

Book Review

Social studies for social justice: teaching strategies for the elementary school classroom.

R. C. Wade, 2007, New York, Teachers College Press, 117 pp.
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Within the spectrum of literature surrounding social justice in the classroom, *Teaching strategies for the elementary classroom* by Rahima Wade is unique in the degree to which it engages younger children directly in democratic participation. In this installment of the Social Studies for Social Justice series, Wade encourages autonomous activism on the part the teacher, with concrete activities and examples that can be readily applied in the classroom. Although an activist stance within the public school system can present the challenge of balancing the teacher's personal political opinions with his responsibility as an unbiased facilitator of learning, Wade illustrates the value of allowing young children to engage firsthand in questioning controversial topics and in organizing their own solutions to social problems that they identify in society.

In order to contextualize the need for social justice teaching, Wade first defines social justice as a concept. Her approach to the implementation of a social justice curriculum emphasizes collaborative and experiential learning as critical components. She claims the teacher can start by building the socially just classroom community with care given to physical layout of the space and the use of class meetings to encourage interpersonal conflict resolution. Next, she offers some solutions for both reinventing and adapting standardized curriculum to fit with her particular focus. In order to facilitate this process, Wade offers suggestions for how to seek support from other teachers and also provides some examples of how classroom teachers have managed to implement social justice teaching. Some of her own suggestions of teaching strategies are the use of children's literature, role-play, primary sources, and engaging children in direct activism in the community.

The connection that Wade draws between experiential learning and teaching for social justice is apt because students are able to engage directly in problem solving for social solutions. Finn (2007) has demonstrated that students who are engaged at a conceptual level in their education, organizing information and making decisions about projects, are more prone to believe themselves capable of generating knowledge and creating change. He has also noted that children who engage in such behaviors tend to be attending schools in higher class neighbourhoods, while children who attend schools within a lower socioeconomic class setting are more likely to have less of a voice in their schooling and believe that they do not have the power to generate knowledge.

Wade's strategy of teaching about social justice through participatory exercises in which children collaborate to effect meaningful change allows the teacher to simultaneously teach about social equity and *practice* social equity. Her practical examples offer the opportunity to give students at an early age the tools they can use to interact with their political worlds, in order to be effective leaders in their schools and active democratic citizens with the knowledge of how to effect change and create the results they would like to see in their communities.

Teaching children these leadership skills necessarily requires them to examine some rather complex and often disturbing societal problems that may not typically make their way into the elementary classroom. Taylor (1999) suggests, however, that children are more aware of social injustice and capable of reasoning about social justice than is typically assumed. In her work with fourth grade students, for example, she was surprised to find that the young people were capable of using their own level of language and personal examples to discuss and try to find the underlying assumptions related to racial discrimination.

The teacher must be ever vigilant, however, that in her attempt to bring important topics about social justice to the young students' level that her own feelings as to the political solutions to these dilemmas are not presented implicitly or explicitly as concrete truth. Although Wade warns that teachers should be careful not to attempt to indoctrinate their students politically, her inclusion of anti-capitalistic and anti-individualistic strategies and models of behavior as examples of ultimately democratic methods betray a clear political bias. Likewise, her treatment of certain topics, such as the "atrocities" (p. 2) of the war in Iraq, can hardly be viewed as neutral presentations of controversial political topics.

Context becomes all the more important in the elementary classroom, as the age of the students makes them particularly vulnerable to political persuasion. Proponents like Wade are often quick to emphasize the importance of bringing social equity to the classroom, but the lack of consensus on what solutions and strategies are most appropriate for bringing about social justice is often minimized or completely ignored.

Confidence in the appropriateness of one's own individual solutions for social justice could lead the teacher to justify implementing her own solutions in the classroom. Wade, for example, gently encourages teachers to flout the standard curriculum and use their own discretion to teach about social justice where they feel it is necessary, simply because it is so important. Likewise, she suggests that social justice might be a running theme behind every lesson or even an entire year. Some caution should be exercised, however, in considering whether activist teachers have been mandated to bring their own political agendas into the classroom.

The attempt to teach in a manner that encourages debate and discussion over the nature of social justice among children is a worthy goal. Wade is successful in encouraging the integration of critical thought and collective problem solving at the classroom level, but has difficulty departing from her own views of what constitutes social equity when addressing the wider political context. *Teaching strategies for the elementary classroom* is a wonderful resource for furthering democratic education provided that educators take caution to allocate time for the activities Wade offers within a reasonable respect for the various demands imposed by the standard curriculum and with an attempt to minimize transference of their own personal views, particularly where the impressionable minds of young children are at stake.

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References

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