



Education Review

Reseñas Educativas

Resenhas Educativas

January 25, 2023

ISSN 1094-5296

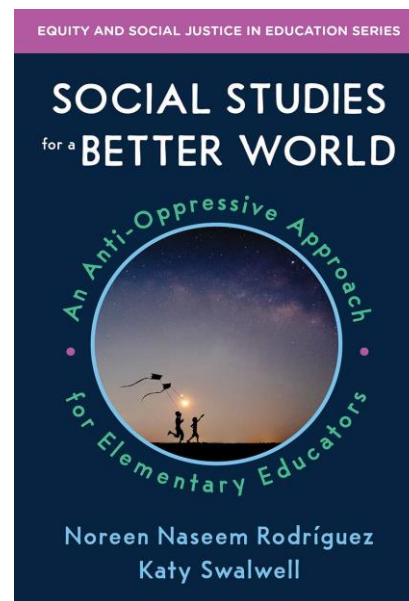
Rodríguez, N. N., & Swalwell, K. (2022). *Social studies for a better world: An anti-oppressive approach for elementary educators.* W.W. Norton & Company.

Pp. 233

ISBN: 978132401677

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In examining how social studies can create a *better world*, Noreen Naseem Rodríguez and Katy Swalwell share an unabashedly critical vision for challenging dominant narratives and amplifying voices that have been historically marginalized in elementary classrooms. The authors' approach is a sharp departure from the tradition of using social studies classrooms for celebrating American exceptionalism and subliminally reinforcing dominant norms (Arnn et al., 2021; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Walker & Soltis, 1997).



Written by two veteran instructors of social studies methods courses, *Social Studies for a Better World (SSFABW)* is a veritable textbook for cultivating a more woke generation of educators and will generally enrich the syllabi of like-minded college instructors. Beyond the ivory tower, in-service teachers, administrators, and those with a role in curricular decisions will also find the book to be helpful for rethinking Eurocentric practices and increasing young learners' enthusiasm via discipline-specific rigor. In short, this instructive, informative, and *anti-oppressive* pedagogical textbook is a long anticipated, how-to guide for explicitly promoting social justice and implicitly democratizing learning in the primary grades.

SSFABW is split into three sections and the authors invite readers to peruse chapters out of order only after reading the opening section to ensure that their anti-oppressive framework is appropriately contextualized (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2021). Throughout the book, the authors follow a

Biola, J. S. (2023, January 25). Review of *Social studies for a better world: An anti-oppressive approach for elementary educators* by N. N. Rodríguez & K. Swalwell. *Education Review*, 30. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/er.v30.3491>

steady rhythm of consistently identifying problematic teaching practices and then proposing more inclusive alternative approaches. After establishing *why* the social studies disciplines need to be reimagined in the introduction, the authors move to an exploration of commonly problematic approaches to topics such as holidays, slavery, and the focus on historical heroes. In the final chapters, the authors outline a plan for operationalizing these ideas without getting fired – a challenge that will require further mediation by social studies methods instructors to ensure that this anti-oppressive pedagogical approach does not jeopardize careers.

Full of edginess, *SSFABW* is significant not because of its critical rhetoric, but because the book answers the call for a prescriptive pathway toward critical praxis (Apple, 2018; Priestley, 2011; Skelton, 1997). In so doing, Rodríguez and Swalwell provide educators with countless shovel-ready resources and ideas for making curricula more inclusive. Their book also outlines tangible, step-by-step processes that demystify the inquiry-based College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework currently endorsed by the National Council for the Social Studies (2013/2014). This push toward inquiry fits within the authors' broad aim of promoting more discipline-specific social studies rigor in the primary grades. As the authors point out, emphasizing rigor diverges from the tendency to use elementary social studies as a space for cutesy arts-and-crafts projects, many of which reinforce dominant norms.

Such calls for classroom transformation build on earlier attempts to use schools as laboratories for constructing a more pluralistic democracy (Carr, 1998; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970/2018). One way the authors of *SSFABW* convey this message is by reminding educators to pay greater attention to the *null curricula*—certain experiences, interactions and discourses absent from the classroom—within their contexts. Through null curricula, students absorb implicit and hidden messages about holiday rituals, classroom management practices, family life, and other hegemonic norms (Ellis, 2003; Skelton, 1997). An oppressive null curriculum, as Rodríguez and Swalwell convincingly argue, can affect students more profoundly than any formal lesson. That said, their critique of the familiar may be unsettling to those with more conservative or traditionalist leanings.

