

BEATING THE ODDS: SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION IN INNER-CITY DETROIT

Julie Anne Taylor
and
Karen Thomas-Brown
University of Michigan Dearborn

Introduction

Despite the worsening financial crisis in the Detroit Public Schools, Cass Technical High School continues to be one of the highest achieving high schools in the state of Michigan. On social studies assessments, Cass students score significantly higher than the statewide average. While acknowledging that their courses are challenging, the students use words rarely associated with social studies classes: fun, interesting, and exciting. A unique teaching and learning environment has been created at the school by caring and motivated social studies educators who maintain high standards while using innovative methodologies. This study examines the social studies department at Cass Technical High School, offering the perspectives of both the students and the teachers.

With over 2,000 students, Cass Technical High School in downtown Detroit faces significant social and economic challenges. Once a thriving metropolis, Detroit has been impacted profoundly by the decline of the American automobile industry. An estimated one third of the residents of Detroit now live below the poverty line, and Detroit has the lowest median household income of any city in the country.¹ Forty one percent of the students at Cass are considered to be economically disadvantaged.² Nevertheless, they consistently outperform other students on state achievement tests; in social studies, their scores are significantly higher than the statewide average. This study examines the reasons, cited by students and teachers, at the school, for the enduring success.

The context

A reporter for *Education Week* described the Detroit Public Schools as “the nation’s fastest-shrinking major urban school system,” noting that enrollment has

¹Alemayehu Bishaw and Jessica Semega, *Income, Earnings, and Poverty Data from the 2007 American Community Survey*, United States Census Bureau (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), 7, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2008pubs/acs-09.pdf>

²Detroit Public Schools, *Cass Technical High School Profile Report* (Detroit: Detroit Public Schools, 2009), 1, <http://www.detroitk12.org.nyud.net/schools/reports/pdfs/510.pdf>

declined by 60,000 students in the last decade.³ Dislocated workers have migrated with their children from the state in search of employment. Declining enrollment also owes to the decisions of parents to transfer their children to charter schools as well as public schools outside the district.⁴ With a deficit of \$408 million, the Detroit Public School District now faces the most serious financial crisis in its history.⁵

Cass Technical High School admits students based on grades in middle school and test scores. A college-preparatory curriculum is available to students in grades nine through twelve. Although most of its students are from Detroit, Cass Technical, a school of choice, admits students from other cities as well. Administrators and teachers have high standards and expectations. In reflecting on the success of social studies education at Cass Technical, one student acknowledged that the expectations of teachers were motivational: "My teacher ... is very experienced and shows high expectations for his students. These expectations push us to excel at any endeavor we go after."

The study

In this study, 85 students enrolled in social studies courses at Cass Technical High School completed anonymous surveys in 2008 on which they were asked to describe their social studies classes and to explain why they think that so many students at the school have had such high scores on achievement tests. They also were asked to comment on whether or not their social studies classes were interesting. On their surveys, students indicated the extent to which they use the Internet to complete research projects for social studies classes. They also reported the frequency of teachers' use of primary historical documents. In addition, three social studies teachers at Cass, Brian Diskin, Kathleen Frazier, and James O'Leary, were interviewed about their instructional methodologies. The evidence gathered for this study suggests that highly motivated and caring educators as well as innovative instructional techniques have increased the students' interest in and knowledge of social studies.

³Lesli A. Maxwell, "Detroit Moves to Shut Schools," *Education Week*, 26, January 17, 2007, 5, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/01/17/19dossier.h26.html?qs=detroit+public+schools>

⁴Lesli A. Maxwell, "As School Year Looms, Detroit Predicts Enrollment Drop," *Education Week*, 27, August 29, 2007, 17, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2007/08/29/01detroit.h27.html?qs=detroit+public+schools>

⁵"Detroit Fires Superintendent, Plans to Fight State Manager," *Education Week*, 28, January 7, 2009, 4, <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2009/01/07/16brief-3.h28.html?qs=detroit>; "Detroit School Board Approves Plan to Address Financial Problems," *Education Week*, 28, November 12, 2008, 4, <http://0-proquest.umi.com.wizard.umd.umich.edu/pqdweb?did=1600816441&sid=8&Fmt=3&clientID=8511&RQT=309&VName=PQD&TS=1232668183&clientId=8511m>

Humor, commitment, and diverse methodologies

When Roy Rosenzweig, Dave Thelen, and researchers at the Center for Survey Research at Indiana University interviewed over 1,400 Americans about their views and uses of the past in 1994, participants used the adjective “boring” to describe history classes in school more often than any other word. People recalled didactic approaches to teaching, dry textbooks, and rote memorization.⁶ By contrast, in the study conducted at Cass Technical High School in Detroit, an uncommon adjective was written repeatedly by the students on their surveys: “fun.” The word “fun” was used a total of 37 times by 29 different students. “Interesting” also was written frequently. One student observed, “My teacher makes history interesting to learn because he is challenging, but at the same time, we still have fun learning in his class.”

