well as personal writing. In an article titled "Bringing Leadership Experiences to Inner-City Youth" author Barry L. Boyd states that,

> Providing an experience alone does not create "experiential learning". The learning comes from the thoughts and ideas created as a result of the experience. (Introduction)

Like other types of learning, service-learning requires continuous and deep reflection in order to be truly effective. Teachers should provide numerous and varied opportunities, including those written and discussed, through which students can reflect on their process.

The sense of ownership on the part of the students participating in a service-learning opportunity is equally important to the instructor leading the group. Teachers of students experiencing service-learning must be dedicated to this unique learning process for several reasons. First, teachers must be willing to put in the extra time and effort that is often necessary for such projects to get up and running. Perhaps more importantly, service-learning teachers

need to be genuinely enthusiastic about the project in order to help carry students through the challenging or frustrating moments. Marjorie Krebs, in her work on the type of teacher who implements service-learning, states that these teachers believe in "the importance of making a positive difference in the world and teaching this belief to students" (144). Teachers who possess this genuine, deep personal belief are perhaps more likely to be able to inspire students in this type of social action work.

Service-learning requires that teachers also act more, at times, like facilitator than a traditional instructor in the classroom. This teacher-as-facilitator mirrors the type of learning community described in Chapter 3: *Classroom Core*. In service-learning, teachers can aid students as they research issues in the community that they feel need to be addressed, set schedules and target dates for themselves, mediate disagreements between student participants, and organize class meetings to address concerns as they arise. However, the teacher will also experience learning alongside his students. Brian Shultz, in his personal account of a very powerful service-learning experience he shared with his students, describes this mutual support between students and students and teacher and students.

> The participants see common threads among and are able to support one another because they have knowledge of others' strengths and weaknesses as well as likes and dislikes. The ability to support one another in classroom activities is important, and this becomes a life skill that can be transferred outside of the classroom and the school environment." (152-3)

In an age of standardized testing and school accountability, service-learning is sometimes seen as an unnecessary extra. However, one of the most important characteristics of true service-learning is that it be directly linked to classroom learning. The project and the larger issue it is connected to should be explicitly related to classroom curricula in order to most effectively

support and enrich the subject. Furthermore, service-learning can be even more powerful when it is incorporated into multiple disciplines. Service-learning is often a prime opportunity for teachers to utilize a co-teaching model bridging together two disciplines. In this way, service-learning is not meant to be taught outside of classroom curricula. Rather, it is meant to enrich and support the teaching that is required of teachers and the learning that is required of students.

The reciprocal relationship established by true service-learning is a bond that is perhaps more important today than ever before. Given the current climate state our world's economy, "Today's schools are expected to do more now than they have ever done in the past, often with diminishing resources" (Greenberg, 2008, 467). There is a direct connection between genuine engagement in service-learning and the depleted coffers of our local and state governments. Communities are more likely to invest in schools if the students are, in turn, investing time and effort in the community. In this manner, service-learning can be a great public relations tool for the school as it vies for limited funds with other community groups. Student action in the local community can establish a strong connection between school and community where once there was not.

Focusing on one component, or all.

Admittedly, service-learning can sometimes be a daunting task. Focusing on the desired result, such as alleviating poverty in the local community, would deter even the most dedicated educator. What the social action teacher should focus on, instead, is the importance of each individual component described above. Teachers should not feel as though they have to take every community-related activity all the way to the implementation stage. For example, when my students are learning about the role of the agora, the meeting and market center of ancient

Athens, we extend this conversation to our local community. I make the connection between the role of the agora in ancient Athens and the purpose of a teen center in our community. Students read relevant articles in the local newspaper in order to brainstorm problems in the local community that a teen center might be able to address. Students then use these ideas to design the activities that would take place at their teen center and create designs to illustrate their ideas. There are many other enriching activities that I could do to extend this conversation. However, my purpose for this activity was not to convince the local community of the importance of a teen center through the work of my students. Rather, I wanted to give my students the opportunity to apply their knowledge of this ancient meeting center to their local community. I wanted to give students a forum where they could discuss what issues their "agora" would address and how it would attempt to do this. With this activity, we started the conversation which, for me, is sometimes the most important step.

