

CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PEDAGOGY: HOW TEACHERS CAN TEACH THE NEW MAJORITY IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By Sheikia Talley-Matthews and Greg Wiggan

Since the beginning of common schools in the nineteenth century, American education has served the purpose of transmitting White Euro-American norms and culture.¹ Social studies teachers and their classrooms have often been ground zero for perpetuating fragmented hegemonic historical accounts of United States and world history that portray White Euro-Americans as saviors of humanity. The teaching of distorted information from American textbooks has caused students of color to become disengaged with history and social studies, while denying them opportunities to explore the contributions of their own cultural groups.²

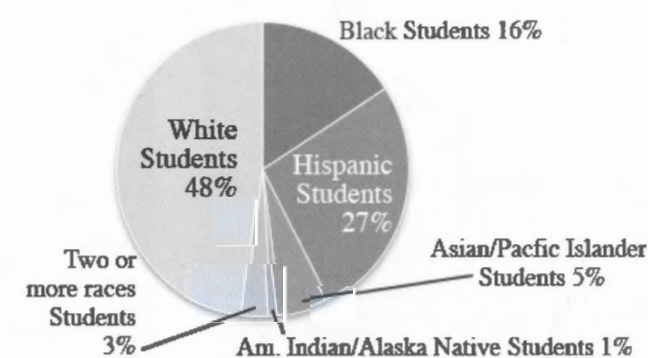


Figure 1. US Public School Population, 2017-18 School Year (NCES, 2017)

We raise the question; how should social studies teachers teach the new 51.9 percent non-White majority of public school students? According to Milner (2012), the racial demographics of the new non-White majority students in public schools would lead most educators to label them as urban and different.³ Therefore, social studies teachers must have content knowledge to teach multicultural lessons. They must also have pedagogical knowledge to know what culturally responsive methods work for their students, such as those outlined by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). To be effective, teachers must understand the social, political, cultural, and physical environments in which students live and learn. In connection with the theme of “Black Migrations,” this article will help teachers implement culturally sustaining pedagogy in social studies classrooms.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy

Django Paris and H. Samy Alim’s work, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies* (CSP), challenges educators to de-center Whiteness in teaching practices.⁴ CSP seeks to foster and sustain the value of languages, literacies, histories, and cultural ways of being for minority communities through education. The goals of CSP are built upon Gloria Ladson-Billings’s concept of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), in which teachers use students’ home culture and community experiences as pedagogical tools, as well as to promote academic success.⁵ The goals of CRP are for teachers to become culturally aware and to use multicultural education strategies in their classrooms. Paris, Alim, and Ladson-Billings recognize that culture is constantly evolving among students, and that teacher pedagogy must reflect student cultures.

Theory into Practice

For the purpose of discussion, we ask the question: what does CSP look like in a social studies lesson on Black migrations? As noted, teachers must have content and pedagogical knowledge. However, teachers’ content knowledge should expand further than the class text: it should also include primary source data and additional readings and artifacts to support subject matter content. How can teachers engage students with the topic of Black migration in a way that is culturally sustaining to minority communities? In light of the NCSS standards for history, which aim to enable learners to develop historical comprehension so they can reconstruct historical events, music could be used as a pedagogical tool. For example, the lyrics of Big Daddy Kane’s old school hip-hop song “Word to the Mother (Land)” may be helpful in introducing Black migrations.

Take a stand [in] the fight for power
Cause we’ve been here before the Mayflower
Living superior abiding by nature
The history of the Asiatic one paid the
Price to be paid in slavery
Like the name of Antonio was gave to me
But knowledge of self broke every shackle and chain
Now I declare myself as the Big Daddy Kane
The teacher, teaching a lesson to be heard
That’s word, to the mother my brother
So discover the truth of one another
Cause here’s the real deal upon our skin color
Lay down white, yellow, red or pink
But the color of black is most dominant
The rising and sizing can never cease
[Marley Marl: what you going say now?]
Peace!⁶

After reviewing the lyrics, the teacher could ask students to deconstruct the meaning of verse two of the song, where the author states, “Cause we’ve been here before the Mayflower.” The social studies teacher could ask what this phrase means to the class, and the use of this hip-hop song could lead the social studies class into a discussion on pre-Columbus Black migration, which is discussed in Ivan Van Sertima’s book, *They Came Before Columbus*. Van Sertima argues that the migration of Black Africans to the Americas began long before the arrival of Columbus and European explorers during the late 1400s.⁷ The presence of Black Africans in Central America, Mexico, and parts of the southern US can be dated back to as early as 800 to 700 BCE, beginning with Olmec culture. Archaeologists in the Americas have found detailed clay and terra-cotta artifacts with images of people with African features, including full lips, wide noses, and kinky hair, going as far back as 700 BCE.⁸ Van Sertima argues that the Black Africans’ interactions within the Mexican region inspired researchers to investigate their artifacts. The Olmecs erected massive structures with god-like images in pre-European and pre-Columbus periods of history. Van Sertima further asserts that the coming of Columbus and the Transatlantic Slave Trade altered the course of Africans and people of African descent to the lowest form of existence around the globe.

In addition to introducing pre-Columbus Black migration, the teacher could show students photographs of these Black archaeological artifacts discovered in the Americas prior to the entry of Columbus and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. After they view the photographs, the teacher could allow students to return to the hip-hop song by Big Daddy Kane, “Word to the Mother (Land).” The teacher could then ask the students to recreate the lyrics to the song based on their personal interpretations.

