

Chapter 11

Maintaining a Socially Just Classroom: Ethical Decision–Making for Student Engagement as a Positive Outcome

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an ethical decision-making for student engagement from a social justice perspective. It discusses what social justice means by presenting some principles gathered from existing related research literature supported by teacher voices that are gathered from written survey. Student engagement and the factors that influence it are discussed highlighting them from a socially and culturally situated perspective. Motivational and sociocultural factors such as funds of knowledge, race, social capital, and cultural capital are presented to demonstrate why mere access is not enough as an ethical and equitable way of engaging student to achieve positive outcomes. Access must be activated by providing students ample opportunities to experience a sense of belonging, teacher trust that they are competent learners, recognition of their identities and interests, and meaningful engagements.

INTRODUCTION

Engaging in problem solving and making decisions to create a learning environment are important processes that educators do in working with students especially those from diverse linguistic, cultural, social, and economic backgrounds. The ethical dimension of providing diverse students with equitable learning opportunities involves educators pursuing appropriate, relevant curricular and instructional procedures that aim to make the students better, in particular, and the broader community and society, in general. The teacher, administrator, or counselor may ask in an ethical perspective the question “Is what I am

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doing just for my students?” or “Is what I am doing making my students and myself better in serving the community?” Making the classroom socially-just for students is ethical and vital in pursuing equity or providing classroom relevant and appropriate activities in order to meet the needs of students when they need them. Key to this effort is the ethical responsibility of teachers to know who their students are and how they learn (Lalas, Macias, Fortner, Flores, Blackmon-Balogun, & Vance, 2016).

Here’s an insightful vignette from the classroom of the teacher and co-author of this chapter:

The room was dark, with sunlight peering through the window and light shining from the projector of my U.S. history classroom composed of 11th grade juniors. As I sat in the back ready to jot down comments in my notebook, groups of students took turns giving PowerPoint presentations on raising awareness on a social issue they chose.

At that moment, the group of students presenting – who were all females – discussed the need for sexual education within their district to lower teenage pregnancy and ensure students were aware of the choices and risks involved with sex. As part of the project, I made it a requirement for students to choose a song relating to their issue, and explain the pertinence of it. In other words, it was a method for me to keep students engaged, allow them to connect their own cultural knowledge to the topic, and force them to think critically by applying music to their academic work.

With this particular group, they began to play a song by the rapper J. Cole titled “Wet Dreamz (clean version).” Immediately, the class burst into laughter and turned to see my reaction. As the class waited, I simply nodded, smiled, and continued with “Explain why you chose this song.” Prepared, the group explained their appropriate and well-thought analytic answer to their fellow engaged classmates.

While some teachers may vacillate to employ music in teaching history to young adults and to allow students to incorporate their brand of music in learning history concepts, the project assigned to the students in the mentioned vignette is an example of how teachers can make decision and attempt to solve the challenge of eliciting student engagement in the classroom. By allowing students to tap into their own interests, in this case their taste in music, teachers gain insights into their students’ backgrounds, knowledge, and cultures. In a socially-just diverse classroom, students’ cultures are acknowledged and promoted to enrich their learning and enhance their classroom engagement.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the importance of teachers’ role in making ethical decisions in promoting social justice in a diverse classroom as a vehicle for promoting, maintaining, and sustaining positive student engagement. What is a socially-just classroom? How does teaching for social justice in a diverse classroom look like? Why is striving for a socially-just classroom an ethical practice in solving problems and making decisions? What does student engagement mean and how can a teacher elicit and enhance it while recognizing the diverse needs of students?

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