Service-learning is a proven method with which to connect students with their local community. The social action teacher should not be intimidated by this process. Instead, taking each of the service-learning stages described in this chapter individually and implementing them systematically will serve students well. Allowing students to discuss problems in the community and then to design a manner in which to address them as I did in the aforementioned activity was but one stage. Perhaps we then survey other students in the school to obtain their opinions of what a teen center should hold. Maybe we then also reflect as a class on the potential challenges of building and maintaining such a structure. Students could also engage in a creative thinking technique that would allow them to deepen their understanding of the role of a teen center or the processes that would be involved in the construction of it. This strategy, called S.C.A.M.P.E.R., would generate a plethora of ideas as students substituted other people, places, or ideas;

combined and blended ideas; adapted their ideas to other similar situations; modified, minified, and magnified individual components of their brainstorms; identified other places their ideas could be used; eliminated the components they decided were unnecessary; and then rearranged their ideas. Taking all of this work outside of our class community, perhaps we then use our designs and our discussions to write letters to or create a presentation for the leaders of the community to convince them to allocate funds for the construction of a new teen center. I believe that each of these steps, whether the initial conversation, the planning and designing, or the public sharing of our ideas, are equally important. If we believe that the only way to get students immersed in and connected with the local community is to follow through with every single step of the service learning process, then we, teachers and students, might easily become overwhelmed. Instead, we must embrace the merit of all steps and implement them individually in our classroom when there is a subject topic that lends itself to a particular component. Using the individual elements of the service-learning process makes attaining *Community Connectedness* more manageable for teachers and more importantly, allows students to deeply experience the various components of service-learning in the process of connecting to their local community.

# CHAPTER 5

# CIVIC AWARENESS

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. (101)
>
> - John Dewey, Democracy and Education, 1926

## Fitting *Civic Awareness* into Social Action Teaching.

The processes of the next branch of Social Action Teaching, *Civic Awareness*, mirror many of the ideas discussed in the previous two chapters. In my work over the last several months I have experienced many moments of clarity in which I was able to see clear connections among the concepts I was reading and discussing with others. In fact, the core and three branches of my Social Action Teaching model are based on these same connections. Still, as I continued my research and discussions it was a challenge to continue making distinctions between what should be considered "Community Connectedness" and what should be considered "Classroom Core" and so on. At some point, I realized that the very point of each of my Social Action Teaching branches is that they build on and mutually support one another. "Civic Awareness" cannot exist without true "Community Connectedness" which cannot be possible without establishing a "Classroom Core".

## The state of U.S. civics education.

Chapter 2: *Social Action Teaching* discusses the impact of NCLB on educational approaches like Social Action Teaching. The effects have been similarly devastating to civics

education in the United States. Traditionally, higher-order civic awareness has been reliant upon a foundation of U.S. history incorporated into the elementary school years. Now that many elementary schools are instead hyper-focused on mathematics and literacy skills, students at the high school level are not able to deepen their understanding of their unique role in the daily functioning of our country. Kathy Checkley describes in Priorities in Practice, " 'High schools are just beginning to see kids- especially children from low-income areas- who have had nominal social studies' (7)". Without this foundation, high school teachers have to backload, first teaching the necessary years of U.S. history and then moving onto civics education. Unfortunately, by the time they get to civics in high school, some U.S. students have already fulfilled their high school history requirements. According to the History and Social Sciences Curriculum Framework of the state of Massachusetts, students are "expected to understand their rights and responsibilities as citizens and how to exercise these rights and responsibilities in local, state, and national government" (2003) through an *elective* 12-grade U.S. government course. Conversations about the rights and responsibilities of a citizen need to begin well before the final year of a student's K-12 education and certainly need to be compulsory, rather than voluntary. Social Action Teaching, with its emphasis on social action and communication, leadership, reading, and higher-order thinking skills, may be more easily justified now in this climate of high-stakes testing than other approaches to learning.

The urgency of developing *Civic Awareness*.

According to the National Council for the Social Studies' "Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for the Social Studies", the essential purpose of the subject is "to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as

citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society" (1994). It is becoming more and more the responsibility of schools to transmit the core democratic values of our country to the next generation. According to an article published in the educational journal Phi Delta Kappan in the spring of 2008, the purpose of our public school system is to foster democratic beliefs, values, and action in students because schools are the only context that have the time, people, and other resources with which to face this challenge. Later in this same piece, authors G. Thomas Bellamy and John I. Goodlad state that the ability of our public school system to accomplish this transmission of values is crucial. "In a democratic society, everyone is affected by what schools accomplish as they educate the majority of each generation's voters, jurors, and taxpayers" (2008). Currently, our school systems are producing a generation that will be able to efficiently read, write, and calculate. These same children, however, have not had enough opportunity to apply these skills as informed and effective citizens.

