

## **Life, Social Studies, and the Pursuit of Happiness: Using Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education to Challenge Conservative Notions of Civic Education**

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**Abstract:** Bok (2010) argues civic understanding could improve student happiness by improving perceptions of politics and government, but the state of civic education in public schools keeps this from happening. This study argues that this notion of civic education is conservative by exploring Bok's premises, social studies, and civic education.

Derek Bok (2010) argues that government can learn from new research on happiness and can help improve the happiness of its citizens through policy and action. Furthermore, the way people perceive government can affect happiness. Citizens can be happier when they understand politics as a sophisticated process they can participate in to improve their government and their lives. Bok suggests that an education based on promoting civic understanding would help make students not only better citizens but happier ones, too. Bok notes, however, that the state of education in schools is such that students receive little civic education and when they do, they receive a fact intensive, two dimensional view of government and politics. The state of education not only limits civic understanding but gives students a negative view of politics and government, and in turn limits their happiness (Bok, 2010).

Civic education is not a stand alone discipline; it works under the umbrella of social studies education. Essentially, social studies is a conglomeration of several disciplines in the social sciences, education, and the humanities with the intent to promote citizenship, cultural awareness, and the examination and resolving of larger social problems (Saxe, 2003). Historically social studies was created to deal with social problems and citizenship issues in the United States. However, the need to look at larger social issues with multiple disciplinary perspectives and to act as global citizens has resurfaced in education (Kirkwood-Tucker, 2001).

Social studies educators have come up with many ways to improve civics. The problem is that this is not widely understood. Students can gain a complex understanding of politics through classroom-based multicultural democratic education (CMDE), for example. CMDE promotes an understanding of the history of the United States, democratic notions, identities, and the official mainstream knowledge promoted in schools for citizenship, but is also critical of it (Marri, 2005). Arguably, social studies education and CMDE challenges Bok's relatively conservative view of education and civics by comparison. This challenge could have implications for the promotion of happy lives. The problem is that no one has explored the premises and conservatism of Bok's view of civic education and how CMDE can challenge it.

The purpose of this study is to add to the literature on education, social studies, and happiness by exploring the conservatism of Bok's view of civic education and how CMDE can challenge it. This three part study seeks to answer the following research questions: (a) What are the premises behind Bok's view of the relationship between civic education and happiness? (b) How is Bok's view of the relationship between civic education and happiness conservative? (c)

How can classroom based multicultural democratic education (CMDE) challenge a conservative notion of civic education?

This study is important because the pursuit of happiness along with life and liberty shaped the establishment of the American government and shapes support for its actions. It is also important because the student of today is the citizen of tomorrow.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study takes the perspective that elements of CMDE can be present in a social studies classroom in Florida and this use of CMDE challenges Bok's conservative notion of education. This paper is organized into three parts to answer the three research questions on the premises of Bok, the conservatism of Bok, and how it is challenged by CMDE. First, this study explores Bok's view on happiness and civic education. Then the premises behind Bok's view on education are discussed. Second, the relationship of social studies education to the perception of the government, and cosmopolitanism is discussed in order to explain the conservatism of Bok's views. Third, CMDE and a south Florida Public School System's use of civic education is discussed along with the methods, results, and conclusion for a study that will answer how CMDE challenges Bok's view of Civic Education.

### **Happiness and Education**

Happiness by definition occurs when a person "experiences life satisfaction and frequent joy, and only infrequently experiences unpleasant emotions such as sadness or anger" (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1997, p. 25). Marriage and other stable relationships can improve happiness along with health, income, power and other factors.

Bok (2010) argues that many of these factors can also be supported by the government through policy and action. The government can help resolve, alleviate, or prevent many of the problems that cause unhappiness. Education can also improve happiness in many ways including teaching people ways to prevent or deal with problems, by helping people train for a job that could improve their income which could be used to resolve problems, or by actually educating them on happiness. Bok (2010) also argues that the perception of the government and politics in general is also important. Bok argues that much of formal and informal education promotes pessimism, distrust, and expectations of government that are not in line with what government actually does. Education may discuss the facts and procedures of the political process that occurs in government, but it does not do an adequate job of explaining how politics and the government really works. This makes people disillusioned from the political process, and they opt out and become unhappy with their condition. Bok suggests the possibility that increasing distrust for the government along with unrealistic demands can eventually lead to major problems for the government and the people it governs (Bok, 2010).

