

2016

Preparing to Teach Social Studies for Social Justice: Becoming a Renegade

Trisha Wickland

St. Paul Lutheran School, Chicago

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer>

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Recommended Citation

Wickland, Trisha (2016) "Preparing to Teach Social Studies for Social Justice: Becoming a Renegade," *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*. Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/mwer/vol28/iss2/6>

This Book/Media Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mid-Western Educational Researcher by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Preparing to Teach Social Studies for Social Justice: Becoming a Renegade

Reviewed by
Trisha Wickland
 St. Paul Lutheran School, Chicago

When I first saw this book title in the Teachers College Press catalog, I added it to my summer to-read list. As a practicing elementary school teacher, I often find myself too preoccupied with lesson plans, grading, preparing students for standardized tests, and mandatory professional development sessions during the school year to enjoy books that I know will improve my professional practice. I was thrilled when I was asked to read and review *Preparing to Teach Social Studies for Social Justice: Becoming a Renegade* by Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath, Alison G. Dover, and Nick Henning, since it would force me to make time in my chaotic schedule to read a book.

Presently, I teach at a parochial school in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago. I am the first and second grade teacher at this school, and can teach anywhere from nine to twelve classes in one school day. Austin is a socially and economically marginalized neighborhood, and my school looks just like those that Jonathan Kozol (1991) described in his *Savage Inequalities*. The physical structure of the school and classrooms desperately need repair and a thorough cleaning, curriculum is outdated, textbooks are tattered, and teachers are exhausted from trying to meet the needs of the students despite the many obstacles they face in an urban environment.

As an undergraduate student, I became interested in issues of social justice and education through my work with Concordia University Chicago's Center for Policy and Social Justice. I was a research assistant for this Center and developed a deep yearning to learn more about social justice and education. So I dually enrolled in a bachelor's and master's degree program and completed a master's degree in urban schooling. Upon degree completion, I believed that I was ready to enter the classroom as a social justice warrior and rock the unequal education system. Little did I know just how challenging that would be.

According to Pat Russo (2004), teaching for social justice means to recognize "oppression in its multiple forms, and then taking action in the classroom to interrupt the cycles of oppression." While *Preparing to Teach* does provide a useful sense of what social justice is, my focus in this review is on the advice, recommendations, and stories provided for pre-service and beginning teachers (for a deeper understanding of social justice itself, see Adams, Blumenfeld, Castaneda, Hackman, Peters, & Zuinga, 2013).

The authors of *Preparing to Teach* have extensive experience in social justice-oriented teacher education programs and organizations. Agarwal-Rangnath is the vice president for the National Association of Multicultural Education, Dover is an assistant professor at Northeastern Illinois University, where she focuses on providing teachers with the knowledge and skills to become

social justice educators, and Henning is an associate professor at California State University Fullerton with experience teaching in urban contexts. The book originated in a project of Agarwal-Rangnath's that focused on justice-oriented approaches to teaching social studies in the elementary grades. The project shifted to focus on secondary teachers, and the authors received letters from twenty teachers with advice, suggestions, and stories for new teachers. Importantly, the authors present stories of teachers who effectively incorporate the Common Core State Standards into a social justice-oriented curriculum. While written about high school social studies instruction, those who are pre-service or in-service middle school teachers may also find the book applicable to their struggles to adhere to standards yet still provide students with a justice-oriented curriculum rooted in critical pedagogy. Additionally, teacher educators, especially those with the responsibility of preparing middle or secondary level teachers, may find this book useful for methods coursework, as it provides many "real world" examples of teachers doing social justice education.

This book is divided into three parts. In Part I, the authors present ways in which teachers respond to Common Core. They provide practical examples of social studies teachers' varied responses to the new standards. In Part II, the authors present and analyze teachers' curricular and pedagogical choices. In Part III, they explore ways in which teachers grow, support, and sustain their justice-oriented teaching, despite current reforms and trends in education that tend to limit teachers' creativity and innovation due to a required strict adherence to the standards. Throughout the book, stories of real teachers creating real social studies lesson plans aligned to the Common Core are included.

In the introduction, Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning write, "... research suggests that even those teachers with strong social justice orientations struggle to build, integrate, and enact social justice pedagogies in their first classrooms" (p. 4). I was instantly hooked and eager to get through the rest of the book! The authors seemed to accurately describe me and the familiar struggle between knowing how and what I *should be* teaching, versus teaching to just get through the day. Even though I teach primary-aged children and this book was designed for teachers of high school students, I knew that parts of it would apply to my practice as an educator.

In the second chapter of the book, the authors explain their three categories for teachers' responses to the Common Core standards: embracing, reframing, and resisting. While they do spend time on the two latter categories, it is clear that, for whatever reason, the main focus on the book comes from teachers who embrace the standards. Those who *embrace* the standards see them as being flexible, allowing the curriculum to become more student-centered and focused on critical thinking. Stories and quotes from social studies teachers are included to show ideas for developing a standards-based, critical thinking, justice-oriented curriculum. Some of the standards, like "evaluate sources of information" and "integrate information from diverse sources," are highlighted. Then, these standards are connected to stories and lesson plans from teachers who used them to develop and sustain their social justice social studies lessons. For example, one teacher uses the CCSS as a means to teach students about the language and culture of power. This teacher believes that embracing and using the literacy standards of the Common Core help open the doors to the culture of power for marginalized students.

