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The Urgent Need for Preparing Anti-Oppressive Citizens in Elementary Social Studies: A Conceptual and Pragmatic Framework for Educators

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Review of:

Rodriguez, N.N., & Swalwell, K. (2022). *Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 219 pp., \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781324016779

We are living through a contentious political era. Continuing systemic injustices plague American society, such as the police brutality disproportionately experienced by Black and Brown citizens, the assault on women's reproductive rights, the dehumanization of and violence against LGBTQIA+ and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), the grave mistreatment of refugees seeking asylum at the southern border, as well as many, many others. Public schools have also long been sites of systemic inequality (Kozol, 1991; Shultz, 2008; Love, 2019), and, more recently, many state legislatures have gained control of curricula with the goal of eliminating opportunities for youth to interrogate such enduring social issues, both past and present. Georgia is one state currently in the spotlight for firing an elementary teacher who read a book about disrupting gender norms with her fifth-grade students (Nunez, 2023). Shielding children from interrogating systemic issues in society and exploring the diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and ways of existing in the world are failed opportunities for preparing the empathetic, collaborative, and justice-oriented citizens our democracy desperately needs. Dr. Noreen Naseem Rodriguez and Dr. Katy Swalwell's text, *Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators*, combats this antidemocratic ideology by rooting the purpose of social studies education in developing anti-oppressive citizens. Their text fosters hope that future generations of citizens will be compelled to and equipped with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to reconstruct a more equal and just society.

Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators is organized into three parts: 1) Building a foundation for anti-oppressive elementary social studies education, 2) Disrupting four problematic elements often embedded within elementary social studies curricula, and 3) Strategies for implementing sustainable anti-oppressive social studies in elementary classrooms and schools. The first two chapters build the landscape for social studies education as a vehicle for "building a better world" (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 1). Chapter 1 defines the five major disciplines that comprise elementary social studies, including history, geography, economics, civics, and the behavioral sciences, rooting each discipline in the empirical and normative questions that guide us as we seek to make sense of the physical and social world. For example, historians ask empirical questions that can be answered with historical evidence, such as, "What happened in the past, and why did it happen?" They also ask normative questions more tied to the ethics and values of a society, like "Whose history matters, and whose stories *should* get told?" Chapter 2 introduces the concept of anti-oppressive social studies as one that runs deeper than mere inclusion and tolerance, instead advocating for pedagogy "as a means of disrupting oppression" (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 27). Chapters 3-6 illuminate four problematic elements often embedded in elementary social studies curricula: 1) Normalization, or messages in the curriculum that promote ideas about what

is *normal* or *abnormal* in society, particularly in regard to teaching about families and holidays; 2) Idealization, or how we idealize and depict concepts like “community” and “community helpers” as perfect with little to no emphasis on the injustice experienced in community spaces every single day; 3) Heroification, or how we typically teach historical *heroes* like the “Founding Fathers” through a singular, *heroic* lens rather than as complex, and also flawed individuals, and 4) Dramatization and gamification, or the ways that elementary students often experience simulations, role-plays, and games that reflect concepts such as slavery in problematic and traumatizing ways. Chapter 7 details powerful pedagogical strategies that can be implemented to support anti-oppressive social studies learning, including inquiry and children’s literature. Chapter 8 addresses the elephant in the room - “how to teach anti-oppressive social studies and not get fired” (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 155) - and shares helpful tips for navigating this currently controversial terrain.

