



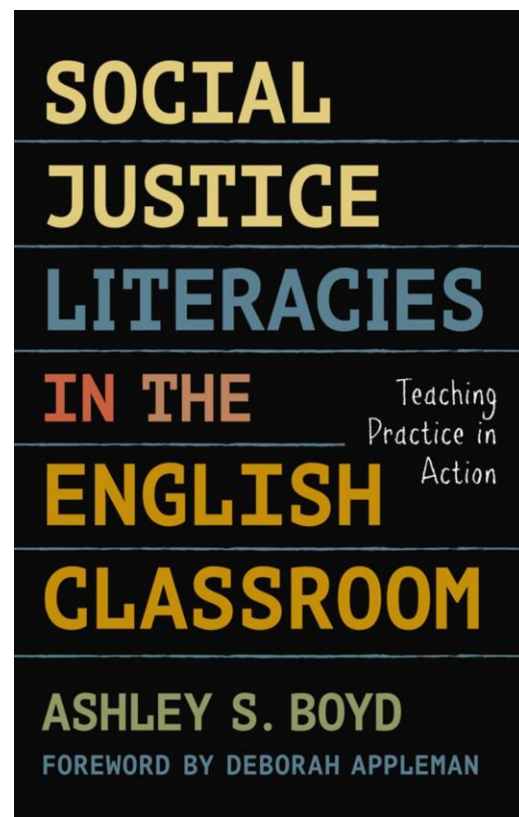
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Social justice is a major focus in education today. Conversations on social justice in education include a range of topics: preparing new teachers to enact social justice pedagogies (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004); understanding components necessary to teach content through a social justice lens (e.g., Hackman, 2005); practicing culturally relevant pedagogy (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995); leveraging texts to develop students' critical literacies (e.g., Schieble, 2012); engaging students in social action projects (e.g., Wilson et al., 2007); and more. Grappling with issues of inequity, privilege, and diversity are more important than ever, as our country becomes increasingly diverse. Currently, children of color comprise 45% of the U.S. student population and are projected to be the statistical majority by 2023 (NCES, 2013). At the same time, the Department of Education (2016) data showed that in 2011-2012 over 80% of U.S. teachers were White, as were 80-90% of incoming preservice teachers



(Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 5). Endeavors to make schools spaces that work toward goals of social justice are needed now more than ever. In *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom: Teaching Practice in Action*, author Ashley Boyd takes up the challenge and explores how English teachers can create spaces where social justice through critical literacies can flourish. Boyd's presentation of social justice and critical literacies reveals them as intertwined and three-dimensional—as a way of being and doing.

Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom is the product of Boyd's study of three English teachers' classroom practices that attempt to embody social justice teaching through the cultivation of their own and their students' critical literacies. While Boyd does not detail how long she observed each teacher, the richness of the narratives and detail of the teaching vignettes evidence time spent in the field. Excerpts of transcribed interactions between the teachers and their students as well as excerpts from interviews between Boyd and the teachers enrich the vignettes. These interviews allowed teachers to contextualize how their pedagogy and interactions with students reflected their social justice beliefs and goals. Boyd weaves these together with her own interpretations, connections to research and theory, and provides recommendations for social justice pedagogy and developing critical literacies.

The book's primary audience would include readers who already have at least some foundational knowledge about social justice and social justice pedagogies and who want to develop or refine their own identities and practices as social justice educators. The introduction serves as a primer on social justice, social justice in the English classroom, and the role of teacher as "catalyst for social justice" (p. 13). An appropriate audience for this book would also include in-service teachers, preservice teachers, and teacher educators. The sequence of the book leads the reader on a sort of developmental spectrum

of social justice literacies—from the definition and theoretical grounding of social justice and critical literacies, to how teachers emerge as advocates for social justice, to building the teacher-student relationships and classroom community necessary for developing students' critical literacies and social justice dispositions, to social justice through curriculum and texts, and finally, to social justice in action beyond the classroom walls. Most chapters end with advice for how readers can translate what they have read to their own practice and pose questions for them to consider and actions to take.

In this review, I present key themes covered throughout the chapters in the book, along with commentary intended to guide readers to recognize ways to incorporate the book's contents into their own teaching. An important overarching theme in the book is that teachers' social justice pedagogies are not practices that are utilized or implemented only in particular instances (such as leading students through a critical discussion of a text) but are instead rooted in critical literacy practices that pervade all aspects of teachers' lives. This theme is evidenced through introductory narratives of each of the three teachers that are the focus of the book—Etta, Beverly, and Tate. In the narratives of each teacher, the author showcases how their backgrounds and past experiences have informed their understanding of social justice and how this intermingles with their beliefs about the purpose of teaching and learning.