### **Method**

In order to answer the first research question (What are the premises behind Bok's view of the relationship between civic education and happiness?) a content analysis was done. Bok's (2010) book "The politics of happiness: What government can learn from the new research on well-being" was purposively selected. The focus was on the elements of the book that mention civic education and happiness. For data collection, note taking was done.

### **The Premises Behind Bok's View of Education**

Three main premises emerged: (a) the distraction premise, (b) the minimal exposure premise, and (c) the more you know premise.

### **The Distraction Premise**

Bok's (2010) critique of education is based on several premises that have implications for this study. Bok argues that part of the problem is that students in college are distracted away from taking civic classes by their vocational coursework and that civics in public schools is diminished by the demands of standardized testing (Bok, 2010). The problem with this premise is that in the public school curriculum students can not avoid learning about civics because it is either an explicit part of a social studies course or embedded with in it. Bok may also be using a narrow view of civic and government courses as the only outlet for civic instruction not in line with the way social studies incorporates civic education through multiple disciplines. This premise also diminishes the impact of teachers who often rise above challenges to teach about the government and the political process.

#### **The Minimal Exposure Premise**

In a second premise, Bok (2010) argues that college can minimally improve civic learning even without direct civic instruction through the learning of basic skills and exposure to liberal education. Bok discusses this premise in terms of college but it should apply in public schools where a student may have little or no civic education or skills at beginning of a course but will gain some understanding through the course of a school year. Theoretically, there should be some change in their civic understanding, perception of government, and in turn happiness even if they fail the class.

#### **The More You Know Premise**

A third premise Bok (2010) has about education is that learning more about the political process would make students happy about what the quality of their government is or their ability to improve it and in turn happy in general. In contrast, Bok argues that learning more about a profession like law could help a college student figure out if they actually like that profession (Bok, 2010). The political process premise suggests that learning more about an institution or a process would make someone like the institution or process more. The problem with this premise is that theoretically, students could learn more about the political process and still hate politics or be pessimistic about the quality of the government much like a college student may dislike the legal profession after learning about it in college. Educators have noted how students gain a distrust for institutions once they learn the history of it (Chomsky, 2000). It is possible that a complex understanding of politics as a process may promote a negative view of government and of American government in particular in some students. Arguably, a conservative bias may be present in Bok's work and underlying premises.

#### **Method**

This second research question (How is Bok's view of the relationship between civic education and happiness conservative?) was answered by doing a qualitative content analysis. A purposive sample of literature using the key terms *civic education*, *social studies education*, *government*, and *citizenship* was done using the search engine GoogleScholar. Bok's (2010) work was also used again. For data collection, note taking was used. Themes were developed from this literature that were constantly compared to Bok's work and reworked to answer the second research question

#### **How Bok's View of the Relationship between Civic Education and Happiness is Conservative**

Themes were developed from this literature were that Bok's work is conservative because he doesn't understand (a) the nature of social studies, (b) the nature of global citizenship, (c) the nature of students, (d) the nature of government, and (e) multicultural education.

#### **The Nature of Social Studies**

Bok's view is arguably conservative because civic education is not limited to civics or a government class. Social studies developed just because the nature of civic issues could not be handled by civic classes alone or limited to citizenship in the United States.

Social studies developed over the course of several decades. It arose during times of crisis when traditional civic education focused on explaining the United States government and its history were not adequate to meet the demands for social and political change demanded by people from their institutions including the government itself. Many definitions have arisen and the make up of social studies has changed. Essentially, it is a conglomeration of several disciplines in the social sciences, education, and the humanities with the intent to promote citizenship, cultural awareness, and the examination and resolving of larger social problems (Saxe, 2003). Many pedagogies and ideas have been associated with social studies including the spiral curriculum (Bruner, 1966) and the expanding communities concept (Stallones, 2004). No matter the discipline or pedagogy used, social studies courses all seek to promote the civic duties of students (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2003). During the progressive era, social studies became associated with the need to solve larger social problems that had negative effects on people by understanding and using complex political action to change institutions that could improve the well being and happiness of people (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2003; Mraz, 2004). Social studies criticism has focused on how much social studies in the past focused on the American government, certain groups in the American culture, and the tendency to be Western centric (Banks et al., 1999). Social studies has faced many challenges in recent years including the questioning of its existence, cuts to its funding, scheduling, and support (Saxe, 2002), interest groups who feel certain disciplines and ideas in social studies should be favored over others (Mraz, 2004), the promotion of materials that do not adequately, fairly, or correctly help all students learn (Kaplan, 2002), and many who feel that social studies in practice lacks focus (Saxe, 2003). However, the need to look at larger social issues with multiple disciplinary perspectives and to act as citizens beyond the United States has resurfaced in social studies and education in general (Kirkwood-Tucker, 2001) and many teachers have overcome the challenges to social studies through their actions (Banks, et al., 1999).

