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# Food for Thought: A Framework for Social Justice in Social Studies Education

LaGarrett King

*University of Missouri*, [kinglj@missouri.edu](mailto:kinglj@missouri.edu)

G. Sue Kasun

*Georgia State University*, [skasun@gsu.edu](mailto:skasun@gsu.edu)

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# Middle School

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## Food for Thought

by LaGarrett King and G. Sue Kasun

**A**round the world, societies struggle with issues of discrimination and many individuals are denied their rights as a result of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, socioeconomic class, or disability. Since the purpose of social studies education “is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society” (NCSS, 1994), many scholars believe social studies education is an appropriate field to explore these topics of injustice (Banks, 2004; Wade, 2007).

Although social studies educators often agree with that sentiment, many wonder how they can approach these topics of injustice and help students realize and promote social change in society. This essay offers teachers a praxis and some clarity about social justice education and how social studies classrooms can be conduits for its practical dimensions. First, we provide a brief description of social justice education and its ideal role in the social studies classroom. Next, we describe important characteristics of a social justice conceptual framework and provide practical examples of how these components work in classrooms by using food as an exemplar. Last, we provide suggestions for middle school teachers who want to explore social justice education as an instructional practice.

### Defining Social Justice and Social Studies

We define social justice education as the pedagogical practice of guiding students toward critically discussing, examining, and ac-

tively exploring the reasons behind social inequalities and how unjust institutional practices maintain and reproduce power and privilege that have a direct impact on students’ lives. Social justice education is both a process and goal (Bell, 1997), and educators have a long history advocating its importance as a means to address inequalities related to race, immigration, and women’s rights (Crocco & Davis, 2002; Evans, 2004; Stanley, 2005; Watkins, 1993). Contemporary social studies scholars (Au, 2009; Banks, 2004; Tyson & Park, 2006; Wade, 2007) continue to promote social justice education as a primary curricular and pedagogical mechanism in an increasingly globalized world and among increasingly diverse student populations. Social justice educators help students “unveil the world of oppression, transforming it into a just world for the purpose of empowerment” (Tyson & Park, 2006, p. 23).

Through the process of social justice education, teachers help students develop what Freire (1970) termed *conscientização*, a “consciousness raising” through which students develop a sociopolitical awareness that helps them formulate and address

*LaGarrett King is an Assistant Professor of Secondary Social Studies Education at Clemson University and has 13 years of experience as a social studies educator. His research interests include history education, curriculum history, and critical multicultural education. King’s work has been published in Multicultural Perspectives, The Social Studies, Theory and Research in Social Education, and the Journal of Social Studies Research. His email is lagarrk@clemson.edu.*

*G. Sue Kasun is an Assistant Professor of Education at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. A bilingual, former teacher and administrator of English language learners in Mexico and the United States, she researches transnational families and students, ways of knowing, and critical multicultural education. Her work has been published in the Berkeley Review of Education and Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education. Her email is gskasun@gmail.com.*

## Focus on Middle School

### EDITOR:

Detra Price-Dennis  
*University of Texas at Austin*

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questions about societal injustices and supporting structures. It is not enough, however, that students only understand that injustices are happening. They also must recognize that they are agents of change who can make a difference in the world. Therefore, following Freire's sense of consciousness raising, awareness turns to action and transformation of the world around them.

We argue that social justice in the social studies classroom encompasses three important principles: critical historical knowledge, critical sociopolitical literacy, and application with agency. This conceptual framework is not intended to be all-encompassing of social justice principles; rather, it is a guide for social studies educators interested in creating and maintaining a curriculum and pedagogy that has a social justice emphasis. To provide clarity of the concepts, we use the topic of food to showcase how these principles can come alive in classrooms. Depending on the context and purpose of instruction, any culture's food could be reframed and used for the pursuit of social justice education. Specifically, we use Mexican food due to its misuse as a method of teaching about the largest immigrant group in the United States. It has been excessively used as an ill-conceived (if well-intentioned) component of the "foods, fiestas, and festivals" approach to multicultural education (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 127). The end result of this model does not promote social justice; rather, it shapes students into cultural tourists. Students may be left with the impression that they have "experienced" a different culture without ever having to understand the social, historical, political, and economic contexts in which cultures are situated (Gorski, 2006), and to which the production and consumption of food is linked. Therefore, throughout our explanation of a social justice framework, we reframe Mexican food in order to reincorporate social studies instruction toward social justice.