The authors continue by explaining the concept of *reframing* curriculum under the Common Core. The common theme throughout this set of teacher stories is that while the standards may define aspects of the curriculum, they cannot stop teachers from creating a social studies curriculum centered on social justice. Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning maintain that it is possible to create a justice-oriented curriculum under the standards, although it is not easy. Stories of encouragement from teachers who were able to change their curriculum to adhere to the Common Core *and* incorporate their beliefs in social justice are included.

At the end of the chapter, the authors explain those who respond by *resistance*. These teachers ask questions regarding the reasons for creation and implementation of the standards, as well as the accountability measures that now accompany them. Through individual analyses and knowledge of the history of education reform, these teachers believe that the standards are temporary and will likely change; that they are ignoring important social studies skills; and that they benefit the corporations who invested and led the charge in developing the standards. The authors remind teachers that there is a large amount of risk in resisting, as some teachers have been fired because of their refusal to adhere to the requirements of the standards. In the last lines of the chapter, teachers, whether they choose to embrace, reframe, or resist the Common Core standards, are urged to think for themselves and develop their own strategies regarding their implementation in their own classrooms.

Chapter three focuses on engaging students in critical literacy. While this book focuses on the content area of social studies, Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning believe that the Common Core requires teachers to develop knowledge of critical literacy as a skill, and to be able to incorporate literacy standards into content areas regardless of their subject of expertise. For example, they urge all teachers to develop the skill of “reading the word and the world” (p. 36) in all students. Later, they focus on social studies, and emphasize the importance of engaging students “in the act of thinking like a historian.” Rather than the memorization of rote facts, as history education has unfortunately and largely become, the authors urge teachers to develop students’ ability to read the word and the world and analyze and critique those ideas considered to be historical facts. Teachers are encouraged to present multiple perspectives and ideas to students, rather than learning from the textbook only. In this chapter, two stories of teachers are included: a teacher educator who returns to the social studies classroom and struggles to do what she taught her teacher candidates to do, and a teacher who has developed units focused on critical literacy, looking at multiple perspectives, and analyzing bias. As a relatively new teacher, I appreciated the inclusion of the teacher educator’s struggle upon her return to the classroom. She knew what teaching for social justice *meant*, but struggled to put that understanding into practice. After many failed attempts and much frustration, she was able to develop a social studies curriculum based in critical literacy. At the end of the chapter, a lesson plan from one of the teachers is presented, complete with its alignment to standards, documents for student analysis, and questions to ask students upon completion of the document analysis.

Chapter four addresses the common question teachers ask, “What will I teach?” I remember asking this question myself as I prepared to enter my classroom for the first time. I looked through the existing social studies curriculum, and decided that it was outdated and that I needed to create my own curriculum. I spent weeks perusing the aisles at the local teacher store, looking at curriculum books, examining my own *Rethinking Schools* books, and trying to put together a

scope and sequence for the entire school year—something that is much easier said than done! Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning remind teachers that in order to create a social justice-oriented curriculum, they must have deep content knowledge of the unit of study, and that they must continue engaging in intellectual tasks while developing and analyzing the curriculum. Additionally, teachers are urged to keep topics of study local, current, and relevant to students' lives. Instead of throwing predigested ideas at students, teachers must first learn about who their students are, what's going on in their lives, and what is important and interesting to them.

Next, the authors present three teachers and their questions and considerations regarding the creation of lesson plans as examples of the work that goes into creating a critical social studies curriculum. One teacher asks questions like, "What academic standards are we working towards?" and "Which anchor texts and materials can I choose to marry what's happening in our community with the academic standards I want to target?" Another teacher created a checklist that he refers to when developing lesson plans. For example, he considers the empowering, humanizing, and problem-posing nature of his lessons. The last teacher explains how he developed a thematic curriculum instead of one that presents history in a strict chronological order. The authors conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ways in which all three of the teachers deal with mandated content through the use of creating "essential questions." Rather than develop lessons based on questions with answers that can be easily located with a simple Google search, these teachers' lessons center on deeper essential questions, like "What does it mean to be free?" and "How do we create equality?" The mandated content is still included in the lessons, but the focus of the lessons is importantly rooted in these critical essential questions.

Chapter five explores teachers' pedagogical approaches. Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning remind teachers, "In a justice-oriented social studies classroom, as teachers look back into the past to figure out what/how to teach, they must also pay very close pedagogical attention to the young people right there in front of them" (p. 69). Five topics for consideration are included in this chapter. The first focuses on developing trusting relationships with students and parents, fostering trusting relationships among students, and appreciating the knowledge that students bring to the classroom. The second addresses the creation of a space for critical dialogue and engagement in the classroom. The third recommends that lessons have a component requiring students to take action in the real world. The fourth, "living history," urges teachers to make events in the past become relevant to the present through student-driven intellectual activities like Socratic seminars, character-driven seminars, and simulations. Examples of a teacher's units about the French Revolution, Wars and Justice, and World War II and Vietnam are included in this section. The fifth topic pushes teachers to delve into "painful truths" in their lessons. For example, the authors present one teacher's choices that include the use of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* (2005) and James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (2007). By addressing "painful truths" in history, students learn to question the dominant, Eurocentric content of traditional history textbooks.