The students used adjectives to describe their teachers like energetic, enthusiastic, and animated. As Robert Fried asserts, a passion about learning among teachers is vital to student engagement.⁷ “I think most of the students at my school have mastered social studies because we have teachers who care and want to teach us,” wrote one ninth-grade student at Cass. Another student explained, “He makes history very exciting, and his positive energy makes you want to learn.”

The students at Cass Technical commented repeatedly on the ability of their teachers to explain the material and the appeal of their use of storytelling and humor. Relating history in the form of stories might increase the coherency and appeal of the material to students.⁸ “I enjoy seeing the sarcasm, the jokes, theatrics when ... applied to history,” wrote an eleventh-grade student.

A number of students noted that their teachers go beyond the textbook, filling in gaps and exploring content that textbooks omit or treat superficially. In addition to giving lectures and relating stories, the teachers often require students to conduct research and to complete projects. When they were studying the Haymarket Riot, Diskin gave students the option of writing a play, a song, a pamphlet, or a script for a movie. One high school student wrote that “when the books don’t explain a lot, we do projects.”

Primary sources

Students at Cass Technical learn history through the accounts of eyewitnesses and contemporaries of events as well as the stories their teachers tell. According to

⁶Roy Rosenzweig, “How American Use and Think about the Past,” *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, ed. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 273-276.

⁷Robert Fried, *The Passionate Teacher* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995; reprint, 2001), 1. Cf. James Percoco, *A Passion for the Past* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1998), 5.

⁸Tony R. Sanchez and Randy K. Mills, “Telling Tales: The Teaching of American History through Storytelling,” *Social Education*, 69, 5 (2005), 269.

O'Leary, "The primary sources we use a lot of ... For example, we associate the music with the era. We look at war lyrics, Depression lyrics. Also, it is easy to get not only documents but footage ... That has increased. We use that a lot." The regular integration of a variety of primary-source materials, including journals, speeches, photographs, films, and music, provides students with voices from the past, making historical developments more immediate. Forty three percent of the students at Cass indicated that they were asked to use primary historical documents by their teachers once or twice a week. Eleven percent reported that they use primary sources almost every day. One student noted, "Before we read a chapter, we usually read primary-source documents, and it pulls us into the chapter.." Another commented, "Our teacher makes history more interesting to learn by making the students interact with historical documents."

Deliberation of the past and the present

Discussions have made history classes at Cass Technical appealing to students who had not previously been interested in the subject. "History is my worst subject, and he makes it fun with activities and discussions we have in class," explained one student. Meaningful, educative discussions require the confidence and preparedness of both students and educators to be successful.⁹ As Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill note, well-executed discussions increase appreciation of ambiguity, complexity, and difference by students.¹⁰ Through discussion, students hone their abilities to synthesize information and to engage in democratic discourse.¹¹ A number of students at Cass indicated that they value the facilitation of discussions by their teachers and the opportunity to express themselves in class. One student noted, "Our history class is a lot of fun because our teacher has a unique way of teaching, and we can get engaged in deep conversation or discussion."

With their students, teachers at Cass Technical draw parallels between the past and the present. Individually and collectively, they assess public practices. By deliberating historical and contemporary principles and decisions, students refine their civic intelligence.¹² One student wrote that his or her teacher "takes things that we are

⁹Diana Hess, "Discussion in Social Studies. Is It Worth the Trouble?" *Social Education*, 68, 2 (2004), 154.

¹⁰Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tolls and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999), 22.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹²Frederick D. Drake and Lynn R. Nelson, *Engagement in Teaching History*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2009), 24-25. Cf. David Mathews, "Civic Intelligence," *Social Education*, 49

learning in the book and will compare them with today's issues and policies, and I think it really does work." Another commented that "our teacher makes history interesting to learn by making it relate to things that we care about in our lives today."

