REVIEWS

Miller, sj, Laura Bolf Beliveau, Todd DeStigter, David Kirkland, and Peggy Rice. ***Narratives of Social Justice Teaching: How English Teachers Negotiate Theory and Practice Between Preservice and Inservice Spaces.*** **New York: Lang Publishing Press, 2008.**

Reviewed by Tom Kerr

This co-authored volume sprang from conversations at a meeting of the Conference of English Education Commission (CEE) on Social Justice at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) 2006 Annual Meeting in Nashville. In the spirit of such face-to-face professional community building, sj Miller, Laura Bolf Beliveau, Todd DeStigter, David Kirkland, and Peggy Rice endeavor to confound, via "the collaborative braiding [together] of university, inservice, and preservice teachers' voices"(18), the rigid hierarchical relationships that often preclude the kinds of critical, democratic practices essential to social justice in educational settings. They do this by enacting, rhetorically, principles drawn from critical, feminist, and postmodern theories that emphasize collective problem solving and recognition of others as full and fully embodied stakeholders in community affairs and decision-making. While the effort to share a rich, open-ended conversation with a broad audience is in most ways successful—a multiplicity of voices and perspectives on teaching for social justice, including those of preservice and inservice[1] teachers, is represented—the self-reflexive cross-talk between insiders makes for slow-going at times, especially for a reader who is neither in the field of Education proper nor privy to the specific programs, courses, and community conversations out of which the textual collaborations emerge. Even so, the theoretical framework and the narratives themselves are sufficiently compelling to warrant whatever patience may be required, and I largely concur with the publisher's claim that this book "will be useful to social

justice researchers, English teacher educators, inservice and preservice teachers, policymakers, cross-disciplinary teacher education fields, and interdisciplinary audiences, particularly in the fields of anthropology, sociology of education, philosophy, and cultural studies" (Jacket).

Defining "social justice" in education is essential for progressive educators and especially important for the contributors to *NSJT*. In her foreword, "If We Could, Only, What?" Ruth Vinz asserts that "social justice is about treating students equitably and fairly as well as teaching them to be fair and equitable with others" (xxii). And what, one might well ask, could be less controversial, less political than this modified version of the Golden Rule? What educator, administrator or parent could object to a pedagogy that, whatever else its aims and methods, self-consciously adheres to such a basic standard of ethical human conduct? As *NSJT* makes abundantly clear, the controversy and politics lie both in different meanings we assign to equity and fairness and in methods we employ to achieve either in a given situation.

While the abstract concept of social justice, like Plato's Good, may be relatively stable, how to realize social justice in particular contexts will, as the Sophists knew, depend on any number of situational variables and relational dynamics. Moreover, criteria for determining when social justice has been achieved are, to a significant degree, subjective. What one thinks is equitable and fair for another may well not seem so to that other (just ask my six year old daughter . . . or me!). Thus, inflexible, linear, and hierarchical educational systems premised on apparently rational, objective standards and measures—systems conceived principally as means of social engineering and control within a competitive capitalist culture (e.g., No Child Left Behind)—will not naturally foster social justice. Vinz offers one riveting case of total educational system failure. In her example, an autistic child ends up inhabiting a decorated refrigerator box in the middle of an otherwise enlightened classroom and the teacher's student assistant, who objects on the grounds that the box solution stigmatizes the child, quits teaching *altogether* in protest and

frustration. As she relates the relational/political complexities of the incident—which involved the preservice and cooperating teachers, the supervisor, the parents, the principal, and Vinz herself in her role as university department chair—Vinz captures precisely the crucial flaw in conventional hierarchical decision-making versus collective, dialogic problem-solving. When one or more participants (here, the student teacher) is excluded from deliberations and/or when one or more participants (here, Vinz herself) defers to the powers that be, outcomes can be dismal. The student remaining in the box and the loss of a courageous student teacher serve as stunning reminders, in this instance, of how badly well-intended teachers and administrators can stumble when social justice is not a self-conscious priority at all levels or in all spaces. Vinz's narrative also illustrates how difficult, even impossible, it can be for professors and their students to negotiate theory and practice *on the ground, in the midst of the struggle.*

sj Miller, who in her introduction provides a theoretical frame for the volume, explains the less obvious consequences of embracing the definition Vinz offers and that serves as the working definition for each contributor:

> [Treating students fairly and equitably] means that we deconstruct and critique the ways that curriculum is socially constructed and consider the foundations of its origins. . . . This means, students are not to blame for perceived shortcomings, rather we look at them within a matrix of issues that may impact their ability to live up to their potentials. (2)

She further unpacks this "matrix of issues," the issues that constitute the specific political content of social justice, by enumerating them: "race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, age, appearance, ability, national origin, religion, weight, height, sexual orientation, social class, environment, ecology, culture, spiritual and animal" (2). And she argues that to teach for social justice in relation to this panoply of issues means "standing up for

injustice and discrimination in all forms" (2). So in Miller's conception, we see clearly the stakes for English Education professors and their preservice and inservice students; we see clearly how it is that teaching for social justice is as much a matter of speaking truth to power, bucking oppressive conventions, and substantially recognizing each other's personhood as it is implementing a particular curriculum or innovative methods.

