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## Book review

**Teaching literacy and social justice-oriented social studies as complementary subjects in the elementary classroom. *Social studies, literacy, and social justice in the common core classroom: a guide for teachers*, Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027, 151 pp., ISBN: 978-0-8077-5408-5**

### Introduction

High-stakes testing and standards dominated by English Language Arts (ELA) have intensified the marginalization of social studies in our public elementary schools for years (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014; Hubbard, 2013; Seif, 2004). Teachers aspiring to empower students to improve society are struggling to translate their visions into practice. Grounded in her research and work with pre-service teachers, Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath presents a way for teachers to both meet standards and teach for social justice. *Social Studies, Literacy, and Social Justice in the Common Core Classroom: A Guide for Teachers* offers a five-tenant framework to guide elementary educators in teaching ELA and social studies as “complementary subjects” with an emphasis on challenging students to examine the world from multiple perspectives and make positive change. At a time when civic trust and engagement are at historic lows (Twenge, Campbell, & Carter, 2014) and when a platform tainted by racism and misogyny arguably contributed to the outcome of our presidential election, Agarwal-Rangnath offers a much-needed argument that social justice-oriented social studies is necessary to prepare our students to be well-informed, critical thinkers and passionate, participatory citizens for a more just society.

### Summary

The five tenants of Agarwal-Rangnath’s framework are *Inspiring Wonder*, *Painting the Picture*, *Application*, *Connecting the Past to the Present*, and *Facilitating Change*. What sets apart the first tenant, *Inspiring Wonder*, from traditional lesson “hooks” are the specific questions and vocabulary words Agarwal-Rangnath encourages teachers to introduce. For example, the author describes a teacher who effectively taught the Gold Rush through a social justice lens while also meeting ELA standard L.3.4.: “Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases.” The teacher used ELA time to pre-teach social justice vocabulary words “*detain*, *justice* and *exclusion*” to inspire wonder before she read a book about the Chinese Exclusion Act enacted during the Gold Rush period. This approach is one example of teaching ELA and social justice-oriented social studies as complementary subjects.

*Painting the Picture* is the tenant in which teachers explicitly teach content, but Agarwal-Rangnath pushes educators to look “outside the box” to find resources speaking to perspectives that may be silenced in textbooks. For example, she suggests giving small groups different picture books about Christopher Columbus. Some books reflect a Eurocentric perspective, while others reflect the indigenous Taino perspective. After closely reading the books, the groups are asked to fill out a chart with column headings: “Name of Book,” “Factually Accurate,” “Omitted,” “Motive,” “Who Do You Root For?” and “Illustrations.” Through this activity, students meet ELA standard R.1.: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” and learn about a historical event through multiple perspectives. This prompts students to make their own inferences and interpretations of history, which is a central goal of social justice education.

The *Application* tenant demonstrates how to take advantage of ELA writing standards to apply recently learned social studies concepts such as the Columbus/Native American encounter. Dialogue poetry, in which two students juxtapose alternating perspectives in one poem, is a particularly noteworthy idea that challenges students to process and apply complex content knowledge told from multiple perspectives. A powerful dialogue poem written by two students on page 81 shows how the children deeply internalized the “painted pictures” in the previous Columbus book activity. This application activity gave the students an opportunity to satisfy ELA standard W.4.4.: “Produce clear and coherent writing in which the

development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” While grappling with new social studies information, students are also given an opportunity to apply their new interpretations of history in a concrete way.

Too often history is discussed as something that happened in the past and there is nothing we can do about it. *Connecting the Past to the Present* is the fourth tenant that thrusts history into the present so students understand connections between historical and current events. Agarwal-Rangnath makes a compelling argument that if the past remains in the past, students may feel guilty or helpless in learning about the injustices of yesterday, and powerless in their ability to make change today. To illustrate this point, the author provides a table paralleling historical and current events. She aligns the encounter between Native Americans and Christopher Columbus with modern day neighborhood gentrification, the Great Depression with the 2008 economic recession, and Japanese Internment during World War II with anti-Muslim sentiments after 9/11. By comparing and contrasting such events in classroom discussions, the author claims teachers are meeting ELA standard SL.1.: “Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.” Through these discussions, teachers are scaffolding students to see how our society continues to privilege some and marginalize others.

The fifth and final tenant is *Facilitating Change*, which advocates engaging students in a culminating social action project. The purposes of the project are to create a space for students to make social studies connections from the past-to-present, meet a multitude of ELA standards, and become change-makers on a particular social issue they care about. The author recommends seeking support from administrators by highlighting that these action projects require critical and higher order thinking, which are skills central to Common Core standards. For example, after learning about the American Civil War, the author imagines students may perceive the fight to end slavery as the fight to end gang violence in their school. The students could then give a formal letter to their principal along with a signed petition suggesting concrete ways to promote safety and well being at their school. This type of action-oriented project allows students to make a positive social change in their school and meet ELA standards such as W.4.1.: “Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.” Teaching for social justice, the author argues, is for students to not only see, but to work to alter and transform the world.

