

Social Justice Feature

Lois McFadyen Christensen

Feature Editor



Why the Attraction to Social Studies?

Lois McFadyen Christensen, PhD
University of Alabama at Birmingham

Abstract

This column is a reminiscent piece about how the origin of my work in the social studies and social justice was launched by a thoughtful and dedicated renaissance teacher.

Introduction

As social studies teachers for social justice, the real work is to try to understand people in the margins and envision how the impact of each of the social studies disciplines and themes might be infused into the core curriculum to enable students to do the same. As Proust once said, “to discover is not in seeing new places, but in seeing with new eyes.” Sister Willana did just that. She was an eighth grade teacher at St. Cyril’s Elementary School in Tucson, Arizona. Her influence was the catalyst that generated a fascination with the multifaceted issues of critical social studies for social justice.

Well before reading conferences were popular and supported by the literature, Sr. Willana met with us about what we were reading. Up until that point in 1964-65, fiction was my reading of choice. This renaissance nun noticed something in many others and probably in me. Looking back, often wondering if it was the excitement on my face when she would pull down the large world maps when discussing world affairs to famous artists or the work done by our small debate group that she noticed latent possibility through my interests and potential. Whatever it was, she redirected my choices to nonfiction and historical fiction literature that was linked to social studies and social justice. That has made all the difference.

Contextual Information

Just to set the educational stage, there were close to 50 students in the class. Most of us had been together since first grade. Most of the girls were still girl scouts and had been in the same troop since brownies. This was southern Arizona and it was hot, really hot. People like to say that it is a dry heat, but it is extremely hot nonetheless. Sr. Willana wore a woolen, black habit in which only her hands and face were exposed. There was no air conditioning in our school, only coolers comprised of an electric blower with water running over hay mats. This was our air conditioning in addition to the hum of a large fan that stood in the corner of the classroom.

Sr. Willana took great pleasure in sports, so in early October, a small black & white television appeared in the classroom to watch the World Series. At recess, she played with us which none of our other teachers did. One memory fixed in my memory is of Sr. Willana lifting up that huge, black skirt with a large rosary draping down her habit as she booted a kick ball playing kickball with us. She had a mean pitch too and impressed everyone, especially the boys, as her long softball hits soared into the outfield. She could get an easy double with teammates on base. Her volleyball serves were almost unable to be returned. No doubt, having Sr. Willana on your team was an asset.

Most parents in our school community knew each other. We grew up in a tight community. In essence, we learned, played, and prayed together.

The Social Studies and Literature Connection

For me, learning was implemented in an appealing and interdisciplinary manner. It was predictable that reading, writing, and social studies often occurred simultaneously. Sr. Willana nudged us to read different types of literature than we usually chose to read. She was the only teacher in elementary school that I recall conferencing with students while encouraging us to choose certain texts and then discussing what we learned and thought about the text afterward.

It is difficult to recall in what order I read the pieces of nonfiction and historical fiction that eighth-grade year with Sr. Willana as my teacher. I *do* remember, however, that she kept note cards. Imagine, note cards for all fifty of us. It was a good thing that she was a nun!! In my mind's eye, I still see how we sat around the room in small groups for our conferences. This type of learning was prior to book talks and literature circles. I *do* know that we were not grouped homogeneously, because my dearest friend was extremely bright. She was not in my group as she had been throughout our years together in school. We had a school library. However, Sr. Willana kept a large classroom library in the back of the classroom near the cloakroom, and it was from there that the books I read came.

Recollecting Reading for Social Studies, Justice, and Life Lessons

My dad was in World War II. He harbored discrimination toward Japanese people. While reading John Hersey's (1946) *Hiroshima*, images of brightly-colored, floral pictures on kimonos worn by Japanese women that were burned onto their bodies from the decision to drop an atomic bomb onto civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not only factual but horrifying to me. In silence, I agonized about it for years. Even in my first 6 years of teaching with the daughter of

interned Japanese Americans, about whom both my parents cared deeply and thought her parents were wronged by the United States' government, the war topic was not approached. But all along, the stark, vicarious experience and words of John Hersey congealed in my mind. The injustice was clear to me then and became crystal clear over the years. Finally, I traveled to Japan as a Keizai Koho Fellow in 1993 and openly discussed it with my aging daddy upon my return. It was resolved for us both. He saw the inhumanness of the action taken. He saw, too, the injustice and read Hersey's book upon my return from Japan.

Certainly I had to write a response to what I read for Sr. Willana but have no recollection. However, reading this moving text and having text-to-life connections transformed me. As Maxine Greene explained (2005), this work became part of my experience and made me see things in the world that I had neither seen nor considered before. In fact, it was in part the impetus to apply for the Keizai Koho Fellowship. I continue to include the teaching of historical Japan and US WWII interactions in my course work, and I always have discussion about internment of the Japanese Americans during the war. When literature raises questions that further with persistent questions for years, cause reflection that extends rethinking and reconsidering, and causes moral action, it become critical pedagogy.

Growing up where money was limited, hotdogs were a weekly staple. However, I never liked them. We weren't forced to eat what we did not want. Following reading *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (1906), at last there was evidence for shunning the weekly unappealing meal. It tickled my parents that I used a published text to prove my point. That was the up side. My mother's father emigrated with his parents from Italy when he was twelve. I never met my Papa Petrini, as he died prior to my birth. But in reading *The Jungle*, I identified with the protagonist, an immigrant, who came to the US. But whose optimism quickly turned sour when he found work with slave wages, corruption, and, in particular, the sickening filth of the meat industry.