One of the strongest aspects of Rodriguez and Swalwell’s (2022) text is that it complicates social studies topics and concepts that are taught in elementary classrooms *every single day*, such as immigration, community helpers, the “Founding Fathers,” westward expansion, and many others, making the ideas very relatable for pre- and in-service teachers. For example, the authors address how mainstream lessons and/or units of study about “families,” often taught in early childhood classrooms, approach the concept through a nuclear lens, centering family structures that reflect expected societal norms. A quick search of “families” on popular curricular sharing websites, such as Teachers Pay Teachers, renders a wealth of learning experiences that characterize *family* as including a biological and cisgender mother and father, sister, and brother, although many of our students’ families assume a wide variety of structures, including families with LGBTQIA+ members, multigenerational families, multiracial and/or multiethnic families, as well as adoptive, divorced, and/or blended families (Rodriguez & Swalwell, 2022). The problem with this pedagogical approach, the authors contend, is that we normalize dominant traditions and subsequently perpetuate often obscure messages that position some families (or other ways of being) as normal and others as abnormal. Beyond the classroom, the long-term impact of normalizing dominant perceptions is that it shapes who we do and do not value and/or advocate for in society, perpetuating an inequitable social hierarchy. As a teacher educator of social studies education, I have witnessed my students reflect on their own pedagogical practices in profound ways as they made sense of the ideas in the text and set future goals for disrupting normalization (and other problematic elements) in their classrooms. This is illustrated in the critical questions posed by one of my students during a class discussion, “What images are we as educators surrounding our students with? What are we implying with our displays of families and holidays? Are we normalizing a dominant narrative or creating a welcoming, inclusive community where everyone is valued and included?”

Another strength of the text is its pragmatic nature, as it provides an abundance of creative solutions for reenvisioning more anti-oppressive curricula, reflective exercises, and instructional resources for its readers, which is especially helpful for pre- and in-service teachers engaging in this type of critical work for the first time. The text is not a set of prescribed

instructional strategies, but rather, the creative solutions and activities are connected to teachers' and students' intimate environments. For example, one of the creative solutions recommends that teachers embark on *caminatas*, or community walks, that enable them to connect with and design learning experiences that include the local communities in which their students live. Each chapter includes "Putting These Ideas Into Practice" activities that foster teachers' introspective thinking and goal setting. One of the activities encourages teachers to (re)envision how they can create family surveys that are more inclusive of diverse family structures. Another activity asks them to reflect on how their previous experiences learning social studies either reflected - or did not reflect - an anti-oppressive approach and to consider how such experiences might influence their own pedagogy. Finally, the appendices of the text include graphic organizers to guide teachers in critiquing curricula for the problematic elements detailed throughout the text, as well as student examples for many of the creative solutions shared in each chapter. The authors have also designed a companion website for the text that includes a powerful list of children's literature for teaching the topics and concepts and additional sources for strengthening the readers' content knowledge of counternarratives.

I have used Rodriguez and Swalwell's (2022) text with pre- and in-service teachers for two semesters, and I can honestly say my only critique is that it might be more helpful for the reader if each chapter made stronger connections to the social studies disciplines (e.g., history, geography, economics, and civics). The first chapter provides a strong introduction to each discipline primarily addressed in elementary social studies, highlighting how each can be utilized as "goggles" for reenvisioning a more equitable world; however, the chapters highlighting problematic elements often embedded in social studies curricula (e.g., normalization, idealization, heroification, and dramatization/gamification) do not make direct connections. As a seasoned social studies teacher, I am able to fluently make connections between Chapter 3's focus on "communities" and the disciplines of geography and civics (and many others, I am sure), but pre- and in-service teachers with far less experience might not make these connections on their own. How can the concepts and topics of concern highlighted in Chapters 3-6, such as families, community helpers, and the "Founding Fathers," be perceived through anti-oppressive *and* interdisciplinary lenses? I believe that addressing this question would make a strong revision for the next edition.

Social Studies for a Better World: An Anti-Oppressive Approach for Elementary Educators is a much-anticipated text in the field of social studies education and adds the anti-oppressive dimension missing in many of the seminal texts utilized by teacher educators. The ideas shared by Rodriguez & Swalwell (2022) are timely and *urgent*, given the state of our democracy. The text is a powerful read for pre- and in-service teachers, administrators, instructional coaches, and all who educate today's youth - those who have the academic and moral obligation to prepare their students for civic engagement that, indeed, makes the world a better place.

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