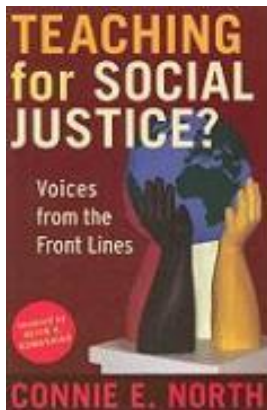


## Professional Book Review

North, C. E. (2009). *Teaching for Social Justice?: Voices from the Front Lines*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. 193 pp., ISBN: 9781594516184 (pb). \$28.95.

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This relatively new text is divided into five sections, each section corresponding to a particular type of social justice literacy and the experiences of a classroom teacher related to that particular type of literacy. Part One, Functional Literacy, focuses on having the appropriate reading and writing abilities to function effectively in a democratic society, combined with the experiences of Margaret, a veteran 7<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teacher. Part Two, Critical Literacy, focuses on being able to critically analyze and combat social injustice, combined with the experiences of Joe, a Native-American/Filipino high school social studies/art teacher. Part Three, Relational Literacy, focuses on developing trust, respect, and caring between students and teachers and highlights the experiences of Julia, a White lesbian Jew who coordinates a program for at-risk youth. Part Four, Democratic Literacy, encourages literacy skills necessary to participate in a democratic society, combined with the experiences of Paul, a veteran, White private school teacher. Part Five, Visionary Literacy, encourages envisioning the future possibilities of our democracy as illustrated by Joe's experience with visionary social justice leadership.

The narrative of this book truly begins by panning in on a White teacher, Margaret, working in a Black high school. She is feisty and smart and believes in her students, regardless of their race or class. The defining question in this section is whether educators should teach what the author defines as marginalized students to “function” within the system or to fight it. Margaret wisely teaches her students so they may “access [sic] certain things as adults” (p. 14). She worries that discussions about racism and poverty only turn her students into victims who then fail to see their own self efficacy.

In response to Margaret's policy of functional literacy, North advocates for change that is not incremental, but radical and systemic. Utilizing counter hegemony is merely mirroring the current system of alleged racism, and a new (third) approach should be developed (p. 37). This leaves the reader to feel that the polarized views of the author and her subject are not compatible. One may also ask what role, if any, the author feels that personal responsibility plays and where the locus of control lies in the life of “marginalized” youth. The book does

not answer these questions but does contend that functional literacy alone does not advance the tenets of social justice.

Continuing from the ideas of Margaret and functional literacy, critical literacy is explained by highlighting the classroom environment and approach of Joe, a Native American teacher at an alternative high school. Although it is critical literacy that is supposed to “emancipate oppressed groups of people” (p. 72), it is functional literacy that enables students to achieve and access the web of power which is holding them back. Joe, the author feels, focuses too heavily on critical literacy while turning a blind eye to functional literacy, failing to employ a sufficient amount of reading and writing activities for his learners. What is it that prevents the teaching of critical pedagogy? According to North, it is White, educated parents who undermine social justice educators by operating a “culture of power” and striving to maintain this power at all costs. Unfortunately, White, well-educated parents have no voice in this work; nor are they represented in a balanced fashion. This leaves the reader to wonder how such a group’s voice would interpret and respond to North’s claims of “foul play.” From reading this book, one could never know, and North said it best herself, “I have yet to meet someone... [with] the humility to examine continuously one’s own blind spots...” (2009, p. 75). Indeed.

Centered on Julia, a study skills teacher, North describes the importance of critically caring about students in Part Three. Teachers have the power to make a significant difference in students’ lives when they recognize them as human beings and acknowledge the differences they bring to the table. Since culture does influence learning and school achievement in schools (Nieto & Bode, 2008), caring for all students is a must. Critically caring can take on many different forms. As North describes in the book, it is a “process that develop[s] teacher-student relationships centered on mutual trust, respect, and responsibility sharing” (p. 107). Breaking down the traditional student-teacher relationship into more of a co-learner role for both also demonstrates the ability to care critically. Relational literacy cannot be taught, but students know when their teachers are treating them with dignity and respect.

North is quick to realize the caring has the potential to harm students instead of helping them. The students will not have these crutches once they graduate and need to learn independence and the surrounding issues. Many teachers will not feel comfortable leaving the role of authority to become a facilitator and co-learner; one teacher ran into problems of entitlement when he broke the student-teacher barrier with students who came from privileged backgrounds.

North asserts that a democratic classroom promotes an arena for discussion. It provides a space for students to act out their thoughts and debate, becoming responsible democratic citizens. Democratic literacy “advances participating in the civic affairs of local, national, and global communities, as well as critical assessments and collective transformation of unjust social, political, and economic structures” (p. 130). In a democratic classroom, teachers need to

be prepared for all types of statements, including those of hate, and have strategies in place to enlighten students and deal with those moments. The questioning of current practices in local, state, and national economies is key to promote a social justice education.

To change our world, visionary literacy is the key. According to North, the process consists of three steps: developing our own personal story, doing our best to realize that story, and preparing for obstacles while maintaining hope for the future (p.150-1). This is probably the most difficult form of literacy to realize. Patience, dedication, and the desire to stay the course are all needed. This visionary leadership calls on teachers to create a respectful classroom where students share their stories, appreciate others' stories, and challenge students to question honestly social justice in our society. Ultimately, the goal of visionary literacy is to help students envision a future where they are key contributors.

This book is well-written and informs the practice of social justice at the school and teacher level. However, coupling one particular literacy with one particular teacher gives the impression that a teacher is only able to exhibit one type of literacy at a time, when just the opposite is true. A teacher can exhibit multiple literacies, while working towards social justice. The author also gives the impression that the literacies are linear in fashion, when that is definitely not the case. Showing social justice literacy holistically, demonstrating how teachers are able to pursue multiple literacies with teachers' examples as support, would have made the book more user friendly.