

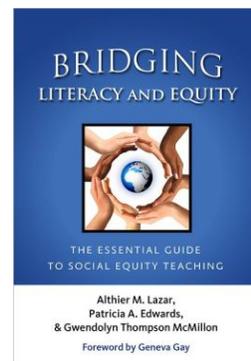
Professional Book Review

Lazar, A. M., Edwards, P. A., & McMillan, G. T. (2012). *Bridging Literacy and Equity: The Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching*. Teachers College Press. 160 pp., 9780807753477. \$29.95

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After receiving the teaching evaluations from students in my Multicultural Literature and Curriculum course, I noticed most of the comments were positive, claiming that the course was eye-opening and students had learned a great deal. However, one comment stood out to me the most:

Although this course was very educational and important to teaching, I walked out of class almost every week ashamed to be a white American. It is imperative that each member and culture of this multicultural class does not feel this way when leaving class.



I absolutely agree with this student -- shame is not a good condition for learning.

From the beginning of my higher education teaching career, I have struggled immensely when talking about issues of race and equity in my classes. I have found many of my students resist this topic and shut down physically. In past student evaluations, I have received remarks stating, "This is a literacy course – why are we talking about race?" These types of, what I considered, negative commentary have prodded me to reflect, modify, and change my classes each semester. Moreover, these comments have strengthened my resolve that I must be more intentional in my teaching. My students must become aware and learn how issues of race, culture, class, language, and literacy are intertwined and the implications for students. Therefore, I am always seeking out resources to help me accomplish these goals.

I believe it is no coincidence that the same time I received my teaching evaluations I also received a copy of *Bridging Literacy and Equity: The Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching*. This short book (7 chapters) is chock full of real-life classroom scenarios that combine current research with practical resources, thus forming an extremely valuable teaching tool useful for literacy education classrooms. At the heart of *Bridging Literacy and Equity* is a desire by the authors to "empower" teachers by equipping them with tools to provide excellent, high-level literacy experiences. It begins laying the theoretical groundwork and moves on to illustrate what classrooms look like when teachers adopt a social equity teaching stance.

The chapter on "Transforming Teachers" is filled with explicit information and numerous strategies to promote an understanding of bias, racism, and privilege, all of which would have been extremely beneficial to use in my course with the student who left my class feeling shame about his Whiteness. The chapter explores the origin of biases and prejudices and offers insight on how to confront and learn from biases to

recognize students' limitless capabilities. One of the tools in this chapter helps teachers investigate racial identities, as these identities guide how people perceive themselves and others through the lens of race. Thus, by examining three separate well-known models of racial identity by Cross, Helms, and Howard, the reader learns about the different categories and general boundaries of racial awareness. This examination is vital as there is a positive relationship between racial identity development and teachers advocating on behalf of their students. The chapter also facilitates ways for the reader to actively examine issues surrounding privilege and subordination by interviewing a senior person in the reader's life to determine if the person was advantaged or underprivileged.

Each chapter in the book provides the most up-to-date research and detailed practices that promote culturally responsive, social equity literacy teaching. The authors emphasize a range of topics including detailing the intricate and relevant nature of culture while expanding knowledge and understanding; becoming aware of, valuing, and respecting the many forms of literacies and language while teaching the language of power; utilizing students' funds of knowledge to teach in the Third Space in order to bridge what's occurring in students' personal lives with school learning; and incorporating critical literacy to interpret and analyze various forms of texts through the investigation of power and to promote action and advocacy for positive change.

One of the most potent aspects of the book is the use of real life vignettes of teachers learning about and implementing different aspects of social equity teaching. These vivid narratives allow the reader to see and hear variations in individual social equity teaching classrooms. Moreover, the authors share examples of teachers who struggle with or are having difficulty with moving beyond their own personal narratives; these examples demonstrate firsthand how social equity teaching is a stance and a process in which teachers are at different stages on the continuum.

Another extremely valuable feature of this book is that each chapter ends with a "Reflection and Inquiry" section. These sections encourage readers to go through a variety of exercises to interrogate and become aware of factors that influence classroom interactions and learning for students. For example, readers can investigate their own views regarding people living in high poverty communities. Readers are also encouraged to scrutinize school curriculum to notice how structural racism hinders high quality literacy practices, how such hindrance impacts students, and how teachers can confront these problems. Another exercise leads readers to investigate the literacy and language practices of their childhood, compare these practices to the practices valued in schools, and develop instructional strategies that support students' ability to maneuver between home and school. The authors include a chapter focused on promoting students' active learning through critical literacy. That chapter provides step-by-step procedures for how teachers can implement critical literacy in their own classrooms. Engaging and reflecting upon these concrete exercises will not only bring awareness to the forefront of teachers' consciousness but will help to facilitate social equity literacy practices in the classroom.

The authors state that they purposefully do not get into the details of the reading process because there are many other books that already address its particulars.

However, I believe that including specifics on how to address the skills and strategies of teaching reading would strengthen the book's appeal. Too many English language learners, students of color, and students in high poverty areas do not receive outstanding literacy instruction that is vital to their learning. Instead, many of these students are exposed to a scripted curriculum that does not connect or invite connections to students' everyday lives. Some students, lacking essential reading skills, spend their days in classrooms doing low-level worksheets involving skills and drills and never learn how these skills are related to the larger purposes of reading and writing (Pegler, 2009). Although the authors' use of vignettes provides a glimpse of how skill instruction can be integrated during high quality literacy lessons and addresses how teachers negotiate scripted curricula, it does not provide the clear-cut detail in which the authors address the tenets of social equity teaching.

Nevertheless, *Bridging Literacy and Equity: the Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching* provided me with a myriad of invaluable new revelations, especially regarding the student who left my classroom feeling ashamed because of his Whiteness. According to Helm's model, my student's comment reflects a person in the "reintegration" stage. At this stage, a person has an awareness of racial inequalities but still experiences guilt and shame when learning about racism. This insight is useful for next time I will teach the course. Not only will I incorporate the authors' suggestion about having students examine where they are in terms of their racial and ethnic identities using Cross, Helms, and Howard's models, but I will also have my students trace the history of a family elder to discern how this person was privileged or subordinated by racism.

Bridging Literacy and Equity is a powerful tool for any teacher striving to ensure that each and every one of their students is seen and their life experiences are validated in the classroom.

References

- Pegler, K. S. (2009). *A critical examination of the attitudes and practices of first year teachers educated in a graduate reading program that emphasized cultural responsiveness*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) Saint Joseph's University, PA.