Nonetheless, curriculum and method, like definition, matter very much, and the narratives in *NSJT* are steeped in theory that promotes critical reflection, democratic decision-making, dialogue, collaboration, and conceptions of the self that, significantly, include the body and the emotions along with the mind. The kinds of curricula and methods that emerge from such theory will be familiar to people in Composition and Rhetoric in the forms of 1) student-centered course readings (including non-canonical, culturally relevant literature); 2) decentered, Freirian classrooms, 3) democratically organized writing groups, and 4) various forms of community-based or service-oriented writing classes and/or units. What may perhaps be less familiar to those accustomed to college teaching are the enormous challenges of taking theory and practices geared toward social justice from English Education courses into K-12 classrooms and bureaucracies, where school boards, administrators, and parents exert enormous forces on an individual teacher's choices, and where student diversity is more pronounced than in colleges. How to do so successfully—how to shepherd progressive teachers from radical English Education programs into mainstream, or even into progressive alternative, classrooms and support them in their careers—is the main subject of this book, itself a form of shepherding and support. While my own experience is confined to college and university writing classes and contexts, the Institution, the System, always looms large, and I find the ideas advanced in *NSJT* very helpful in thinking about political struggles in my own teaching life.

Miller frames the problem of guiding and supporting progressive teachers with a spatial metaphor and complimentary

pedagogical heuristic, both of which many contributors to the volume draw heavily on. She argues that progressive teachers need access to what she calls "fourthspace," an intellectual/emotional/subjective space that will allow them to "reflect, reconsider, reconceptualize, rejuvenate, and re-engage—the 5 re-s" (10). Forthspace is posited by Miller as a vertical space that escapes the constraints and potential limitations of horizontal spaces that teachers inhabit, including the firstspace of the concrete classroom/building; the secondspace of the imagination; and the thirdspace, where real and imaged spaces converge. The distinguishing feature of fourthspace, in Miller's physics, is that it should allow free and full play to the social, emotional, and political identity of the teacher, so that this identity can thrive and thereby shape the other three spaces. Fourthspace as Miller envisions it might most simply be understood as any space, psychological or social, that allows a teacher to be her most robust self—or to center herself—in relation to her work, her commitments, her allies and friends. It can, we know, be exceedingly difficult to be oneself, or to align one's principles and practices, in highly striated and /or prescriptive social spaces. Fourthspace, whether one enters just for a private moment of meditation during a hectic class or through direct dialogue with those in common cause, is offered as a ritual space where, by practicing the "5 re-s," one can stay in touch with self and others.

While Miller does not address the difference between identity and personality, the distinction may be useful for understanding the political role of emotion as articulated in *NSJT*.[2] Conjuring the character of Robin Williams in *The Dead Poets' Society* should be enough to remind us how much our culture tends to value the iconic figure of the charismatic teacher, whose personality becomes the ultimate conduit for knowledge or, more often, inspiration. Such teachers may work against the grain, which is one reason they get our attention. But very often their success is simply a matter of a deeply engaging personality working effectively to explain and transmit mainstream cultural values, as Williams' character does. Charismatic teachers may be

spectacularly successful without ever revealing much about their actual identity, including personal information about who they are, where they come from, and why they do what they do. My favorite high school teacher's advice to me as I prepared to teach for the first time, for example, was "never let 'em see you sweat." However, when identity, over and above personality, is brought to the fore, when we embody our teaching and, in fact, let 'em see us sweat—i.e., show students a broad range of emotion, including emotions that are difficult for many teachers, such as fear, sadness, and anxiety (doubt)—it becomes possible, in Miller's view, to foster "pedagogies that are unequivocally authentic." One might quibble with the term "authentic" in a book steeped in postmodern theory, but whether labeled "authentic" or not, feelings form us, and one can argue that it is only through feelings, especially empathy, that we can ever hope to realize social justice. As Miller explains,

> Instructors should be proactive about how to engender emotional contagion in such a fashion that the classroom can be a site where individuals are not devoid of emotion but that the expression of self can become a transformative tool toward a more democratic space in schools. (10)

Such transformation requires more than the free expression of opinions and perspectives, though this is critical. It also requires a level of mutual recognition and reciprocity, predicated on dialogue, in which emotion moves dynamically and in all directions.

Four of the six chapters in the *NSJT* are, to one degree or another, collaborative or, in Bakhtinian terms, dialogic (and Bakhtin is explicitly referenced). While all four are in different ways engaging, each perhaps deserving of their own review, here I'll sample just two, "Dream Big: The Power of Literature, Imagination, and the Arts," and "It's in the Telling and the Sharing: Becoming Conscious of Social Justice through Communal

Exploration," in which Miller's "collaborative braiding" is prominent.

