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A Void to Fill: Recognizing a Lack of Diversity in the High School Social Studies Curriculum

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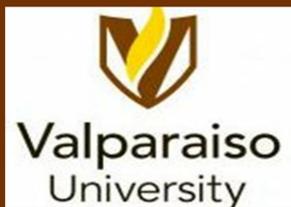


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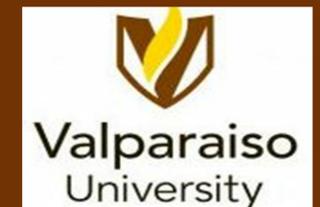
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A VOID TO FILL: RECOGNIZING A LACK OF DIVERSITY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM

Joseph Teeple
Department of Education



ABSTRACT

This action research project analyzed the current perceptions of diversity within the high school history curriculum at a small, predominantly white school district in northwest Indiana. Sixty-seven students participated on two separate days for this project. On the first day, a survey was distributed in which students provided anonymous, biographical information about themselves. Using a Likert scale, students also indicated their responses to five questions pertaining to their value on diversity and their thoughts on its inclusion in the current curriculum. On the following day, students were asked to jot down as many important historical figures in which they could recall from their previous lessons. These would later be analyzed to assess the demographics of all historical persons submitted by students. My results suggested that most students believed they had encountered an adequate amount of diversity in their history curriculum. This perception was not accurately reflected in the students' lists of historical persons they remembered studying throughout the year. The results from this study indicate that students are vastly unaware of the lack of diversity presented in their high school social studies curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

- Few studies thus far have analyzed students' attitudes towards history and how these sentiments correlate with their own national pride and/or shame.
- There is considerable debate as to whether multicultural and civic education can co-exist in the social studies curriculum.
- In the State of New York, multicultural education has been used by African American educators and leaders to address issues of inequality in both academics and income.
- Much debate has occurred regarding the inclusion of religion and religious values in the United States social studies curriculum.
- Carter G. Woodson provided great contributions to the modern multicultural movement. This is evident in his strive for more community education initiatives.
- The push towards a multicultural social studies curriculum seeks to replace the historic mission of U.S. public schools, which traditionally included the need to establish a national identity that all citizens share.
- James A Banks' social action approach for multicultural education helps students discover social injustices within their own communities.

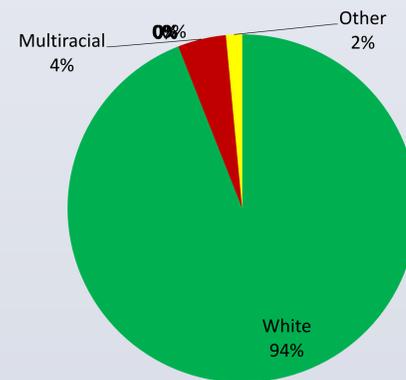
RESEARCH QUESTION

Do high school juniors in a small, predominantly white town perceive a lack of diversity in the social studies curriculum?

METHODOLOGY

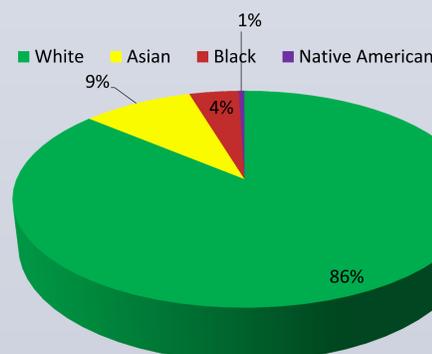
The action research occurred at a small high school in northwest Indiana comprising approximately 250 students in Grades 9-12. According to the 2010 U.S. Census data, the small school is situated in a community in which 93% of the population is white. This is consistent with the layout of my classroom as well. Sixty-seven students, divided between three sections of a U.S. History class, participated in this project. Thirty-five students were male, while thirty-two students were female. Three students identified themselves as multiracial while one student identified herself as "Other." All remaining students claimed to be White. Two sophomores and one senior participated in the project; sixty-four students hailed from the junior class. On one day, students completed a questionnaire seeking their thoughts on the diversity in their social studies curriculum; the survey also sought students' personal value on diversity. Students indicated their responses on a Likert scale; their responses would later be averaged. On the following day, students were asked to submit the names of as many historical figures as they remembered studying throughout the year. Their responses would later be analyzed and categorized according to the gender and race of the students' submissions.

Classroom Demographics

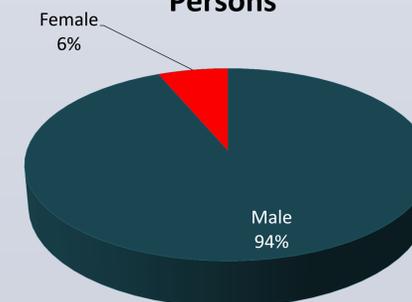


SURVEY RESULTS

Race/Ethnicity of Historical Persons



Gender of Historical Persons



DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

My action research revealed fascinating insights into students' perceptions of diversity in the high school social studies curriculum. My female students on average differed from their male counterparts by only .1. This surprised me as I thought more females would recognize an imbalance in the curriculum, particularly regarding their own gender. It seemed most students overestimated their interactions with diverse historical figures, as evidenced by student responses to the survey and follow-up activity. When asked about the quantity of diverse representation contained in their textbook, students indicated that they agreed an adequate amount was presented. The average student also indicated that the diverse material in their textbook better helped them understand issues facing other cultures and groups. Although students seemed to believe they encountered ample diverse figures in their curriculum, they only seemed able to recall a disproportionate number of white and male persons. This study poses intriguing questions to social studies educators.

- How do we incorporate more diversity in our curriculum?
- Should we emphasize our curriculum's biases to students so they are more aware of this void?

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of my research results was the fact that students seem relatively unconcerned with studying diverse perspectives. The average student indicated that they disagreed with diverse perspectives being a top priority for learning in their history class. This challenges teachers to develop teaching methods that stress the importance of learning about diverse cultures and people and translate this learning objective into something all students can appreciate.

Limitations and Challenges

- Students had not yet studied the Civil Rights Movement, which inevitably omitted potential diverse responses
- Study was conducted on two separate days; thus my data variables (students in the class) may have changed
- Submissions with Asian historical figures may have been inflated, as the class was studying Mao Zedong and Jiang Jieshi at the time

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