Best practices in *Civic Awareness.*

True civics education, like Social Action Teaching, requires an emphasis on both the knowing and then doing. Therefore, the first essential component to civic awareness is for students to know the history of the United States, the processes of the local, state, and national governments, and their unique rights and responsibilities as citizens. By studying the development of our country from the settlement of North America by Europeans and their interactions with Native Americans to our involvement in the wars of the 20th century, students need to understand the people and events that have shaped our nation's history. Because of this, traditional history courses are absolutely necessary, beginning at the younger ages, in order for students to acquire this knowledge set. According to the 2007 History and Social Sciences

Curriculum Framework of the state of Massachusetts, students should receive instruction on the history of the United States at the elementary level in grades 2 and 5. Additionally, high school students are to receive two years of United States History. This foundation in the elementary schools in essential to the higher-order thinking expected at the high school level and without it, as was mentioned earlier, high school teachers must first teach these civic basics. By studying the rich and varied history of the United States, students can begin to understand their place in this history including the impact of these events on their everyday lives and their personal responsibilities as citizens of this country.

Students also need to face a balanced view of our country's history. According to an 2008 article titled "Citizens of Today and Tomorrow" in Curriculum and Teaching Dialogue journal, traditional civics education tends to emphasize our "nation's strengths and other countries weaknesses" (119). In order for students to be informed citizens they need to have an understanding of the times of challenge in which our country has failed. This will allow them to understand the human role in the course of history. Humans fail and because humans are the most essential component of history, there are moments in history that we all must acknowledge and learn from.

With this foundation of U.S History knowledge, students can then move onto the doing of social action. This is best practiced through the "I do, We do, You do" teaching method. In this approach, the first step involves the teacher modeling the concept being taught, the second step involves the teacher leading the students as they try the concept together, and the third involves the students acting on their own. If a teacher has established a true classroom community as outlined in Chapter 3 then this modeling and initial practice on the part of the students has begun. Students should be introduced to civic practice in the context of the classroom through

the holding of classroom meetings to address areas of concerns and class voting to improve classroom climate and processes. Civic activities need to be incorporated into the most basic functioning of the classroom and the school in order for students to build an understanding of these same processes on a larger, national level. Outside of the classroom, students should be further encouraged to act as citizens as they view and discuss news on a regular basis, develop and articulate clear opinions on relevant issues, and engage in rich debates over important topics.

In the past, civics education has focused more on the knowing of social action than the doing. Yet, many experts in the field of civics now identify that, as Sheldon Berman states in "A Superintendent's Systematic Notion of Civics",

> Participating in a democracy is learned behavior. It takes years to develop the ability to understand the complexity of issues, to negotiate the challenges of political change, and to act effectively on behalf of the common good. One doesn't simply acquire this knowledge and learn these skills through a senior elective civics course in high school. (2008)

Students will not simply absorb an awareness of civics. Rather, civic processes and values must be first modeled by the classroom teacher, then incorporated into the daily procedures of the school, and finally, acted on by the students in their lives in and outside the school.