### **The Nature of Global Citizenship**

Bok (2010) is conservative because he does not take into account that civic learning and civic practice is global and informal and not just formal and national. Cosmopolitanism is the idea that citizenship means caring for people beyond the borders of the nation one is in. Cosmopolitanism is an ancient idea that was once only possible in very small city-states. Various communication technologies now make it possible to interact and be affected by more people across geographic and temporal barriers. People can now truly be global citizens. Essential to cosmopolitanism is the need for global citizens to expose themselves to different cultures, dialogue with people, and to think beyond their nation state. The cultures of many nation states borrow from each other in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, networking is already occurring between people across geospatial borders, and the challenge to meet problems is global. For some people, it can be just a matter of realizing how much cosmopolitanism is already relevant in their lives (Appiah, 2006).

### **The Nature of Students**

Bok (2010) does not realize that many students have too much civic understanding in that they learned it in a home country and arrived here to learn a civic education that is in conflict with what they learned. In a world of increasing classroom diversity, Bok assumes all students are the same mono-cultural empty vessel before civics. The term *sojourner student*, for example,

is part of a taxonomy for categorizing transnational students where in the sojourner student has moved internationally but their only challenge is not limited to learning the norms and language in their host country as is the case for some other students. Sojourner students may have to return to the sending country and thus have to relearn the norms and language of that country too. In the case for students from Mexico who go to the United States and then return to Mexico with experience in American schools, they can find that what they learn in America may not fit the specific needs of their Mexican classroom. For example, a sojourner student who excelled in history in the United States may do terribly in the subject in Mexico since the point of view of the curriculum focuses centrally on Mexico and not the United States. In the United States, that same student may have had trouble with some subject they had excelled at in Mexico because of language barriers. Short term challenges like these can mean that their overall academic career can be set back (Zuniga & Hamann, 2009).

### **The Nature of Government**

Bok's view is conservative because it is based on a traditional view of government as physical formal institutions. In his book, Bok does not discuss government in terms a *subgovernment* or a *hegemony*, for example, that must be dealt with by teachers. People make contact with government not just by dealing with the institutions in the three branches of government but in what is often called the subgovernment. These are institutions like think tanks, research centers, associations, leagues, lobbyists, networks, firms and other informal institutions that help set the policy agenda for what eventually is done in government. The formal government is the political process one sees like the top of an iceberg but subgovernment is all the informal institutions that do their work anonymously and whose work slowly makes it way up to the government (Heineman et al., 1990). Government is also an idea that controls people. Government is not just an institution but a hegemony (Gramsci et al., 1971). It is up to public intellectual to challenge hegemonic ideas. The classroom and much of what students learn in popular culture and in official knowledge is part of hegemony. The classroom can be a site of power where students can be subjugated by the ideas of the elite (Freire, 1970). Students are liberated when they are able to create their own knowledge. Teachers as public intellectuals must do this in the classroom as well as outside of it (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991).

### **Multicultural Education**

Bok's conservatism leads him to see a colorblind civic education. A straight forward teaching of civic education is White Anglo centered. Learning the techniques of civics still means that the Puerto Rican students can see the American flag they pledge to as a symbol of imperialism, an African American student can see that they are not equal in early forms of the constitution, and civic problems are no longer limited to the United States. Global citizenship and discussion is necessary to highlight the multicultural dilemmas of democracy and civics (Banks, 2004).

### **Method**

In order to answer this research question (How can classroom based multicultural democratic education challenge a conservative notion of civic education?) a brief literature review was made using the key terms *civic education* and *the name of a south Florida school district* in order to explain what is available. That public school system will be referred to under the alias of south Florida public schools or (SFPS). SFPS was chosen because it is emblematic of what is possible in south Florida. A literature review was created of SFPS system's resources for civic education by using the terms Civic education, Florida, and the school districts' name in several search engines. This literature review and the work of Marri (2005) and Bok (2010)

were also used. For data collection, note taking was used. After data analysis, a list of resources in SFPS system for civics that could fit into a list of elements of CMDE was developed through content analysis and compared to the previously discussed premises and elements of conservatism in Bok's work. CMDE themes were developed by constantly comparing the different resources and answers theorized for the research question.