Even more progressive-minded readers should prepare for a thorough self-interrogation if they aspire to meet the authors' woke standards. In raising the bar for socially just classroom programming, Rodríguez and Swalwell make a strong case against commonly employed games, role-plays, and resources that seemingly well-intentioned teachers use to diversify their curricula. To support readers who are willing to scrutinize such practices, the authors provide a "Gamification and Dramatization Flow Chart" (p. 127), an effective tool for determining whether an activity would pass the authors' stringent anti-oppressive litmus test. The flow chart is also consistent with the rest of the text in showing that these forward-thinking authors repeat a familiar refrain from earlier curricular theorists: fun activities should not

supersede meaningful learning endeavors (Taba, 1962; Tyler, 1949; Wiggins & McTighe, 2011).

Although Rodríguez and Swalwell's quest for rigor attracts a variety of ideological adherents, teacher educators who use *SSFABW* as a textbook should be forewarned that the book must be handled with kid gloves. On the one hand, infusing diversity throughout teacher preparation curricula addresses standards prescribed by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2020) and is consistent with the extant literature (Bennett et al., 2019; Chang-Bacon, 2021; Matias, 2016). On the other, critical pedagogy has become a cultural lightning rod that is likely to attract fierce opposition in many states and localities (DeSantis, 2021; Nierenberg, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Therefore, there is an inherent risk to introducing preservice teachers to this anti-oppressive approach without acknowledging that questioning dominant norms "is contentious" (p. 6). Accordingly, instructors who use *SSFABW* as a textbook owe preservice teachers at least a cursory debriefing on more traditional perspectives such as those represented in *The 1776 Report* (Arnn et al., 2021). Former President Trump commissioned *The 1776 Report* as a backlash to *The 1619 Project*, which recenters American history to better account for the narratives surrounding enslavement (Silverstein, 2021).

The 1619 Project's ethos is congruent with Rodríguez and Swalwell's eclectic combination of multicultural, feminist, and Indigenist influences. Given their liberal ideological orientation, the authors' cautions against *indoctrination* may be viewed as hypocritical by conservative readers. Although the authors emphasize that expanding classroom conversations to include topics that are "*political* is different than being *partisan*" (p.17), their vision for *a better world* is in stark contrast to the curricular proposals touted by *The 1776 Report* (Arnn et al., 2021) and the more fringe perspectives of the alt-right. Whereas traditionalists champion learning about the so-called "Founding Fathers," Rodríguez and Swalwell emphasize the fallibility of these men. The authors argue that "we can't desecrate the 'Founding Fathers' as some critics may contend, because *they weren't ever sacred to begin with*" (p. 93). Indeed, it is hard to disagree that the time has come to upend stale, dead White male versions of history. However, readers should also question whether *SSFABW* will help future generations build a better consensus.

Readers should also question the book's sourcing because the authors make too many generalizations that are not well-supported. It follows that skeptics and readers hoping to use *SSFABW* to evangelize would be interested in knowing the basis for the following claims:

- "... most people aren't in poverty because of 'bad' financial decisions but rather because of longstanding structural inequalities and exploitation" (p. 12);
- Elementary schools often use clip art to reinforce dominant norms in ways that are "damaging" (p. 52);

- Positive Behavior and Supports (PBIS) monitoring “often becomes so time intensive that it ends up distracting from ... meaningful curriculum” (p. 73);
- Most Blacks who escaped slavery did so “without help from white people” (p. 125); and,
- Prize-winning books for children and young adults “can *fiercely* uphold dominant narratives” (emphasis in original, p. 151).

Though the authors’ lived experiences and scholarship entitle them to write with some authority, more diligent citation would add weight to their arguments.

Not without controversy, *SSFABW* has the potential to live up to its title in classrooms led by teachers who are committed to social justice ideals. Moreover, Rodríguez and Swalwell’s anti-oppressive approach to improving social studies instruction in the primary grades is likely to inspire open-minded readers to experiment with new resources, frameworks, and curricular tools. Their edgy book drops the pretensions of stuffy academia and reads instead like a series of well-researched blog entries. Unfortunately, the authors’ pedagogical approach also has the potential to provoke outrage in more conservative contexts and is occasionally short on evidence for bold assertions. Given these vulnerabilities, instructors of social studies methods courses should include this text in their syllabi only if they are prepared to accompany it with additional resources that will help preservice teachers understand and navigate through America’s current political and cultural maelstrom. That said, more veteran practitioners should read this volume if they hope to cultivate more inclusive classrooms, pivot toward inquiry-based instruction, or discover new resources for recognizing historically marginalized groups.

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Education Review/Reseñas Educativas/Resenhas Educativas is supported by the Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State

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