Technology and research

Technology is used extensively by both teachers and students who, in addition to using PowerPoint, make podcasts, create digital films, and write blogs. For one room, the school acquired a classroom response system involving "clickers" so that the students' responses to multiple-choice questions could be tallied, graphed, and displayed within seconds on LCD projectors. When students are absent or need to review a lecture, they may download podcasts as well as PowerPoint slides from TeacherWeb. Similar to Blackboard, TeacherWeb allows individual teachers to post lectures, directions for assignments, and deadlines on their own pages. Soon the history teachers at Cass Technical plan to utilize skyping. On a survey, one student commented that his or her teacher is "very technological which makes it fun for our generation."

Fifty eight percent of the students at Cass reported that they use the Internet to do research for history classes to either a moderate or a large extent. When middle and high school students throughout the United States took the National Assessment of Educational Progress in United States history in 2001, they indicated the extent to which they used the Internet and compact discs for research projects in history. The more students used these tools to do research, the higher their scores on the NAEP in U.S. history tended to be.¹³ Because the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) and Michigan Merit Examination (MME) were administered separately from the surveys for this study, the relationship between individual student achievement and the use of computers for research purposes could not be established.

The integration of geography and archaeology

A number of students indicated that the lectures in history at Cass Technical are enhanced by an abundant use of images by their teachers. "I try to integrate maps into every subject area that we cover," explained Frazier. In addition to orienting the students, maps, by showing physical features, natural resources, and political boundaries, illustrate the motives behind conflicts. As Jeremy Black has shown, during the twentieth century, maps were drawn and published by the government of the United States, the Soviet Union, and other nations to depict geopolitical threats and to generate

¹²(...continued)
(1985), 678-681.

¹³National Center for Education Statistics, "Average Scores by Time Spent Using CD-ROMS or the Internet for Research Projects, Grades 8 and 12: 2011," *The Nation's Report Card: U.S. History 2001* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), slide 26, nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/data/ppt/ushistorypress052002.ppt.

support for military spending and war.¹⁴ Current events and topics such as international trade, climate change, and terrorism also are understood better when maps are used.¹⁵ Digitally, military and other types of maps are increasingly available to educators and students via websites maintained by institutions such as the Library of Congress.¹⁶

Teachers at Cass Technical High School enhance learning by holding virtual field trips and by taking students outside the classroom into context-rich settings with three-dimensional artifacts such as museums, courtrooms, and archaeological sites. As Elaine Heumann Gurian explains, museums do more than display evidence; they preserve memories and organize meaning.¹⁷ Within museums, students have increased choice and control, and visits to museums can increase their intrinsic motivation to learn history.¹⁸ In addition to examining collections of artifacts, students at Cass unearth them; they participate in archaeological excavations of part of the Eastern Market, a neighborhood of Detroit.

Conclusion: State of Michigan assessments

High schools students in Michigan take state assessments in social studies twice. To students in the ninth grade, the Michigan Educational Assessment program test is administered in the fall of each year. Eleventh-grade students take the Michigan Merit Exam in the spring. Both tests include multiple-choice and short-answer questions. In 2007, 92.6 percent of ninth-grade students at Cass met or exceeded expectations on the MEAP whereas only 71 percent of students statewide did. Eleventh-grade students at Cass also performed well that year. Over 96 percent met or exceeded expectations on the MME. By contrast, 83 percent of students in the state passed. In 2008, the scores of the students at Cass remained high; 93 percent of the students met or exceeded expectations on the MME whereas 80 percent of students statewide did.¹⁹ These sorts of scores suggest that Cass Technical High School provides a model of instruction worthy of consideration by social studies teachers across the United States.

¹⁴Jeremy Black, "Where to Draw the Line," *History Today*, 58, 11 (2008), 53-54.

¹⁵Harm de Blij, *Why Geography Matters* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 21, 23.

¹⁶Simon Appleford and Vernon Burton, "Digital History: Using New Technologies to Enhance Teaching and Research," *The Journal of American History*, 94, 4 (2008), 1331.

¹⁷Elaine Heumann Gurain, "What Is the Object of This Exercise?" *Reinventing the Museum*, ed. Gail Anderson (Lanham, PA: AltaMira Press, 2004), 270.

¹⁸John Falk and Lynn Dierking, "Museums and the Individual," *Learning from Museums* (Lanham, PA: AltaMira Press, 2000), 85.

¹⁹The authors can provide specific documentation for these scores upon request.