### Critical Historical Knowledge

Critical historical knowledge means continually providing students with a thorough historical contextualization of social studies content. Educators can begin with the textbook, but must be able to move beyond it to explore a deeper understanding that considers multiple perspectives of historically underserved communities, critiques common sense notions that often only serve the interests of the most powerful (Kumashiro, 2004), and demonstrates the importance of micro and macro analyses. If students are not exposed to or given the opportunity for a critical historical analysis, knowledge becomes ahistorical and decontextualized. Hence, students will have a narrow understanding of the political, social, and economic systems that create and sustain oppressive social dynamics, which might otherwise be transformed to the greater benefit of all in society, not just the most powerful (Hackman, 2005). To be effective, social studies educators have to be knowledgeable about multiple positions on an issue so they can effectively provide a knowledge base and dialogue that facilitates students' critical thinking. Additionally, social studies educators serve as models for students on how to approach content through an analytic lens.

To better understand critical historical knowledge, consider the issue of Mexican food. Teachers who choose to use food to promote cultural understanding ought to go beyond the typical lesson requiring students to prepare and share food that "represents" the culture being studied. Instead, teachers can have students begin to question their own accepted conceptions of food in the first place. For instance, teachers can examine not only the what regarding the general staples of the Mexican diet, but also the historical why. In the case of Mexico, tortillas made from corn are a well-known staple. Tortillas are rooted in indigenous cosmology and meaning systems, which can be explored using basic and thought-provoking texts (see recommended texts). Teachers can provide primary source documents that speak to the historicity of Mexican food and all of its manifestations, from indigenous Mexicans to the ways corn is used across other

cultures. Concretely, the teacher might invite guest speakers, including parents, community experts, and museum curators, into the classroom to speak about their working knowledge of both planting and harvesting corn, as well as the complicated process of how the corn is transformed from kernel to masa/dough to tortilla. This “funds of knowledge” approach (González, Molly, & Amanti, 2005) positions local community members as resources and reframes students’ thinking about these communities. This exploration of multiple perspectives allows for students to move beyond knowledge that supports the narrative of the dominant culture, gives voice to historically oppressed persons, and provides a framework to understand distinct group dynamics.

The contemporary experience of Mexican immigrants can be addressed as well, including how and why their diets have changed. Mexican immigrants often lose a relatively healthier diet and adopt an American diet that includes higher consumption of processed foods and sugar in just one generation (Batis, Hernandez-Barrera, Barquera, Rivera, & Popkin, 2011). To explore further, micro and macro analyses can be done in classrooms in which students compare and contrast their individual diet with traditional Mexican diets. Teachers can ask several questions shifting between individual (micro) and group (macro) understandings. What is my diet comprised of? How does it differ from more traditional Mexican diets? What is it Mexican families trade when they shift to the U.S. diet? These questions allow a historical contextualization that permits knowledge scaffolding, which leads students to see the relevancy of food to their lives, to those around them, and to those abroad.

### Critical Sociopolitical Literacy

Sociopolitical literacy refers to the ability to critically examine knowledge as multifaceted, complex, and—depending on the creator—either oppressive or liberatory. Educators need to teach students to identify why and how knowledge is created and who its creators are and their interests, as well as to uncover commonsense assumptions of knowledge while recognizing multiple and oppressed voices. In this way, they will be able to promote social change. Freire (1970) believes we should teach students to “read and write the world,” which requires not just understanding but also questioning institutionalized knowledge as well as facilitating solutions for injustices. Critical historical knowledge is only the first step teachers should take in developing social justice lessons; without an understanding of the nuances of knowledge, students’ ability to challenge inequities will be stunted.