# CHAPTER 6

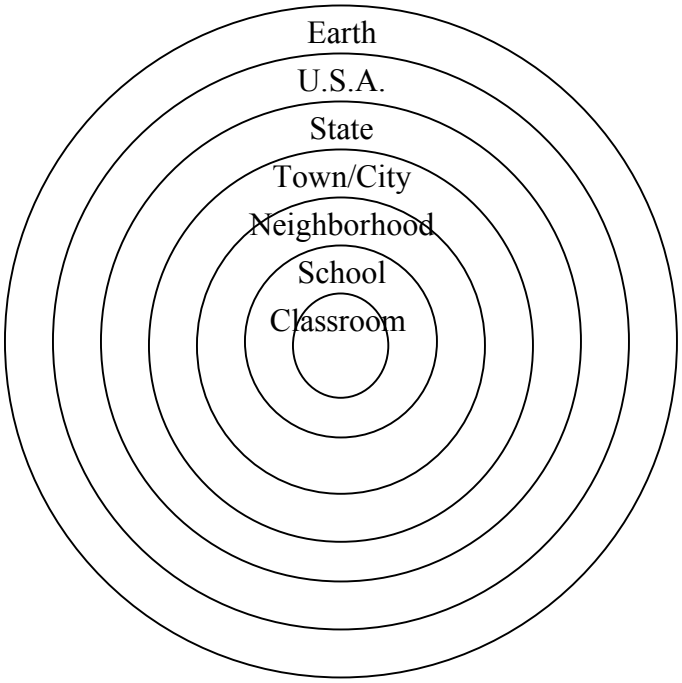
# GLOBAL RESPONSIBILITY

I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world.
-Socrates (470 B.C. - 399 B.C.)

## Teaching from the *here* of students.

Teachers provide a special context conducive to Social Action Teaching through the incorporation of the core and three branches. Establishing a classroom core, fostering community connectedness, and instilling a sense of civic awareness in students provide a foundation on which students can then understand their unique responsibilities as global citizens. In order to understand their place in the global community, social action teachers may employ a simple visualization activity. The following activity allows students to explore the concept of community by investigating what community means and which communities they belong to. Students, at any age level, can identify the communities to which they belong. Using a visual representation of concentric circles will allow students to see the levels of their citizenship, starting from the smallest level of the classroom, moving outwards to the largest level of the entire globe. Students should explore what their membership to these various groups entails, eventually identifying the responsibilities and rights that they possess within each of these communities to which they belong.

Figure 3.




Representing the concept of community using a visual such as that in Figure 3 allows students to see how each community is imbedded and is a division of the next, larger community. This is perhaps most helpful when it comes to the largest community as being citizens of the entire world can sometimes be difficult for younger students to grasp. Students can more easily apply the knowledge and skills associated with the first two branches to the larger and more complex *Global Responsibility* branch once they see that it is simply an extension of the first two.

Knowledge of a global citizen.

Unlike in the case of *Civic Awareness* it would be unreasonable for students to have to first take courses in World History before they begin to develop an understanding of their responsibilities as a global citizen. However, what is important to incorporate at the earliest age is a basic study of geography. I no longer take it for granted that my students have received the necessary instruction in geography that the state of Massachusetts mandates for the sixth grade. Even as middle school students, many cannot accurately label a blank map of the world with the

seven continents and four oceans. In addition, identifying between cities/towns, states, countries, and continents is not as obvious as I once believed it to be. In our studies of the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean Sea area, we begin each unit with a few map activities that allow students to understand the placement of that region on the globe, the modern countries located in the region, and the placement of the region in relation to the United States. In addition, my classroom is adorned with colorful maps of various locations including maps of national parks, historic U.S. cities, city-states of ancient civilizations, thematic maps of the world, and basic U.S. state driving maps. In my experience, students really enjoy looking at maps, especially those most rich in detail and color. As Ira Shor and Paulo Freire explain in their 1984 book, A Pedagogy of Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education, "The political activist and liberatory teacher have to start from the *here* of the students" (my emphasis, 155). Students strive to make sense of their learning according to how it relates to them. Geography, and an emphasis on place, allows students to begin to understand how their actions might affect those in regions that were previously believed to be separate.

Acting as a responsible global citizen.

There is no doubt that our students need different skills today than they did 50 years ago. Instead of workers that can skillfully navigate the industrial age, today's employers are looking for workers with high knowledge and skill sets. Primary Source, a teacher professional development organization based in Watertown, Massachusetts, and Education First Educational Tours, a company that offers travel opportunities for teachers and students recently, collaborated on a video that highlights the need for these skills in a changing economy. According to the video, "Global Education: Preparing Massachusetts Students for Success in today's

Interconnected World", companies are seeking out employees with superior problem-solving, collaboration, and cultural sensitivity skills.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills is an organization that has tried to make sense of these new expectations for schools. The Partnership uses its website (www.21stcenturyskills.org) to provide resources for teachers and schools interested in incorporating the new skills into curricula. The Partnership has created a framework of six crucial skill sets:

