Teaching American History to Diverse Learners in Urban Settings

Teaching American history to diverse students turns out to be more complex and problematic than it appears. From the research studies, we know that non-white students come to the classroom with different narratives of the American past than their white counterparts. Yet the history curriculum, textbooks, standardized tests, and what many teachers do center on a story that remains surprisingly Eurocentric. This can create powerful discontinuities in the classroom for non-white students, influencing their achievement in and attitudes about American history. Such discontinuities also influence the sort of relationships teachers can and do build with their students.

In this presentation, VanSledright provides a look at the lessons he learned about discontinuities and student relationships during a period in 1999 when he taught fifth graders American history at a diverse, local public elementary school. These lessons may provide ways for rethinking what it means to teach American history to diverse learners while keeping an eye on enhancing their academic growth in the subject.