### **How Classroom based Multicultural Democratic Education Can Challenge a Conservative Notion of Civic Education**

This study takes the perspective that elements of CMDE can be present in a social studies classroom in Florida and this use of CMDE challenges Bok's conservative notion of education. CMDE, SFPS, and CMDE elements are explored to answer the third research question.

#### **Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education**

Marri (2005) developed a framework for a model of classroom-based multicultural democratic education (CMDE) after observing good secondary social studies teachers promote an understanding of the codes of power, promote skills for effective citizenship, and teach a curriculum extended beyond the limits of official knowledge. Good social studies teachers do this by using multiple resources to study an issue, promote deliberative democracy through classroom discussion, behavior and cooperative learning. The CMDE model links multicultural and democratic education by promoting thorough disciplinary content, community building, and critical pedagogy. Thorough disciplinary content must include both mainstream academic knowledge and transformative academic knowledge. A community must be built in the classroom that promotes respectfully relationships, conflict resolution, and group work for problem solving. Finally, teachers must promote a critical pedagogy that allows critique and meaning making of democracy, cultural, socioeconomic, and political diversity, and agency through critical thinking, individual social action and group social action. Good teachers can promote most of aspects of the CMDE model without prior knowledge of CMDE (Marri, 2005).

#### **Civics Education in the south Florida Public Schools System**

In Florida, K-12 students are mandated to learn local, state and federal government before high school graduation usually through a one half credit, one semester course called American government. Standardized testing often ignores civics, government, or citizenship. Florida college students have complained that American government in public schools is too limited, that the system does not prepare them for democracy, and a lack of contact with political leaders in the classroom exists (Pitts, 2000). South Florida Public schools (SFPS) however is becoming influential at the local, regional, state, national, and international level when it comes to civic education. This district's social studies teachers and social science division promote civic responsibility and activism through a required social science competency based curriculum that promotes democratic principles, community service, and voting. SFPS requires an annual civics course in middle school and uses voter registration drives, required community service, values based character education initiatives, and law and civic elective classes. SFPS uses partnerships with various entities to create co-curricular opportunities including mock trials, moot courts, a youth ethics initiative, and school violence prevention demonstration programs. In election years, certain students participate in presidential debates and mock elections at the local, state, and national level using computer software. SFPS uses student government associations. Support from partnerships with the state legal system, civic education groups, and legal associations help some students attend congressional conferences on civic education and collaborate with voting rights leaders and groups (Doyle & Shenkman, 2006). SFPS has oral history projects where students study communities, conduct, archive, and transcribe interviews

with community members and create various project related essays, photographs, and artwork. These projects have focused on community, civil rights and veterans' issues and allow students to learn and do historical research at local university libraries, special collections, and museums (Hersh, 2008).

### **Thorough Content Knowledge**

Civics is imbedded throughout the different disciplines in social studies in the SFPS system. CMDE teacher could put the content in the various contexts available to gain the bigger picture. For example, voting is not just a civic act but a geographical, sociological, legal, and psychological act too. SFPS has the advantage of allowing students to create knowledge.

### **Deliberative Democratic Praxis**

Every civic act could be thought out, talked out, acted out, and the consequences played out and reflected upon in SFPS with a multicultural lens.

### **Community**

A democratic community can be created in the classroom where students respect each other and solve conflicts through voting and links to other communities. SFPS resources allow a classroom democracy to link to student government and beyond.

### **Social Action**

SFPS students do both individual and cooperative learning. Individual students can create election posters but they can also collaborate for voter registration drives for example.

### **Going Beyond Official Knowledge**

CMDE teachers can use multiple resources to teach beyond the textbook. SFPS students can go beyond official knowledge by creating their own knowledge such as the work done in the oral history projects. Conservatism limits civic acts to civic classes and contexts and limits diversity and participation. The results show CMDE, Social Studies, and SFPS resources can create a multidimensional use of civic learning that challenges these limits.

### **Implications for Future Research, Practice, and Conclusions**

Future research should focus quantitatively and qualitatively on the long term impact of CMDE on students as they move from K-12, college, and beyond. Banks (2004) argues that multicultural and democratic education may be helped by global learning and citizenship. CMDE can help promote this at the K-12 level in south Florida schools. The implication for practice is the realization that elements of CMDE should occur purposely and not incidentally in all civic education, that SFPS resources and strategies should be shared through out the state to support CMDE, and that viewing these resources, strategies, and goals conservatively does not lead to better student happiness or civic understanding. By exploring Bok's work and CMDE, this study showed that civic education can be limited by how it is perceived as well as practiced.

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