Current Events in Social Studies Curriculum

Social Studies is a notoriously difficult subject to define. What constitutes social studies curriculum? What should Social Studies teachers aim to teach their students? In the middle level grades, standards require teachers to plan lessons involving history, geography, politics, economics, AND civics. Should teachers provide a curriculum that is merely a retelling of history as expressed through a textbook? Or should teachers strive to make history relevant to present day society? Does Social Studies simply point at a map to identify the location of Argentina, or does it go beyond a two dimensional page to explain how this large, diverse country came to be? Are the politics, economics, and civics of today independent of the past? Or are they part of a historical continuum of events that have shaped and molded our present day society? When looking at current events in the Social Studies classroom, I reason teachers can relate the social and political significance of these events to shine a more thorough light on the past. Furthermore, I believe that current events and their relationship to history can help students better comprehend and be actively engaged in the politics, geography, and civics of our time.

As expressed by Lowenthal, “youngsters, scarcely conscience that there has been a past give little thought to what it may have been like” (2008). Though this could come across as blanket statement, I believe it suggests many concepts for a Social Studies teacher to consider when teaching history. First, younger students without a developed concept of time pertaining to the vast expanse of human history may have difficulty distinguishing the significance between something that happened 1,000 years ago compared to something that happened 60 years ago. Consequently, students may have trouble relating the events of the distant past to the recent past, and likewise to
modern society. Current events can help students make sense of history by making it more relatable to their lives, culture, and environment.

As an example, let us look at a civil rights event that took place 70 years ago that nearly all 8th grade GPS’ s teach their students. *Plessy vs. Ferguson* was a landmark United States Supreme Court decision upholding the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of "separate but equal." Now what exactly does this mean to an 8th grade student? Possibly, students would view this point in history similarly to how Lowenthal says many history guides still function as, “displaying the past as an aberrant present-sometimes superior, usually inferior to today in aesthetics, behaviors, and beliefs” (2008). The students may conclude that this event happened in an environment whose culture and politics were entirely different then our own. How could anyone think it was ok that people of different race had to attend separate, but “equal” schools? Why did this issue even require a Supreme Court case hearing? I can recall numerous times in school when I myself have been guilty of this mentality. One way to fight this line of thought is to show the ways in which modern day society and contemporary events link to the past.

When examining the civil rights battles being fought today, we can take a look at the LGBT communities struggle for acceptance and equality. For example, in the past five years over 25 states have made gay marriage legal within their borders (a total of 32 altogether). However, the Supreme Court has still not declared this a Constitutional Right. In a USA Today interview with Ted Olson, former solicitor general and current Republican lawyer, Olsen states, “there are people in 18 states of the United States that don’t have this fundamental right that he [Obama] has just announced that he believes in” (Page, 2014). Furthermore, he goes on to say, “When will that happen? And how much misery and how much suffering do individuals in this country have to experience before that
happens?" (Page, 2014). Again, while this statement may seem like an over exaggeration for some, let’s compare the civil rights cases of today with *Plessy v Ferguson*.

In the classroom a teacher could challenge her students to try and view the perspectives of the peoples of the past. How might the people who were opposed to the desegregation of schools in the south have viewed *Plessy v. Ferguson*? How may they have viewed similar civil rights cases dealing with gay marriage in today’s society? A person in the 1950s may have asked the question of why we need to desegregate schools when black people have separate, but equal facilities. Likewise, there are many people today who may ask the question of why the right of marriage need be extended to gay couples, when no one is stopping them from having a relationship. These are the questions a teacher could ask her students in the classroom to help them gain perspective. In addition, these questions prompt students to think about how the events of today and the ways in which people respond to them, are not all that different from the past. In terms of Civil Rights Movement in the United States, our society has made progress, yet current events like these, show how we have a significant road to travel.

As a particular assignment in the classroom, the teacher could ask students to investigate the specific states that have made amendments to their gay marriage laws and those that have not. By looking at the proclamations of the court decisions, students could use the language inherent in these cases to compare and contrast the language used in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Next students could analyze the article pertaining to the Supremes Court’s decision to deny hearing appeals from five states on the overturning of gay marriage bans. Students could then participate in a classroom debate on whether the court’s decision exemplifies an action (allowing other states to freely overturn bans on gay marriage) or an inaction (not affirmatively endorsing gay marriage as a constitutional right), as the article states it should. Finally, students could be challenged to think of the influences of cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* and how they paved a road for equality today. What would be the
The implications of a similar Supreme Court decision mean for the LGBT community today and for the future of civil rights?

The United States was born out of the American Revolution and the creation of the Constitution. The Constitution was designed to allow for amendments we could use to advance our society in the spirit of democracy. Current events help convey to students that democracy is not an end in of itself but a constant battle for civil rights and equality. The beliefs and actions of the people, places, and events of the past have bearing in today’s society. Students should understand we face many of the same challenges as our ancestors did in not blindly accepting the status quo. It is our responsibility as Social Studies instructors to provide students with the essential context and depth of topic necessary for students to relate meaning to their own lives and environments. Social Studies is all about relationships, both past and present. As Parker suggest, “To lead a non-idiotic life is to lead the unavoidable connected and engaged life of the citizen, paying attention to a caring for the public household, the common good” (2003). Through the use of an engaging Social Studies curriculum, current events can help equip students with the tools and knowledge to forge a more just and harmonious future.