After the initial lesson on Black migration, social studies teachers should continue the lesson to include the Transatlantic Slave Trade and The Great Migration. The Transatlantic Slave Trade took place during the 1400s to 1800s; millions of Africans were enslaved and transported from their homelands throughout Africa to the Americas and Europe.⁹ Furthermore, in 1619, many Black slaves were transported from Caribbean islands to Jamestown, Virginia. In fact, under the order of King James of England, the first Black African slaves arrived in North America from the island of Barbados in 1619.¹⁰ The Transatlantic Slave Trade was a detrimental experience for African people and their descendants. Teaching this content from a CSP perspective involves teachers allowing their students of color to process their experiences through modern-day struggles with racial inequalities, segregation,

unemployment, and underemployment. This could help bring to life the class lesson on migration.

Between 1916 and 1970, while the US was fighting in World War I, masses of Black people fled the Jim Crow South in search of better economic and racial conditions in the North and Midwest. This is known as the Great Migration. However, as large numbers of Blacks migrated to the North, they still encountered racial discrimination in employment and housing.¹¹ During this time, people from the Caribbean also migrated to the US in great numbers to find work in the industrial boom of the country.¹² Many people from the Caribbean migrated to Florida and New York. In the 1920s, Harlem became the world’s largest Black urban community. Its residents migrated from the South, as well as from Jamaica, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti, among other places, and many of these immigrants were a part of the Harlem Renaissance.¹³ These migrations provide important content that could enrich a modern-day social studies lesson.

Conclusion

In closing, the purpose of this article was to provide an approach for implementing CSP on Black migrations in social studies classrooms. CSP seeks to enhance traditional classrooms through cultural enrichments and student-centered activities. As such, CSP can be used to help dismantle hegemonic structures in America’s schools.

Notes:

1. Kathleen Bennett DeMarrais and Margaret Diane LeCompte, *The Way Schools Work: A Sociological Analysis of Education* (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1995), 10-11.
2. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: New Press, 1995), 301.
3. Richard H. Milner, “But What Is Urban Education?” *Urban Education* 47, no. 3 (2012): 556–61, accessed February 6, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085912447516>
4. Django Paris and H. Samy Alim, *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 1-8.
5. Gloria Ladson-Billings, “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy,” *American Educational Research Journal* 32, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 465–91, accessed October

- 12, 2017, <http://journals.sagepub.com.librarylink.uncc.edu/doi/pdf/10.3102/00028312032003465>.
6. Big Daddy Kane, "Word to the Mother," released June 28, 1988, accessed October 20, 2017, <https://genius.com/Big-daddy-kane-word-to-the-mother-land-lyrics>.
 7. Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 25–31.
 8. Ibid.
 9. John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Knopf, 2000), 40–44.
 10. Greg A. Wiggan, *In Search of a Canon: European History and the Imperialist State* (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense-Springer Publishers, 2015), 55.
 11. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 374–76.
 12. Greg A. Wiggan and Jean T. Walrond, *Following the Northern Star: Caribbean Identities and Education in North American Schools* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science, 2013), 45–52.
 13. Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 401–17.



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Lesson Plan:

Pre-Columbus Black Migration

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Connections to Middle School and High School

Goal of Lesson Plan: To teach students to critically think about history and Black migration by analyzing music and photographs.

Objective: Students will examine photos of artifacts from the pre-Columbus time period 800 BCE–1492 CE. Students will gain an understanding of various time periods of Black migration.

National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) Standards:

• History

Enable learners to develop historical comprehension so they might reconstruct the literal meaning of a historical passage; identify the central question(s) addressed in historical narratives; draw upon data in historical maps, charts, and other graphic organizers; and draw upon visual, literary, or musical sources.

• Culture and Cultural Diversity

Guide learners as they predict how data and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural groups and frames of reference.

• Warm up Activity (Addresses NCSS Standards: Culture and Cultural Diversity)

Directions: Students will complete a Know, Want, Learn (KWL) activity about the topic of migration via a class twitter account. KWL activities address: What do students know about this topic? What do students want to know about this topic? What did students learn?

Activity 1 (Addresses NCSS Standard: History)

Students will be provided with a copy of the lyrics to a hip-hop song by Big Daddy Kane titled "Word to the Mother (Land)." The class will also listen to the song. After reviewing the lyrics, the teacher will ask students to deconstruct the meaning of verse two of the song, where the author states, "Cause we've been here before the Mayflower." The teacher will raise the question "What does the phrase mean?"

Activity 2

The teacher will introduce students to pre-Columbus Black migration. The teacher will then provide students with photographs of images archaeologists discovered of Black Africans living in the Americas prior to the coming of Columbus and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. After viewing the photographs, allow students to return to the hip-hop song "Word to the Mother (Land)" by Big Daddy Kane.

Assessment

Informal assessment: Class participation in a discussion on pre-Columbus Black migration. Formal assessment: Students will recreate the lyrics to the song based on their personal interpretation of Black migration. This CSP assessment is designed to support the value of languages, literacies, histories, and cultural ways of being of minority students.

• **Teacher Resources:** James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*; *Sankofa* (documentary by Haile Gerima)