1. *Information and communication skills* (information and media literacy skills; communication skills)
2. *Thinking and problem-solving* (critical thinking and systems thinking; problem identification, formulation and solution; creativity and intellectual curiosity)
3. *Interpersonal and self-direction skills* (interpersonal and collaborative skills; self-direction; accountability and adaptability; social responsibility)
4. *Global awareness*
5. *Financial, economic and business literacy*, and developing entrepreneurial skills to enhance workplace productivity and career options
6. *Civic literacy*

As Ken Kay identifies in an article for Middle School Journal, being well-versed in the core academic subjects as the standards mandate is simply not enough for students entering an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Rather, knowing content knowledge and then applying this information through a method like Social Action Teaching is the type of experience today's students need. These skills are specifically appropriate for middle school students says Mary Jo Conery, the assistant superintendent for 21st century learning in a public school district in Tucson, Arizona, "Middle school students are ripe for these kinds of experiences, as they are also developing a sense of identity" (Kay, 2009, 42). As members of various communities, students need to develop multiple identities that allow them to navigate the local, national, and

global communities. Developing these 21st century skills will allow them to act as effective citizens in each of these realms.

Teaching global responsibility, globally.

While budgetary cuts and competing notions of civics education have recently resulted in less hours of citizenry teaching in the United States, other countries are currently implementing citizenship curriculum. The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority of Great Britain's national department of education established citizenship as a subject in its own right in 2007. While some critics originally stated that the goals of the National Curriculum were too lofty, most educators would more than likely agree in the objectives of the subject. The 2007 National Curriculum stresses the importance of citizenship as it allows students to take a more active role in public life.

> Citizenship equips pupils with the *knowledge* and *skills* needed for effective and democratic participation. It helps citizens to become informed, critical, active citizens who have the confidence and conviction to work collaboratively, take action and try to make a difference in their communities and the wider world. (my emphasis)

The goals of the U.K.'s recently adopted Citizenship subject stress the knowing and the doing that are essential to Social Action Teaching.

The Citizenship subject is offered beginning at Key Stages 1 (ages 5-7) through Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) and develops the same concepts through the years. According to the United Kingdom's "Votes at 16 Coalition" website, there is currently a movement to lower the voting age from 18 to 16 and, in some areas, there have been regional elections that have allowed citizens 16 and up to vote (2009). The hope is that with explicit training in national and global

citizenship these younger students will be informed enough to participate in the voting that has traditionally been reserved for older citizens.

Addressing the critics.

Initially the national education departments of the United Kingdom and the regional departments of Canada received some public criticism for their new models. In his article "Empty lessons for Citizen Ignorant" for the London Sunday Times, columnist Chris Woodhead boldly condemned the measure in the spring of 2002,

> [T]he subject is set to become an educational nightmare: ludicrously grandiose in its aspirations, shot through political correctness and based upon the discredited progressive thinking that has damaged the lives of so many children…A quarter of 11-year-olds arrive in secondary school unable to read properly and we…expect them "to consider their identities and the different…identities and communities to which they belong"…If we were not talking about children's lives, it would be comic.

Woodhead's arguments against the citizenship curriculum are very similar to criticisms of similar teaching in the United States. As Chapter 4: *Community Connectedness* identified, our own NCLB has similarly shifted the focus from higher-order thinking to teaching the basics, such as literacy, as Woodhead mentions. Additionally, there are plenty of schools and teachers who would nod their heads in agreement that children who cannot read simply cannot tend to these higher-level concepts like identity and one's place in the community. However, some schools are experimenting with a unique way to combine the two. Instead of students practicing basic reading and writing skills using reading passages selected out of the current Language Arts text, some teachers are utilizing reading selections with specific citizenship-related themes. Mrya Zarnowski describes a teaching strategy that is meant to increase civic and global

awareness in students. Thought experiments strengthen the literacy skills that most educators strive to incorporate into their teaching including vocabulary, identifying main ideas, analyzing details, summarizing, and making inferences. What is different about thought experiments from other literacy teaching is *what* the students are reading. Students engaged in thought experiments are reading the news, articles about historical events, and sources pertaining to social justice figures. Thought experiments require students to follow 4 steps in order to increase both their literacy and civic awareness skills: 1. Decide on a question of inquiry, 2. Write a description of a current issue, 3. Read about a historical figure, and 4. Synthesize the sources to determine how the historical figure would think of the current issue. According to Zarnowski,

> When teachers address both literacy and social awareness as aspects of reading comprehension, they do more than teach children to read the words and get the gist of a text- they address the civic mission of schools. (57)

This approach to literacy directly responds to the criticisms of those that believe we do not have time to teach about citizenship in schools. Perhaps the traditional methods we have used to teach literacy have failed our students and rather than implementing more hours of these methods, we should focus more time on methods that require more of our students.