Really, Sinclair's (1906) work offered pause to examine capitalism for the first time, even though I probably didn't have the language to describe it and the ways in which big industry maltreated its most vulnerable people as workers. Sinclair described how terribly foul the working conditions were and the absence of hygienic practice in food preparation for human consumption. The text made me feel hopeless. This history was not told in history books; the culturally different were subjugated. The only ones who thrived were the rich and powerful.

Beyond my personal meal boycott, I began to rethink how people in power in the US so often covertly dominated people with limited resources with oppression, lacked consideration for them, and immorally disregarded their knowledge. Power and authority were so casually dehumanized. Without awareness, reading Sinclair's work stirred the development of critical historical consciousness (Kincheloe, 2001). Yet again, this has become a habit of mind since the reading of this text. Now, in critical pedagogy course work, students often choose to read Sinclair's text. We spend time examining how history has been veneered and how to assist students to inquire in a developmentally appropriate manner into labor movements, such as how Chinese workers built the railroad system and the treatment issues surrounding abuse. Lives such as Jane Addams are studied. Much of what has been covered up in history is uncovered and now recognized by students.

Black Like Me (1961), by John Howard Griffin, occupied my attention for the entire time it took me to read it. I recall carefully considering the vile hatred of racism. As kids, we went to an African American dentist, Dr. Fred Thompson, from the time we were young children. Talk about dissonance: It was so confusing to imagine people treating him that cruelly because of the melanin in his skin and hair. Griffin's experience as an African American lasted only for sex

weeks. It occurred to me what it must be like to endure a lifetime in the segregated South. I remember wondering why people simply just didn't migrate out of the South. I knew about Harlem and its Renaissance because of the music that my folks listened and danced to. Only the frustration I projected occurred to me, not the actuality that they rightfully belonged and deserved liberty, justice, and equality as U.S. citizens where they lived.

Obviously, I was reading this piece of non-fiction during the Civil Rights movement. My folks had strong convictions about social justice that were repeatedly verbalized. They were news junkies and watched everything about the movement on our black and white television with colorful talk of equality and moral commentary. Reading this book was another vivid, life-changing experience that corresponded with text. In a particular part of the book, Griffin gazed in the mirror and reflected on how blacks also looked in the mirror daily, day in and day out, knowing the day would hold more discrimination, prejudice, and hatred. He realized that his experience was minimal in comparison. Griffin could not land a job, was bullied, insulted, nor even find a restroom to use while black. In Montgomery, AL, Griffin saw the same discriminatory practices. However, he saw a swath of hope in the beginning of the non-violent movement of twenty-seven year old Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. At one point, tired and weary, not taking the medicine to darken his skin, Griffin vacillated between black and white, noticing the same extremes of treatment by white people. Ultimately, Griffin moved to Mexico because of the retaliation of hate-filled whites resisting his written account of *Black Like Me* and because of issues of integration and equality.

An indelible imprint described the power that this text had on me. Presently, students choose this text in courses for outside reading to connect to critical pedagogical practice. Additionally, for the past eight years, with a number of like-minded colleagues, I have been involved in an interdisciplinary planning and implementation of a Civil Rights movement course. Learning about the past of forgotten and absent African American historical contributors serve as role models for our students who promise to perpetuate the legacy to the youth under their tutelage. The students, most of whom are teachers, have the tools, resources, and contacts to generate and create immersion experiences and move social justice education into transformative social action education (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007; Banks, 2007). Genuinely, they are reinvigorated and recommitted to a more just and peacefully active approach to seriously involving course participants in critical pedagogical strategies for social justice to rethink the familiar and reinvent the possible each year.

Writing about how I came to be powerfully drawn to the social studies and social justice issues has been cathartic and profound for me. I was well educated by well-educated women. Sr. Willana was extraordinary. At least for me, she steered me in a direction that has been formative for the entirety of life. I can only hope that I live up to the challenge to perpetuate her learning legacy. As critical social studies educators oriented to justice, we never know how far our influence reaches. Over years, it is difficult to imagine how students reflect on what they have learned under our tutelage. Sr. Willana taught at the intersection of critical literature and social justice studies.

References

- Aldridge, J. & Goldman, R. (2007). *Current issues and trends in education* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Griffin, J.H. (1961). *Black Like Me*. New York: New American Library.
- Hersey, J. (1946). *Hiroshima*. New York: A.A. Knopf.
- Kincheloe, J.L. (2005). *Critical theory primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kincheloe, J.L. (2001). *Getting beyond the facts: Teaching social studies/social sciences in the Twenty-first Century* (2nd ed.). New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Matthews, J. & Uhrmacher, P.B. (2005). An interview with Maxine Greene. In P. Bruce Uhrmacher & Jonathan Mathews' (Eds.), *Intricate Palette: Working the Ideas of Elliot Eisner*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- McLaren, P. (2006). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education* (5th ed.). New York: Allyn & Bacon.
- Sinclair, U. (1906). *The jungle*. New York: Vanguard Press.
- Wink, J. (2005). *Critical pedagogy: Notes from the real world*. New York: Allyn & Bacon.