

Professional Book Review

Berdan, K., Boulton, I., Eidman-Aadah, E., Fleming, J., Gardner, L., Rogers, I., & Solomon, A. (Eds.). (2006). *Writing for a change: Boosting literacy and learning through social action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 192 pp., ISBN: 0-7879-8657-7 (pbk). \$22.95.

Reviewed by Jean M. Landis, Eastern University, U. S. A.

This powerful text is divided into three sections. Part One, consisting of 11 chapters by different authors, explores student-centered learning through Social Action. Nine teachers and their students describe their work with Social Action in the classroom and community. Part Two consists of three chapters in which the editors tie the examples to theory, definition, process, and principles. In these chapters, discussion focuses on how to get started with Social Action in the classroom. Part Three includes many teacher-friendly teaching activities and methods that one can use to implement Social Action within the curriculum.

The editors make it clear that “Social Action is a distinctive methodology and should not be confused with the generic term *social action*, which describes activity aimed at bringing about change in society. Social Action redefines the relationship between professionals and service users—in this case, between teachers and young people. It presents a democratic framework for true partnership, and it is inclusive rather than exclusive” (p. 87).

One of main sponsors for the book is the National Writing Project (NWP), begun in 1974 at the University of California, Berkeley, and dedicated to improving student writing through professional development for K-16 teachers across the United States, Puerto Rico, and the U. S. Virgin Islands. A second sponsor is the Centre for Social Action (CSA) at De Montfort University in Leicester, England, an organization working to help people of all ages achieve their goals for social action.

The collaboration of the NWP and CSA helps to blend in-school and out-of-school literacies with the focus on Social Action. Instead of silencing teachers and students, they are seen as agents for social justice and an important part of school reform. Using the Social Action process, the teacher-facilitator engages the children and youth “to consider *what* issues and problems concern them, analyze *why* they exist, consider *how* they can take action to change them, take these actions, and then reflect on what they have done and what has changed” (p. 9). This research builds on Paulo Freire’s work and assumes that everyone can be an agent for change. In *Writing for Change*, Social Action theory is not only based on the interests and concerns of students, but is also directed by students. It is noteworthy that this theory and methods also align with standards and conventions of writing instruction. It assumes that students have strengths

and the right to be heard, as well as having the knowledge, language skills, and experience to address social problems. Social Action theory “views young people, parents, and communities as experts about their lives and as capable of creating positive and lasting social change” (p. 87). The classroom examples illustrate how students became empowered after they saw how they could create change within their schools and community by writing persuasive letters to real people about issues they thought were unfair within their school and/or community.

For example, some urban youth wanted to address the issue, “that too many young people get involved with negative activities after school... many kids just hang out with nothing to do, and that this lack of structured activity can lead to bad grades, bad school attendance, drug abuse, and bad behavior” (p. 25). In response, students wrote persuasive letters to the mayor and other government officials, to the Orioles baseball team and the Ravens football team, and to some reporters of the local paper, demonstrating their understanding of the conventions of written language. As a result of their persistence, a federal bill by Maryland Senator Mikulski set aside \$70,000 for the Youth Center, where teenagers served on the board and worked at the center. Students wrote grant proposals until they received \$180,000 toward their annual operating budget. Once empowered, the students did not stop.

This book should be required reading for *all* teachers. The inspiring stories and practical methods are both empowering and transformative. Furthermore, the principles and process of Social Justice theory align with culturally responsive teaching, which centers on the cultures and voices of all students, including the marginalized. For instance, culturally responsive teachers teach for empowerment, transformational learning, and social justice. Culturally responsive teachers also have high expectations for all students and assume that all students can learn. Both theories disrupt the deficit theory and build on the strengths of students, viewing students and parents as resources to help inform the curriculum and to be agents for social justice in their school and community. Social Action theory and process provides space for teacher and student reflection concerning self-empowerment and transformational learning to help impact and transform self and community. Social Action theory and process also engages and motivates students and parents as problem posers as well as problem solvers. Instead of feeling powerless, students assert their power to become movers and changers!

The National Reading Panel Report (2000), which fueled the *No Child Left Behind* policy (2001), noted that a student’s loss of motivation to read was correlated with reading failure. The report also noted that more research was needed on how to motivate students to read and teachers to teach. Social Action theory and process has demonstrated that hard-to-reach students of all ages can become engaged and motivated when they address issues and problems that are important to them. Also, students feel empowered and less disillusioned with

the educational system when they see that their voices can make a difference and that they have power to embrace literacy and justice.