## Analysis

*Social Studies, Literacy and Social Justice in the Common Core Classroom* makes three significant contributions. First, it provides a practical framework that can guide teachers toward teaching for social justice. While the structures of the first three tenants are commonly found in traditional lesson plans, the last two tenants are significant contrasts to conventional curricula. Rarely do textbooks explicitly “connect the past to the present” or encourage students to “facilitate change” through social action projects. The book’s second contribution is its wealth of social justice-oriented questions that challenge students to examine stories, art, history, and other fields of inquiry through a critical social justice lens. Textbooks and mandated curriculum often guide teachers to ask questions like, “From whose perspective does the story take place?” but hardly ever ask, “Whose perspective do we not hear?” or “Who may be missing from the storyline?” The author embeds dozens of such questions through each tenant; each question emboldens children to grapple with controversial issues, think critically, and openly debate truth and justice. Third, the book provides the reader with concrete examples from real teachers, portrayed through valuable tables and vignettes. This book is particularly suited for teachers who want new ideas for teaching social justice-oriented social studies and meeting ELA standards.

While the book has multiple strengths, there are also several important issues and weaknesses. One concern is that the author’s primary argument that ELA and social studies can be taught as complementary subjects may enable and even perpetuate the marginalization of social studies. Recent research advises caution in combining literacy and social studies because literacy skills are often found to dominate the routine, distancing students from history rather than supporting their understanding of it (Pace, 2012). Administrators focused on test scores and teachers with limited time might use this book as a resource to reduce or eliminate time slotted for social studies or as “evidence” that social studies does not need to be on the elementary schedule. Despite the author’s strong advocacy for social justice-oriented social studies, she does not explicitly endorse the *ideal* structure for elementary social studies education in which social studies is given as much attention as reading and writing, as conceptual knowledge from social studies makes reading and writing easier (Johnson, 2000). Also, not one social studies standard was included in the book, which sends a problematic message to teachers that social studies is not as important as the other subjects.

Another issue is that the book is not written or organized in a particularly teacher-friendly fashion. The reader has to do a lot of navigating, cross-checking, and page flipping to determine which teaching idea is linked to which standard. The reader often has to guess which lesson ideas and standards are supposed to connect as the ELA standards are placed in separate text boxes amidst long passages of text. Additionally, it can be difficult to determine which part of a lesson is associated with which tenant, especially in the *Facilitating Change* section where the project examples seemed to lack distinction from the assignments in the *Application* section. A chart at the beginning of each chapter connecting examples of mandated curriculum, social justice-oriented ideas, ELA standards, and social studies standards would help teachers organize and plan. It also would have been helpful if the author had included a sample of authentic curriculum from a real textbook, and had shown how to restructure a lesson to integrate her social justice-oriented ideas and connect it to ELA and social studies

standards. Due to the lack of these features, the book may feel overwhelming and confusing for teachers rather than inviting and accessible.

Lastly, many of the recommended lessons are complex and require a great deal of preparation time, knowledge about social justice history, and class time. Agarwal-Rangnath offers few detailed suggestions on how to prepare and implement the lessons. For example, she proposes: “Each group is given a picture book about Christopher Columbus. Some books lean more toward a Eurocentric perspective, while others toward the Taino perspective.” Which books? Where should teachers find these books? Few teachers have the time or energy to, among other steps, research, purchase, read, prepare vocabulary, and write reflection questions to execute these types of comprehensive lessons without more detailed guidance. Additionally, most elementary teachers are only aware of the Eurocentric history they were taught when they were in school and do not necessarily have the background knowledge to teach “outside the box.” Implementing these multifaceted social justice-oriented social studies lessons during ELA class time may also not be realistic in many typical literacy block contexts. Most elementary teachers use “The Daily 5” or a daily center system in which successful student outcome is highly dependent on the consistency and fidelity of the ELA structures and routines. To expect a teacher to replace his or her Daily 5 routine for a comprehensive social studies-oriented book activity that could take up to a week is possible, but often implausible. To implement many of the complex activities suggested, a teacher would need to carve out social studies time *in addition* to the regular ELA time. By recommending such lessons, the author is, in reality, advocating for more social studies time on the daily schedule, but did not explicitly argue that. The author could have gone into detail on how to integrate her lesson ideas into commonly used elementary teaching structures and routines. Better yet, she could have advocated that social studies be integrated into ELA *and* receive increased time—as its own subject—in order for rigorous, project-based, social justice-oriented social studies education to truly come to fruition.

Overall, Agarwal-Rangnath has assembled a valuable framework with strong ideas for teaching social justice-oriented social studies. A slight reframing of her thesis could avoid the risk of furthering the marginalization of social studies. Among a myriad of recommendations to make elementary social studies more meaningful and powerful, research increasingly recommends that social studies leaders advocate more extensive and frequent time for social studies (Hawkman, Castro, Bennett, & Barrow, 2015; Anderson, 2014; Bolick, Adams, & Willox, 2010). Instead of surrendering to the pressures of standardized testing and settling solely with the integration strategy, teachers need to be encouraged to stand up for what will most effectively and absolutely accomplish the author’s noble goal: to prepare students to be well-informed, critical thinkers and passionate, participatory citizens for a more just society.

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