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Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom

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less and call it more. Consequently, students spend more time memorizing small bits of information and spend little to no time making connections, positing implications, or thinking creatively. Many teachers from all parts of the country report that standardized tests are being relied upon too heavily to determine students' passage to the next grade. As has been widely reported, this disproportionately affects minority students. Consequently, many minority students are forced to repeat grades. Despite their ineffectiveness, these tests remain because when they do work, the public relations victories garner financial awards.

The Shame of the Nation is of particular interest to those in the field of Catholic education. The schools that Kozol visits and portrays in this book are often in the very same neighborhoods where Catholic schools are closing. Secondly, the populations that these inner-city schools serve include the students with which Catholic schools have the most success. If Catholic schools remain open and affordable, a burden may be lifted from the ailing public system Kozol describes.

The Shame of the Nation is typical Kozol. Problems are presented along with their causes, but no real solutions are offered. Still, it is important that these drastic inequalities in the nation's public schools find their way into the minds of the public so that those who can might mount a crusade to improve these failing schools. For the Catholic educator, this book adds further support to the important role Catholic schools play in the inner cities, relieving them of a portion of the already enormous yoke they are forced to bear. If more citizens read this and other similar books, perhaps Kozol will be able to make the nation's successful schools the subject of subsequent works.

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Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom

Rahima C. Wade
 Teachers College Press, 2007
 \$22.95, 124 pages

Reviewed by Rodney Pierre-Antoine

Rahima C. Wade, a professor of elementary social studies at the University of Iowa's College of Education, attempts to provide strategies for teaching social justice to elementary school teachers in *Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom*. The book's title is somewhat deceiving, as the author devotes much of the book to the importance of social justice curriculum in schools and its long-term impact on children, while explicit strategies to help elementary teachers implement social justice curriculum are scarcely presented. Wade does an exceptional job outlining the significance of social justice curriculum and how to establish a just classroom community, but falls short in the attempt to provide elementary teachers with a "how to" set of strategies to integrate social justice into the curriculum.

Wade's nonsectarian approach to social justice and how it benefits the common good is well aligned with the themes found in Catholic social teaching. The themes identified by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Catholic social teaching have led bishops across the country to encourage their diocesan schools to integrate social justice into the curriculum. Despite not including a single mention of Jesus' teachings of love and service to all neighbors, this book is a great resource for any Catholic school classroom.

Early in the book the author explains that, "As teachers, we have an obligation to help our students develop the skills, knowledge, and values to create a society that will someday no longer tolerate the abject poverty of so many in the luxury of the few" (p. 2). Here, Wade lays out how teachers are responsible for instilling in students a sense of care and concern for all in their community while empowering them to be advocates for those who are poor and less fortunate. This point is harmoniously aligned with several of the above themes present in Catholic social teaching.

Social justice curriculum aims to combat the injustice that exists in our society today by instilling a sense of empathy in children during their formative years and providing students with opportunities to serve the common good. Wade asserts that social justice curriculum can be taught to children across all grade levels regardless of the socioeconomic setting of the school or the classroom teacher's experience. Wade offers various strategies on how teachers are to create socially just classrooms that nurture community and help develop future citizens who will always work on behalf of those who are oppressed.

The author defines social justice as "the process of working toward, and the condition of, meeting everyone's basic needs and fulfilling everyone's potential to live productive and empowered lives as participating citizens of

our global community” (p. 5). In order to embrace social justice as adults, students must first be taught to care for others while embracing the importance of fairness. Melinda, a third grade teacher profiled in the book, refers to her students as the “kids who care.” Melinda points out how “kids who care about themselves, care about each other, care about people in the world, and care about the environment” (p. 27). This point parallels the Catholic social teaching of care for God’s creation. To instill care within kids, the author states that teachers must begin first with student’s lived experiences, their concerns, hopes, and dreams. Once these experiences have been embraced, teachers need to move their students to see beyond self and acknowledge multiple perspectives. For social justice to be embraced, the classroom community needs to be a student-centered place where all are valued and respected. They must learn to work collaboratively and move away from isolationism. To achieve this, the author highlights the importance of building relationships in which differences are embraced. The classroom is arranged in a way that invites discussion and collaboration in decision making. Students learn to speak up through participation in circle meetings that serve as a place to check in, build community, resolve problems, and share affirmations at week’s end. “When we have difficulties in our community, we talk about them respectfully and attempt to resolve them so that everyone feels valued and appreciated and so everyone in our community enjoys each other” (p. 24). This classroom community expands as students learn to include others into the classrooms like parents, other teachers, and community members, supporting the Catholic social teaching of call to family, community, and participation.