To draw further from the example of Mexican food, critical sociopolitical literacy can be cultivated by asking what leads Mexicans to replace their native foods and what should be done about it? Critical understandings of marketing can be used in this effort, such as through the U.S. government’s initiative to develop critical middle-school age readers through

Admongo.gov. Students can critically examine advertising (on television, websites, newspapers, and magazines) that is aimed both at youth and at immigrant communities. Students also can develop understandings about the availability of healthier foods in certain locations and their lack of availability in “food deserts” (Smith, 2011), as well as consider advocating for better food choices in their own schools and communities. In practice, teachers can have students bring a log of what they see advertised on television during the programming they watch and then use the tools they learn from critical analysis to make sense of how and why marketing is being used to shift their food preferences. Together, the teacher and students can research profits of the companies that manufacture processed foods and compare them to the profits of companies that produce whole foods (such as grains and legumes). Finally, the teacher could invite another outside resource to share community knowledge about how some organizations are working to help families provide healthier foods despite the food deserts in which they often find themselves.

### Application With Agency

Teaching students to critique the world is important; without fostering activism, however, students can become cynical and feel agentless while facing social injustices (Freire, 1970). Application with agency involves students’ enactment of social justice principles into an action plan that can be implemented to improve society. This approach helps students understand the link between classroom content and the real world, which increases lesson relevancy. It also empowers students to be agents of change. Application with agency can be implemented in myriad ways. Students can promote awareness of social injustices through artistic expression, writing campaigns to local and national government officials and agencies, and digital media (Facebook pages, Twitter), or through the planning of actual grassroots protests and/or information sharing sessions.

Returning to the idea of Mexican food, students’ ambition for activism must be foregrounded; it is counterproductive for the teacher to impose her/his vision on students. Students may include options that represent the healthier side of Mexican food among their food possibilities. They also may want to return to the sense of food as part of the life cycle and consider their own cosmologies and how they relate to understanding the nourishment of their selves on this physical level. Students could learn about, debate, and advocate for or against the imposition of present-day “sin taxes” on what are considered unhealthy foods, such as soft drinks and cookies. Finally, returning again to the sense of having the greater community be part of the classroom experience, as noted in the critical historical knowledge and critical sociopolitical literacy examples, students, with the guidance of their teacher, take their work into the community in an effort toward transformation. Students could protest the marketing (and manipulation) of both youth and immigrant

groups by large corporations whose usual push for the bottom line of increasing profits takes little account of historic and healthier practices of various groups or the physical needs of today's youth. Students may choose to promote healthier food choices at their schools and/or campaign to increase awareness among students about those choices.

## Conclusion

Social studies educators can convey to students the need for critique and social justice efforts in our schools and communities in a way that promotes the agency of students as learners and as possessing the ability to transform the world in which they live. Throughout our essay, we used the example of Mexican food as a demonstration of how educators can facilitate students' critical historical knowledge, critical sociopolitical literacy, and their application of these understandings with agency. As a result, students would find themselves as historical players who can and do work toward change while developing deeper understandings of different cultural groups and the historic and political contexts in which groups are situated. We agree with Hackman (2005) that social studies educators need to stress a critical analysis of their societies and the social action that accompanies it. This is not an unpatriotic endeavor. Instead, we need to stress the importance of equality and our responsibilities as citizens to "participate, voice, and protest" (Hackman, 2005 p. 106), so we can continue our dream, through education, of a truly democratic society.

## Recommended Texts

### Books About Mexican Food

- Aliki. (1976). *Corn is maize: The gift of the Indians*. New York, NY: Harper Trophy.
- Anaya, R. A. (2012). *The first tortilla: A bilingual story*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Gonzalez-Jensen, M. (1997). *Mexico's marvelous corn/El maravilloso maíz de Mexico*. Oxford, England: Rigby.

### Books About Corn and the Mexican Diet for

#### Teacher Preparation

- Fusserl, B. (2004). *The story of corn*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Pilcher, J. M. (2012). *Planet taco: A global history of Mexican food*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

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- Evans, R. W. (2004). *The social studies wars: What should we teach the children?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
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- Tyson, C. A., & Park, S. C. (2006). From theory to practice: Teaching for social justice. *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, 19(2), 23-25.
- Wade, R. C. (2007). *Social studies for social justice: Teaching strategies for the elementary classroom*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
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# Being a Social Justice Educator

by **Mindy Hall**

“We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from this Earth. We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.” These words, spoken by President Barack Obama, are hanging prominently in my middle school social studies classroom. They are reflected in my teaching and assessment practices, classroom environment, the professional work I engage in, and the relationships I have with others.

