

Noreen Naseem Rodriguez and Katy Swalwell. *Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2022. Pp. 233. \$29.95.

Noreen Naseem Rodriguez and Katy Swalwell's *Social Studies for A Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Education (SSFBW)* is an insightful and practical resource for elementary educators working to shift, and ultimately transform, their classroom practice. This book, both practical and inspirational, is a valuable addition to the literature available to support equity and social justice education, explicitly engaging with social studies instruction in the distinct, and often overlooked, context of elementary school classrooms. With this thoughtful text, Naseem Rodriguez and Swalwell offer elementary practitioners—who often feel isolated and overwhelmed in their commitment to anti-oppressive social studies instruction—a clearly articulated path forward and, importantly, reassurance that they are not alone.

As pedagogy instructors invested in incorporating social justice into elementary social studies curriculum, *SSFBW* provided us with the toolkit that we had been looking for. Over ten semesters, the three of us—Brianna Padilla, Phyllis Goldsmith, and Rachel Reinhard—co-taught the social studies methods course for elementary pre-service teachers at the University of California, Berkeley. When Reinhard encountered *SSFBW* in the Fall of 2021, she and Goldsmith immediately integrated it as the anchor text the following semester, and Goldsmith and Padilla continued using it the subsequent year when they co-taught the class. *SSFBW* pulled together conveniently and impressively the core ideas in the scholarship on the teaching of history while also speaking to the aspirational nature of anti-oppressive social studies instruction in elementary classrooms. Based on our use of *SSFBW*, we anticipate this text not only being a go-to resource for instructors in teacher preparation programs but also for professional development opportunities, led by district instructional specialists or self-organized cohorts of teachers.

SSFBW is divided into three parts that engage broad understandings and offer discrete examples, attending to planning and instructional practices all while taking seriously the intellect of elementary teachers. Part I consists of two chapters and makes a compelling case for the transformative role of social studies instruction for younger students, explaining the connection between the core disciplinary modes of thinking and critical pedagogies. Part II includes four chapters that delve deeply into common “pitfalls,” as characterized by the authors—inherited practices that are counter to the goals of equity and social justice education. In two chapters, Part III provides guidance for deliberately planning for critical inquiry, while also acknowledging the very real-world risks facing teachers committed to disrupting traditional and harmful practices and narratives.

Part I grounds readers in a research-based understanding of the disciplines of social studies (history, civics, economics) and makes a case for their importance in developing critical pedagogies, such as anti-oppressive reasoning, in elementary classrooms. Naseem Rodriguez and Swalwell explain that questioning strategies is essential to framing critical inquiries for students. The authors provide an academic grounding in social studies sub-disciplines for elementary school teachers while reinforcing the “need to consider what the dominant narratives are to these disciplinary questions...[to] make sure we’re attending to the counter narratives.” (10) This attention to unpacking dominant narratives and inviting the construction of counter narratives is central to the “anti-oppressive” stance advocated by the authors. The authors explain, “We use the term anti-oppressive to describe an education that explicitly addresses functions and impacts of oppression as well as the courageous and inspiring struggles against it.” (27) The text provided us a framework for inviting our pre-service teachers, who will be trained as generalists, into the disciplinary specificities of the social studies in a way that could align with their deep-seated commitments to social justice.

Part II takes a magnifying glass to habitual practices and activities in elementary classrooms that often pose an obstacle to an instructor’s own commitment to anti-oppressive education. In four chapters, Naseem Rodriguez and Swalwell provide useful and non-judgmental explanations of four practices they characterize as “pitfalls”: Normalization, Idealization, Heroification, and Dramatization and Gamification. As instructors of pre-service

teachers, we found these chapters to serve as an easy reference for spot-checking specific lessons. In looking at the “pitfall” most common to the grade they were teaching, our pre-service teachers critically analyzed an individual activity against the broader goal of developing an anti-oppressive classroom. For experienced teachers, this section will be useful as a quick entry point for making discrete, though impactful, changes to begin the process of disrupting instructional practices they may not have previously recognized as a “pitfall.”

Part III includes two chapters centered on the practical task of beginning this work, filled with real-world considerations and anecdotes. The first chapter in this section provides concrete first steps for transforming curriculum, and the second acknowledges the political pressures (and outright censorship) some teachers face, providing counsel on “how to not get fired.” These chapters focus on the “how” of building better curriculum alongside making clear-eyed instructional choices in increasingly contested spaces. Grounded in the latest research and frameworks, Naseem Rodriguez and Swalwell provide examples of critical inquiry activities, assessments, and the integration of English language arts within the context of state standards and time constraints in elementary classroom schedules. The authors convincingly show that planning for inquiry becomes one of many “easy” first steps on the journey to creating an anti-oppressive classroom for instructors who may feel hesitant about taking on these changes. Additional suggestions for entry points into this work include connecting instruction to student experience and current events, creating space for conversations with colleagues, making time for self-reflection, and recommitting to ongoing learning. The authors, always pushing the reader not to shy away from working for a better world, remind us that we cannot “stop believing that a better world is possible” and “we must constantly sharpen our critical consciousness to be aware of problematic practices and build our tool kit to disrupt them.” (156 -157) One of their most important reminders is that we cannot do this work alone.

SSFBW is the text we needed to support our work training educators in anti-oppressive social studies methods. This text introduces elementary school teachers to the most current research on historical thinking, instructional frameworks for social studies, and anti-racist and social justice frameworks and instructional practices. Naseem Rodriguez and Swalwell provide concrete steps for implementation in a format and tone accessible to practitioners, providing a “how to” for the many “what ifs” that often stop classroom teachers in their tracks as they seek to transform their instruction in pursuit of a better world. The authors regularly acknowledge the aspirational nature of this book. In the epilogue they write, “Part of equity and justice work is recognizing that you will likely mess up when you venture into new ways of thinking and knowing, particularly when those new ways are in opposition to what you’ve always learned and done.” (170) In a time when our world is rapidly changing, and increasingly complex global issues arise at a near daily pace, this book serves as a resource to empower educators to meet these challenges and fears with confidence and purpose, and in community.

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