# CHAPTER 7

# CONCLUSION

> What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility — a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world…
>
> -President Barack Obama, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2009

## A challenge at a unique time.

The growing diversity of the United States is undoubtedly an asset. At the same time, developing effective communication between and opportunities for citizens of diverse ethnicities, religions, languages, and socioeconomic levels is a challenge that requires urgent action in our classrooms. Currently, as Chapter 4: *Community Connectedness* confirms, serious disparities between White students and students of color, between native English speakers and English Language Learners, and between poor students and students with a higher socioeconomic status persist. These inequalities are inherent elements of our education system and teachers must actively work against them each and every day. Because it is the responsibility of our schools to address "the increasingly multicultural and multilingual student body and…the widening social and economic disparities in U.S. society" we must adapt our teaching to balance out these inequalities (Greenberg et. al. 2003, 467). Yet, many have questioned the very methods we are mandated to utilize in order to ensure that none of these children are left behind. I cannot help but wonder to what extent this rigorous focus on standardized education is doing for the students who are already struggling. When children are

already feeling disconnected from schools, how can we be expected to entice them back with regularly scheduled standardized assessments?

I often wonder what we will think of our current teaching thirty years from now. Will I, when I am beginning to think about retirement, laugh at the ridiculousness of this focus or will I be impressed with the precociousness of our system? Will I take pride in the system of which I am a member? Is our focus on standards and testing really allowing me and my colleagues to balance out the inequalities persisting within our system?

Despite these reservations, I have lately experienced a new energy. Whether it be internal and a result of my growing confidence as an educator or through a larger context such as the election of President Barack Obama, it certainly feels like essential changes are within our reach. Indeed, "young people are volunteering at higher rates today than their predecessors did a few years ago" (Walling, 2007, 287). This is precisely the type of energy that we, as educators, must capitalize on. This will require a renewal in our promise that we made when we walked into our first classroom. We must, at all costs, nurture and challenge each and every child that daily looks to us for support. This requires us to think outside the box, to take risks, and then to reflect on the effectiveness of those actions.

As I suggested in my Introduction, I would never have dared to develop an entirely unique approach to teaching *and* to then share it with others in my first few years of teaching. Now, as a teacher who is comfortable with state learning standards, my own expectations for my students, and the unique characteristics of a middle-school adolescent learner, I possess the tools to explore beyond the words of a text or the objectives of a framework. Through this Synthesis I have gained the confidence to research, develop, implement, reflect on and share this method with others. Because of the time and effort that I have invested, I have found this experience

inspiring. My hope is that others have felt a similar sense of spirited empowerment through their reading of this work.

Further questions for consideration.

As is the case with my fellow CCT graduates, each time I read through this work, I come up with more questions to ponder. Though I am pleased with the current form of this Synthesis, I also recognize that, like many other facets of life, there is still plenty of room for growth. Even after this work is printed, bound, and eventually placed on my shelf, I will continue to develop the ideas presented within these pages. Specifically, I would like to further reflect on the following:

- As Nina Greenwald inquired during my public presentation of this work, I wonder how these concepts can be assessed and evaluated. Additionally, how can the social action teacher use this assessment to further shape his/her instruction?
- To what extent can a classroom teacher have an impact beyond the molding of the students who he/she has for one academic year and how is this impact achieved?
- How can the branches of Social Action Teaching be adapted for elementary and high school students?
- Could a classroom be exclusively shaped around Social Action Teaching or are there other elements that need to be incorporated?

Looking forward.

My work in the Critical and Creative Thinking Program has allowed me to grow both personally and professionally. My development of Social Action Teaching through my Synthesis work has given me a glimpse into my future as an educator to which I am immensely

grateful.  This Masters' work has fostered my desire to have an impact beyond my classroom and the subject that I teach. I do not think it would be enough for me to be the teacher that a handful of students remembered long after they left my room. I do not want to be, nor am I, the type of person who goes through the motions, floating until the end is in sight. I read the stories about those great educators who fundamentally change the experiences of others around them. That is what I work to become.

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