For example, Etta is the daughter of a White mother and an Iranian father who grew up in a diverse metropolitan area where her ethnicity was not something that made her stand out. When Etta moved to a rural area after September 11, 2001, her ethnicity became the source of discrimination by her classmates. She became aware of her own race and ethnicity and was deeply impacted by teachers who helped disrupt the negativity of her peers. These teachers inspired her to become a teacher herself: "Etta's social justice

manifested from her own pain as a student. Her sense of unfairness came from her own experience with discrimination, and teaching is her avenue to heal her personal pain as well as protect others from experiencing similar agony” (p. 19). Although the root of Etta’s experience with discrimination was due to her being mixed-race, Etta is particularly passionate about advocating for LGBTQIA students. The introductory narratives of each teacher and the story of what inspired her dedication to social justice demonstrates that orientations toward and foci of social justice are unique and are based on “the *experiences* of the teacher...not necessarily her gender, race, or ethnicity” (p. 31, emphasis in original). Readers can use Boyd’s narratives of Etta, Beverly, and Tate to reflect on their own identities and experiences and reflect how these have influenced their desire to educate for social justice.

A second theme in the book is the importance of building relationships with students that establish equity and directly work to disrupt oppression. Boyd uses themes that emerged from her observations of Etta’s, Beverly’s, and Tate’s classrooms to show the multiple facets of relationship building that have led these three teachers to be successful in building classroom spaces that promote social justice. Examples include valuing students’ diverse positionalities (p. 38) and disrupting language and words that discriminate and oppress (p. 47). For example, a vignette from Etta’s classroom shows how she negotiated what could be a difficult discussion that emerged from a student using the word “gay” in a derogatory way. Instead of simply shutting down the student and admonishing her for the use of the word, Etta approached the use of language that “perpetuates oppression” in a way that is “still inclusive of her students but simultaneously disrupt[s] narratives that are exclusionary and subjugate others” (p. 47). In this vignette, Etta’s student Kesha complimented another friend who finished presenting about a book

by saying, “Ya’ll make the other lit circle group’s work look gay” (p. 47). Etta used the situation as a teaching moment and deconstructed why the use of “gay” in this context was problematic and hurtful. Etta said, “No, wait. Let’s talk about word choice in this situation. This is a word that is used in our language as a habit. It’s not Kesha’s fault. It’s habit. I don’t think Kesha means that the lit circles are interested in same-sex partners. What did she mean?” (p. 47). Etta helped the class think about the damaging effects of the language and shared the story of her friend who was gay, and how language can make people feel unsafe. In this dialogue, Etta facilitated discussion away from one student’s use of the word “gay” as an insult, situated how this derogatory usage is pervasive in our society, and detailed its negative effects. It can be difficult and contentious for teachers to handle situations where slurs and microaggressions are uttered in the classroom (e.g., Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009); vignettes like this will be helpful to teachers as models for their own negotiation of difficult discussions.

Also representative of this theme is the notion of “critical caring,” which is particularly focused on the relationships that teachers need to develop with students who are most affected by inequity—students often ignored, marginalized, or mistreated in schools (p. 54). The chapter on critical caring features the ways that Beverly developed relationships with students whom other teachers might disregard as having attitude problems or being lazy. For example, an interaction between Beverly and Michael, an African American student in her class, shows how she cared about his personal situations and struggles with family upheaval, yet still set high expectations for him and held him accountable for work in her class. When Michael comes into class and puts his head on the desk, Beverly does not chastise him. Instead, she affirms that he is “ok,” checks in with him again after class, and lets him know

he should catch up on work during a tutoring period. Boyd focuses on another aspect of Beverly's critical caring: how she negotiates her positionality as a White teacher of mostly African American students. Beverly is careful to implement pedagogies that are mindful of her privilege and oppressive relationships, but at the same time utilizes approaches that best meet the needs of African American students. Boyd describes Beverly as a "warm demander," noting that Beverly sets up a classroom environment that is very structured, with firm directives to students that some might see as "overly rigid" (p. 60), but that Beverly's approach "illustrates what researchers have found to be effective practice of teachers of students of color" (p. 61). Critical caring entails using the type of instruction and interactions with students that best match their backgrounds and needs, reflecting key tenets of culturally relevant teaching, to which readers can make connections (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

A third theme in the book is how teachers negotiate curriculum requirements and standards while maintaining their social justice goals. Tate chooses books she knows are relevant to her students and their experiences and uses those to help them build the competencies required by the standards. For example, one vignette illustrates Tate's choice of a book that she believes connects to students' lives and empowers them to believe they can succeed despite the difficulties they face beyond the classroom walls—violence, gangs, and drugs. Tate described the book *We Beat the Street* as being the true stories of "three doctors who came from nothing and amounted to a lot" by making a pact in high school to complete college and attend medical school. According to Tate, this kind of reading is important because her students "don't ever get like you CAN do this. . . . You are capable of doing this" (p. 68). Tate's choice of the text *We Beat the Street* gives her students, 98% of whom are African American, the opportunity to see role models

of African Americans who overcame challenges of violence, gangs, and drugs to be successful in life.