Chapter six provides readers with ideas to consider as they are developing or re-examining their philosophies regarding being a justice-oriented educator. First, the authors recommend that teachers determine whether they hold the embracing, redefining, or resisting responses to the Common Core standards, as explained in the beginning chapters of the book. They suggest that teachers constantly analyze and rewrite their own philosophies of education, and that they

continually think about what it means to be the best social justice educator. Second, the authors recommend that teachers take advantage of their time spent in teacher education programs by asking critical questions in classes and developing a network of justice-oriented beginning teachers. Third, they describe challenges that teacher education programs face in developing teacher candidates who have expertise in their content area, knowledge of, and fluency with the Common Core standards, as well as the ability to develop student-centered lessons, given the current accountability-based reforms in teacher education. Despite these challenges, they insist that programs must not neglect social justice in the service of following teacher licensure protocols. Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning also provide readers with stories of teachers trained in social justice-oriented programs, as well as stories of those who had to navigate issues of social justice once in their first teaching job. Last, the authors urge readers to continue a focus on learning during their first years. Their recommendations include joining professional learning communities and engaging in professional development activities that are focused on issues of social justice in education.

Chapter seven, importantly, addresses the loneliness and isolation that many justice-oriented teachers face. The title of this chapter, “You Can Do This, but Not Alone,” struck me as particularly relevant, as I often feel that my colleagues do not have the same justice orientation that I have. Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning explain several challenges that beginning social studies teachers encounter, such as the depth versus breadth of content knowledge covered in a school year, accountability measures, the reliance on textbooks, and the need to incorporate CCSS literacy into social studies, even though literacy may not be a teacher’s area of expertise. After describing these, the authors explain the further challenges that beginning justice-oriented teachers face, like building community and connecting with students and families, incorporating social justice into the classroom, learning the traditional curriculum, and finding resources outside of the traditional curriculum. All of this takes time and resources—two things that are limited for beginning teachers. The importance of finding a community, participating in a mentoring program, building a support network of teachers who are from a variety of contexts and locations, and joining organizations and professional networks is strongly emphasized.

The last chapter of the book addresses the political nature of teaching. In the opening of the chapter, the authors write, “schools are neither politically neutral nor ‘objective’ environments, and thus everything that occurs within them is necessarily reflective of their politicized nature” (p. 111). They go on to outline steps that beginning justice-oriented teachers should take as they enter the teaching profession. First, these teachers should strive to become agents of change in their classrooms and communities. However, the authors warn readers that they must be careful when working through this step as to not anger administrators and get fired. Second, teachers should reframe the notion of accountability. Rather than consider themselves accountable to outside forces—standardized testing, politicians, state boards of education, etc.—teachers should first and foremost consider themselves accountable to their students and themselves. Third, teachers should participate in collective action for social justice. Rather than being a lone ranger, Agarwal-Rangnath, Dover, and Henning explain the importance of working in solidarity with like-minded educators in order to increase their power to effectively challenge and change dominant ways of thinking. Finally, teachers must resist compliance as they enter the world of warriors. The authors explain that all of the teachers depicted in the book embody professional

agency and work for social justice despite current trends in education. They end this chapter, and the book, with this quote from a teacher urging justice-oriented teachers to persist:

Most importantly, when the work gets hard, and it will, you will need them to take your hands, look you in the eye, and remind you why you must persist... *A teacher, Warrior.* That's what you are. It's in your bones and it's in your heart. Persist, Warrior. Above all, persist... (p. 123)

I read this book on a weekend, with only eight days of school left in the year. It gets harder and harder to get up and face the challenges that greet me once I get to school. But as I was reading this book, it provided me with hope.... hope that social justice-oriented curriculums can happen in modern classrooms, especially those classrooms that serve historically, socially, and economically marginalized populations of students, despite the daily accountability and sociocultural pressures that teachers face. As I finish this school year, I am reassured that I can be what I set out to be—a teacher for social justice.

Author Notes

Trisha Wickland is a first and second grade teacher at St. Paul Lutheran School in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to trisha.wickland@gmail.com

References

- Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W. J., Castaneda, C., Hackman, H.W., Peters, M. L., & Zuinga, X. (Eds.). (2013). *Readings for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Agarwal-Rangnath, R., Dover, A. G., & Henning, N. (2016). *Preparing to teach social studies for social justice: Becoming a renegade*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York : Crown Publishing.
- Loewen, J. (2007). *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Russo, P. (2004). What does it mean to teach for social justice? Retrieved from https://www.oswego.edu/~prusso1/Russos_what_does_it_mean_to_teach_for_s.htm
- Zinn, H. (2003). *A people's history of the United States: 1492-present* (5th edition). New York, NY: HarperCollins.