

# Social Justice for 'These Kids'?

## A Book Review of *These Kids: Identity, Agency, and Social Justice at a Last Chance High School*

Heidi L. Early-Hersey



**I**N HER BOOK *These Kids: Identity, Agency, and Social Justice at a Last Chance High School*, Kysa Nygreen explores the concepts of identity, agency, and social justice as they relate to students for whom the traditional American education system is not working. She uses the lens of last chance, or continuation, high schools to examine the often competing purposes of education and how those purposes are or are not fulfilled in continuation high schools. Nygreen's approach is one of participatory action research, in which she recruits a small group of current or former continuation high school students. The point is not so much to detail the particular school but to capture the characteristics and perspectives of students who do not succeed in regular high schools. One important goal of this research was to "empower Jackson youth to demand better, more equitable educational opportunities" (Nygreen, 2013, p. 7). Through a clear historical examination and reflection on the research experience, *These Kids* explicates and explores the paradox of getting ahead in American schools and attempts to initiate an alternative discourse.

The bulk of *These Kids* is a description of Nygreen's research study. It includes the selection of participants; exploration of shared definitions of ideas important to the research, such as social justice; and planning for the research itself. Throughout the project the student participants were placed in leadership and decision-making roles. This experience and how the students reacted to these new roles indicated to the researchers that even a small group of people committed to creating more social justice and equity for underserved students could and would, unwittingly, replicate the constructs and politics of traditional education systems.

*But just as in the interview debriefing session, the grading conversation was ultimately reproductive. Like much of the grading in schools*

*everywhere, our process emphasized the form over the content of education, privileged 'attitude' over other evidence of learning, and sorted students into a hierarchy of learning. . . . We showed that we could go through the motions; we had learned the rules of schooling and could easily apply them. But we did so with surprisingly little reference to actual student learning, or to the political goals that had initially motivated the social justice class. (Nygreen, 2013, p. 126–127)*

The results of the study and the participants' personal reflections on their experiences allow Nygreen and her research partners to imagine a more just and equitable schooling experience for "these kids." Nygreen clearly recognizes the complexity of interconnected social issues at play in the education of America's youth. This book doesn't seek to put forth detailed solutions or alternatives but suggests that a starting point is a change in mindset so that educators value all students. As she says in the concluding chapter of her text:

*Rather than increased educational hierarchy, we might construct an education system that provides every student with multiple opportunities to excel and develop his or her talents across a wide variety of arena. We might nurture and reward students' diverse ways of knowing without arranging these hierarchically. (Nygreen, 2013, p. 173)*

One of the most powerful and useful ideas presented in *These Kids* is the paradox of getting ahead. While not a new idea,

HEIDI EARLY HERSEY earned her MAT from the University of New Hampshire. She has served as an adjunct faculty member there since 2004. She is also the director of teaching and learning for two school districts in southern Maine, MSAD 60 and RSU 35.

Nygreen's treatment of this topic is concise, well researched, and aptly applied to her field of study. Her explanation begins with a careful summary of three legitimate, different and, at times, conflicting purposes for education. She references Larabee's (1997) work and describes these goals as (a) democratic equality for participatory democracy, (b) social efficiency aimed at preparing workers for employment and economic participation, and (c) social mobility so that education is a tool for individual advancement. This philosophical value set often (ideally) drives education design. A heightened awareness of these three different drivers, if discussed, might allow for more clarity, prioritization, and shared purpose as school systems evolve and continue to attempt to meet the needs of all students. Nygreen (2013) argues that "the dominance of the social mobility goals weakens possibilities of social justice education in schools" (p.11). She explicates this concept in her explanation of the paradox of getting ahead. Essentially, if success within the education system results in getting ahead in life, the implication must exist that successful students get ahead of other students who fall behind. Our system is an inherently hierarchical one that results in winners and losers. Even within the structure of last chance high schools, designed to serve students who were not successful in traditional high schools, both teachers and students routinely reproduce this hierarchy.

This book's research provides a personal lens through which educators and social scientists could examine our education system, particularly as it relates to "these kids." *These Kids* would be a useful read for two specific groups of educators: preservice teachers, because it does a good job summarizing and explaining the competing goals of American education and how those have evolved over time in response to social and economic changes, and

experienced teachers seeking to develop a deeper understanding of those students who are unsuccessful in traditional schools. Teachers working in alternative education programs around the country would likely see glimpses of their students and perhaps themselves in this text. The reflections of both the young participants and Nygreen shine a light on how deeply entrenched personal biases and preconceived notions are about students, us as educators, and schools.

Where this text falls short is in its appeal to a broader, more diverse audience. The subject matter could have lent itself to the telling of a compelling story of rich characters, drawing out the stories of these kids, their strengths and struggles, but instead those accounts feel superficial. The solutions offered in *These Kids* are conceptual and philosophical. The book does not assign real responsibility to students or educators for enacting systemic change or even for achieving individual success. It is hard to look within this text and feel that the current education situation for students in last chance schools is anything but overwhelming and self-reinforcing. What the reader is left with is a book that reads like the research study it is: short on personal connection. Because of this choice in framing, Nygreen missed an opportunity to connect with a broader audience of educators.

## References

- Larabee, D. F. (1997, April). Public goods, private goods: The American struggle over educational goals. *American Educational Research Journal*, 34(1), 39–81. doi:10.2307/1163342
- Nygreen, K. (2013). *These Kids: Identity, Agency, and Social Justice at a Last Chance High School*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.