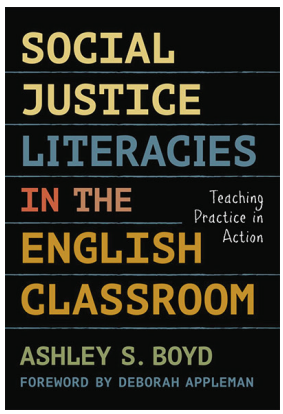
BOOKS-IN-ACTION

NICOLE SIEBEN, *Column Editor*

Karis Jones examines a recently published pedagogy text that focuses on incorporating social justice practices into English language arts teaching as a method for inspiring hope and agency in secondary schools.

Teaching for Equity Inside and Outside the English Classroom



Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom: Teaching Practice in Action
Ashley S. Boyd. Teachers College P, 2017.

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Many teachers realize that the beliefs and values we hold about teaching may not always align with the institutional goals proposed for our classrooms. Due to the external pressures of preparing students for standardized testing and maintaining the status quo, educators may question their capacity to promote social justice in the English classroom. Ashley S. Boyd, a former high school English teacher, believes in instruction that prioritizes reading critically and encouraging social action. In *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom,* Boyd examines the practices of three English teachers working to enact a social justice curriculum in their classrooms. She has organized the book into sections: (I) Social Justice and the Teacher, (II) Social Justice and the Classroom, and (III) Social Justice beyond the Walls of the English Classroom. Boyd shows us that social justice practices *can* and *should* be part of ELA instruction in secondary schools.

In her opening chapter, Boyd defines teaching for social justice as introducing *all* students to a demanding, diverse curriculum that invites them to critique the world and examine their position within institutional systems of power. Pedagogical approaches that highlight social justice are "occurrences such as reading the 'texts' that are students and engaging with them in mutual, understanding relationships; utilizing language in disruptive and supportive ways; and demonstrating an ethic of care that balances rigor with understanding" (35). The chapter discusses why it matters that ELA teachers see themselves as agents for social justice. In subsequent chapters Boyd identifies the principles of social justice literacies and presents findings from her study of three US classrooms in the Southeast with students of diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. She also presents classroom vignettes that highlight the teachers' school contexts and experiences from their own lives that helped them recognize the importance of social justice.

PRACTICAL APPROACHES AND APPLICATIONS

Boyd believes that social justice pedagogy begins with recognizing that "texts" (including everything from the canon to popular TV shows) contain hidden biases that need to be examined critically. If teachers do not disrupt dominant worldviews and simply work to "create students who are replicas of themselves" (14), then students whose experiences and values differ from their teachers' may be

seen as deficient, leading to possible alienation and disengagement. Boyd calls for teachers to work with students to highlight inequalities and "respond to the crises of the time" (31). When teachers work with students to locate biases hidden in various texts, these moments become opportunities to critically examine the world. Furthermore, teaching with social justice in mind does not mean addressing just one issue or concern, but instead recognizing the unique social situations in an individual school and the specific challenges faced by students in that school.

Boyd also explains how teachers can leverage pedagogical practices to promote equity. As an example, she describes a classroom moment during which a student shouted at a peer who did not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. Instead of shutting down the topic, the teacher, Ms. Swan, opened a critical classroom discussion about different values on this matter. After offering an anecdote and giving both students a chance to share their thoughts, she said, "It's cool and brave of you both to share your opinion on this . . . and it's okay if we disagree here. I'm okay with that" (40). The discussion ended with the original student apologizing to the class and his peer, which leads to what Boyd describes as "transformative language practices." These practices allow students to critique classroom language, unpack culturally accepted phrases that promote stereotypes (such as "that's so gay"), and interrupt harmful discourse patterns that have the potential to marginalize and oppress some and privilege others.

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Boyd highlights the need for teachers to embody practices of critical care, "paying keen attention to students' circumstances and acting accordingly" (53). In one example, she describes a situation in which a behavior support specialist brought a student to English class, telling his teacher, "This should be a tardy." The African American male student entered the class, yanked a chair out, and sat down, muttering through tears. The teacher approached him and asked if he wanted to step out to talk. When he nodded, she gave the class an assignment and left the room with him, asking a colleague to look in on her students. Though the student did not tell her what was wrong, the teacher comforted him while he worked through his emotions. "Some days are hard, I know," she said. They then returned to class together (58). Instead of accepting the specialist's assessment of the situation that the student was at fault or seeing the student as hostile or emotionally out of line, the teacher both disrupted the school's power dynamics and worked against stereotypes by validating the student's emotions and still prioritizing the importance of his education. Boyd uses this example to suggest that distinguishing between behavior management or low expectations and critical care is a characteristic of socially just teaching.

SOCIAL JUSTICE LITERACIES BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

In the final chapters, Boyd imagines how teaching with a purpose, embodying critical care, and providing content with critique could lead to social action projects that mobilize students. She suggests that, perhaps, Ms. Swan, who managed the student disagreement about the Pledge of Allegiance by inviting a discussion, could have ended her unit on "Human Rights and Responsibilities" by helping students raise money and gather supplies to send to refugees or by writing letters to government officials about the issues they examined in class research projects. Boyd argues that this last step is key for moving students to action and giving them hope that it is possible to change society. Acknowledging that this step may be difficult, Boyd advises teachers to navigate the awkwardness of moving from typical classroom learning activities to social action projects by finding community partners and communicating transparently with parents who may resist these pedagogies.

SOCIAL JUSTICE TENSIONS AND RESOLUTIONS

The teachers in Boyd's study struggled with institutional pressures and resistance when they attempted to turn their social justice pedagogies into social action. For instance, one of the students in Ms. Swan's class told her that his father did not like the way she handled the Pledge of Allegiance incident. She respectfully accepted the critique from this student while affirming her decision to have conversations about controversial subjects. Boyd addresses these deterrents, encouraging English teachers to persevere and not to be afraid to express their own values in the classroom. She also urges teachers to develop written rationales for curricular choices to be prepared to respond to critiques, as well as to be cognizant of possible self-censorship about difficult topics.

Boyd insists that it is possible for any teacher in any classroom to teach English in a way that helps students use language arts to resist and critique the status quo; in other words, the social justice literacies of the teacher support the critical literacies of the students. She paints an enticing picture of a future where these pedagogies become the norm: "I re-envision [the English classroom] as a space thriving with lively conversations . . . . I imagine students engaged with social action projects, tackling issues of import to them in their immediate as well as broader contexts . . . . I picture students who come to value one another's differences and seek out diverse perspectives" (118–19).

I believe Boyd's vision is both compelling and attainable. As literacy teachers, we have space to build a future where students are empowered to be "agents of change," equipped to think critically about the social inequalities playing out around us every day and, as ordinary citizens, to work to change existing oppressive mindsets and structures. Though there are real and present obstacles, we ELA teachers cannot give up or lose hope as swimming against the current can sometimes cause us to do. Instead, we must decide what social justice literacies look like for our individual classrooms and communities and have the courage to enact them. EJ

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