Once community has been established in the classroom, Wade argues that the transition to teaching social justice curriculum can be made. At the elementary level this means addressing issues such as anger management, bullying, kindness, respect, empathy, self-esteem, and feelings. All of these issues center on the life and dignity of the human person. Students learn to identify prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. By raising student awareness, the author believes teachers can begin to teach students how to change their thinking and the thinking of others as well.

Having embraced the dignity of the human person, students can begin to think outside the box. To do so, teachers must adapt their social studies curriculum to include the history for social justice. Wade stresses how social justice curriculum needs to be rigorous and provide students with opportunities to question the world around them, both past and present. The author further states that this curriculum needs to empower students to think for themselves so that they can learn to take a stand for whatever their beliefs may be. Students need to be exposed to various values and beliefs. They

need to be taught how differences among people have led to power, privilege, and wealth for some and abject poverty for others. Students need to be exposed to the injustice present throughout history. “Studying injustice can increase students’ awareness, empathy, and even moral outrage, hopefully motivating students to care about others and work for social justice” (p. 38).

Wade introduces the concept of human rights as, “those conditions, practices, and experiences due every human being by virtue of being human” (p. 53). Simply put, all humans have a certain dignity, yet another Catholic social teaching. Students must be introduced to grassroots movements throughout time that have fought for the human rights of the disenfranchised. Students must be shown how the leading advocates who worked the front lines fighting for human rights issues did not work alone, tying to the Catholic social teaching of solidarity. To combat injustice like this takes a collaborative effort and true solidarity. Through social justice curriculum, students are taught critical thinking skills that allow them to evaluate and make sense of the world around them.

Students are encouraged to see the need to be active participants through experiential projects that enable them to be up close and personal with those in need. Wade stresses that students need to learn from the community while engaging in action for the community. This gives them opportunities to know and also transform the world. This can be achieved through a variety of methods such as writing letters in which they express their views, fundraisers, school-based activism, community service projects, and participation in rallies and marches. In doing so, students learn they have a responsibility to advocate for the human rights of all.

While the author thoroughly explains social justice and the necessity of its implementation into the classroom, *Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom* fails to offer a detailed “how to” for implementing and integrating social justice into the curriculum. Wade explains that a thematic approach with added depth will lead to deeper understanding, but does not detail for teachers how to create a thematic social justice unit. The author does offer a few examples. Wade advises that children’s literature, role-play, primary sources, poems, and visual and performing arts can be used to bring social justice curriculum to life. These strategies allow students to concretely connect what they are learning and provide them opportunities to share their voice, in turn developing more empathy within. Instead of simply presenting these strategies as examples, the reader would have been better served with an outline of exactly how a teacher could implement such strategies.

The many teacher testimonials throughout the book help support the effectiveness of social justice curriculum in the classroom. More testimonials from students who were exposed to social justice curriculum would prove both useful and practical for the reader. I would give more credence to student feedback on the impact social justice has had on their sense of community and humanity. Having done so would have further cemented the claims substantiated by Wade.

There is a growing push in Catholic education to integrate social justice into the general curriculum. This curriculum is well aligned with the social teachings of the Catholic Church. Despite its secular point of view, *Social Studies for Social Justice: Teaching Strategies for the Elementary Classroom* informs readers of the importance of teaching our students to serve one another. Catholic social teachings and Jesus' challenge for us to love and serve one another can be read between every line. This book can be used as a great source to stimulate discussions within Catholic school communities as to why social justice needs to be brought into classrooms. It is a great starting point to begin reflecting on how to integrate social justice into the curriculum. However, more resources with detailed strategies will have to be found to implement effectively and fully such curriculum into the classroom.

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