Tate sometimes feels a tension between the responsibilities that she has to her district (mandated curriculum, standards, testing) and what she believes students need in terms of learning specific skills and social justice awareness. However, Tate is not willing to let district requirements outweigh her "equity-oriented goals" (p. 70). She explains, "On paper I know that my test scores matter" (p. 70), but the idea of teaching to the test really frustrates her. Tate "mediates this problem" by teaching "in a way that affords her students' success on the test as a byproduct of what they learned in her class" (p. 71). Tate describes this as "a little surviving and subverting" (p. 71). For example, when teaching the required topic of persuasive speeches, Tate has students read Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech but also has them read an article about "how perfect it was" as persuasive speech. She also uses this analysis as a space for students to "acknowledge racism in the current context" (p. 72).

A vignette with Etta shows how teachers can harness the potential of required traditional content, such as Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, to build students' critical literacies. Etta has her students unpack a scene between Mercutio and Romeo and question whether it perpetuates stereotypes of men making jokes about sex and promoting disrespect toward women (p. 76). Students discuss stereotypes of, as a student says, "just what guys do" (p. 76). This vignette of Etta's classroom discussion, along with Boyd's accompanying analysis, shows how classics of the English canon can be leveraged to help cultivate students' critical literacies while also helping students develop essential skills for analyzing texts. Importantly, this does not entail teachers molding the students' opinions based on their own beliefs. In expressing her goals for social justice, Etta says, "I don't want to teach them what to think and I tell

them that a lot. I just want to teach them—that sounds cheesy—but I just want to teach them how to think. And I just want to teach them how to question” (p. 20).

A final theme in the book is the ways in which teachers can help their students become agents for social change beyond the classroom walls by putting their critical literacies to work for social justice causes that are important to them. Boyd emphasizes that if teachers want to “truly immerse themselves in social justice,” (p. 93) they have to help students move beyond the academic content, “advancing equity in the classroom space....to challenge[ing] themselves as well as their students to act in the world outside of the school, to use their critical literacies to effect change” (p. 93). Boyd cautions that sometimes when students are grappling with social justice issues and uncover the inequity and oppression present in the world, they can experience a “state of helplessness” (p. 94). The teacher’s job is to help students to “deconstruct” the world but *also* to “reconstruct” it, with the understanding that they cannot solve problems in their entirety but *can* engage in activism that can make a difference.

Social action projects are a way for students to engage. Boyd explains that social action projects are the natural next step to “flow from the critical pedagogies illustrated by Etta, Beverly, and Tate” (p. 97). Boyd argues that an essential component to the social action projects is an organized approach: choosing a topic of interest to students, investigating the topic, deciding on a sequence of steps for action, developing a plan for implementing the steps, and following through with their plan. Boyd is quick to point out that social action projects can be challenging due to resistance from parents, colleagues, and school administrators, and teachers’ instincts to sometimes self-censor. Boyd lays out a spectrum of social

action that teachers can implement in their classrooms, depending on “the environment in which the teacher works, her comfort level, and the resources she has available to assist students” ranging from “indirect action” to “direct action” (p. 100).

In our current educational climate of mandated curriculum, standards, and evaluation based on test scores, teachers can feel overwhelmed by just trying to meet these requirements, let alone integrating social justice into the content that they teach. This book demonstrates how integrating social justice in the classroom is an outcome of teachers who are fully immersed in social justice and critical literacies as a way of being and through their relationships and interactions with students. The vignettes and analysis of Etta’s, Beverly’s, and Tate’s teaching demonstrates how social justice is not something that has to be wedged or sneaked into lessons at the expense of covering required content. Instead, social justice and critical literacies are revealed as practices that can flow naturally *across* the dispositions, instruction, learning, and actions of teachers and students in the classroom. Importantly, however, the vignettes of Etta, Beverly, and Tate and Boyd’s accompanying analysis do *not* paint social justice and critical literacies in the classroom as easy or automatic. The journey these teachers have made, their constant critique and refinement of their practices, and the ways they acknowledge the complexities with which they grapple daily, represent social justice in the classroom as an ongoing process with challenges *and* rewards. These crucial insights make *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom* essential reading for those in the education field that want to transform their classrooms to spaces where inequity and oppression can be disrupted and where both teachers and students are agents for social change.

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