Teaching for social justice is what I do. It is so interwoven in my educational practices that it is often difficult for me to discern the difference between “teaching” and “teaching from a social justice perspective.” Social justice recognizes that each and every person has value and the focus is on both individuals and groups. “Groups” can be as obvious as ethnicity and religion or as unapparent as divisions based on sexual orientation, ability, or socioeconomic status.

A visitor in my classroom may witness a 7th-grade world history lesson focusing on the development and growth of Islam and how it differed from the Christian Crusades. On another visit, the focus may be an 8th-grade lesson on life in the southern American colonies in the 18th century from the perspective of a slave. Students in my classes are taught from various perspectives, in the hopes of giving them awareness of, insight about, and appreciation for various viewpoints, time periods, systems, historical trends, and cultural groups. Critical thinking is woven throughout, focusing on concept formation, similarities and differences, and making connections. Students might be asked to compare a historic leader with a modern-day one. They might be told to write from the perspective of a Native American who sided with the French during the French and Indian War. While studying about items traded along the Silk Road during a certain time period, students might be instructed to describe the impact of a selected item on modern life. At times, students must compare a historic person, event, or time period to themselves or their lives.

When students are able to connect to their learning, it often becomes more relevant and important to them. In addition to the connections described above, I also vary my instructional and assessment strategies to spark interest in the content we are studying and to create an environment focused on student success. I often weave choice into my formative and summative assessments to meet student needs and provide layered opportunities to interact with the content. For example, instead of a paper-and-pencil test, students might be assigned a project (format is their choice) with specific guidelines explained in a rubric. Such a project can be done individually or with a peer. Assessments in my classroom also include creating illustrations, engaging in creative writing projects, participating in classroom discussions and group work, conducting student-directed research, role-playing, incorporating art and music, using primary resources, supplementing texts with trade books and video clips, and demonstrating learning through interactive Smartboard activities.

If teaching for social justice is about recognizing that each and every person has value, then teaching for social

justice means meeting the needs of all students through instructional strategies, assessment practices, relationships, and classroom environment. I often have heard that parents teach their children more by how they live their lives than by what they say. The same is true for teachers. It is not what I teach but rather how I teach it. The environment in which my teaching and assessing takes place is as important as my practices.

The walls of my classroom display pictures of children from a variety of cultures, races, and time periods. Quotes from Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., George Washington, Mohammad, Melba Pattillo Beals, various Native American leaders, Desmond Tutu, and others also cover my walls. Photos of both famous and obscure places throughout the world are interwoven with quotations or proverbs about the importance of diversity and respect. I selectively choose to decorate my classroom with such posters, quotes, poems, and pictures to create an environment that is welcoming and inclusive of all. My hope, as I have shared with students and parents alike, is that each student will “find” himself or herself somewhere in my classroom. What do I mean by this? A Muslim student might read a quote by Mohammad and feel welcome in my space. An African American student might feel as if she “belongs” when she sees a poster of The Little Rock Nine hanging on a wall in my room. A student who has lesbian moms might feel accepted when she reads the poem entitled “Gay” displayed near her desk.

Additionally, my bookshelves are filled with diverse selections of picture, nonfiction, chapter, historical fiction, and poetry books at a variety of levels. The books are not just there as decoration, but are used throughout both my world history and American history classes. I might supplement a unit on African kingdoms with a picture book of a Mali tale or share a historical fiction book about a slave auction in the mid-19th century. In this way, I hope to relate to students in ways that make the most of their learning styles or interest levels.

It is important to not only have social justice goals in mind as a unit or lesson is planned, but also create an environment that is supportive of such goals. Telling students that they should recognize and appreciate diversity is hollow unless you create an environment that supports this ideology. Asking students to recognize and appreciate the many interconnections and interdependence of a global community has more meaning when it is taught in numerous ways and students are evaluated on such connections.

Students in my classes know who I am and what I am about. They know I respect, trust, and value their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. The teacher I am is consistent with who I am in other aspects of my life. This realness creates a learning environment that supports teaching from a social justice perspective.

*Mindy Hall is a 7th- and 8th-grade social studies teacher at Bexley Middle School in Columbus, Ohio. She has presented at numerous local and national conferences and her work is featured in Acting Out! Combating Homophobia Through Teacher Activism, Teachers College Press, 2010.*