In "It's in the Telling," Laura Bolf Beliveau and her co-authors, Kristin Olgivie Holzer and Stephanie Schmidt, explain the framework of their collaboration this way:

> Instead of remaining in our individual marked spaces (Laura as teacher educator, Krsiten as novice teacher, and Stephanie as preservice teacher), we opted to make the experience communal. We strove to remove the boundaries and binaries from the conversation. . . . The narrative reciprocity in this chapter hopes to make the act of becoming a communal one. (26-27)

The implication, of course, is that teaching and learning in environments where social justice is identified as a desired outcome also constitute a "reciprocal, communal act of becoming." Form following function in this way, the chapter is divided into an introduction, three separate narratives about teaching, a transcribed discussion of each narrative between all three, a collective analysis, and a section entitled Final Thoughts, in which each writer reflects broadly on teaching and social justice. It is a complicated rhetorical structure, to be sure, with each part containing illuminating scenes and personal as well as theoretical insights. References to Barthes, Lyotard, Foucault and other postmodern icons in the framing paragraphs of the chapter seem to me slightly overwrought or unnecessary, as the reasons given in the authors' own words for weaving together their disparate, detailed teacher narratives sum up their shared commitments very well:

> Students and teachers, complete with complicated histories, devise their own regulatory institutions relevant to their experience and values. The way in which teachers relate to students might serve as an example of larger societal reciprocity and social justice. Equitable, sustainable

> conversations about social justice might be best accommodated in an inclusive, courteous, malleable classroom designed to honor small-scale narratives. The dynamic story recognizes autonomous existence, while providing a context for human experience and a platform for social justice: historical continuity, cultural identity, and social empathy. (24)

For new English or Language Arts teachers heading out into classrooms for the first time, or for progressive K-12 teachers struggling to find their way in challenging circumstances, Laura, Kristen and Stephanie's own narratives and accompanying discussion should prove invaluable, in that singular way only another teacher's words can, when he or she is commiserating or brainstorming with us in an hour of dire need.

In "Dream Big," English education professor Peggy Rice seizes on Maxine Green's metaphor of "seeing big" (from *Releasing the Imagination*) to explain why social justice pedagogy necessitates embodiment and empathy (69). In Green's words,

> To see things or people big, one must resist viewing other human beings as mere objects or chess pieces and view them in their integrity and particularity instead. One must see from the point of view of the participant in the midst of what is happening if one is to be privy to the plans people make, the initiatives they take, the uncertainties they face. (69)

Metaphorically, teachers not only need to get out from behind desks positioned at the proverbial front of the room, they need to sit down with their students and connect to them as fellow human beings and fellow citizens, even as needs and roles of teacher and student differ. While such ideals (seeing big, being in the midst) are easy enough to formulate, showing teachers how they can be put to practice in relatively or extremely hostile spaces is another matter. For Rice in her undergraduate seminar on trends and

issues in the teaching of elementary English language arts, the key is to model in her own pedagogy strategies that can be implemented at all levels:

> I have always structured the course to be student-centered and inquiry based with many opportunities for reflection as we consider best practice vs. common practice, especially in terms of implementing instruction that enables all of our students to meet the NCTE/IRA standards of English Language Arts. In addition, I have always emphasized the value of literature reflecting a diverse perspective in connection to topics such as censorship, critical literacy, reflection, and imagination and the arts as we consider developing a social justice pedagogy in which all of our students are treated fairly and equitably. Within these discussions, I emphasize the importance of establishing community and developing empathy. (69)

Rice's student collaborators, who are each quoted at length in the chapter, discuss some of the ways this approach influences their own teaching, especially in their efforts to build community, character, and develop empathy. One teacher, Emily, takes time before getting to controversial subjects to discuss "how to make meaningful comments that will build each other up instead of tearing each other down" (73). Another, Jamie, explains that she "[teaches] character education in the beginning of the school year, which helps create a community in the classroom" (73). And Alena explains how she shares her own experiences and feelings around difficult subjects, such as suicide, to show students that she is fully embodied, there for them as a person as well as their teacher. "Honesty," she writes, "is what I value most in my relationship with all my students" (74). Central to each well developed narrative, from which I have plucked these short quotations, is the notion that critical thinking and social justice must be deeply rooted in feeling, connection, and community. Central, too, is the fact that social justice always involves struggle

and movement from some degree of blindness to some degree of insight.

In the single-authored closing chapter of *NSJT*, English education professor Todd DeStitger reflects on the future of social justice teaching, again by combining theory and narrative. Like Vinz in her Foreword, DeStitger focuses his discussion on an individual student in a particular circumstance, principally to show "the futility of abstracting the principle of social justice from the lives of teachers and students" (129). He draws an illuminating analogy between Melville's recalcitrant Bartleby, who responds to each of his employer's requests with some version of "I would prefer not to," and one of his own Chicago high school students, Mondale, who when asked to participate in class, would respond simply, "Aw, hell no, Todd." While DeStitger explores this analogy from many angles, he is mainly interested in questioning our often unquestioned belief in reasonable discourse and/or deliberative democracy as the be-all and end-all of fairness and equity in teaching, or in any context, for that matter. As all teachers (and parents) know very well, reason often fails abysmally, precisely for the way it leaves the body, the emotions, the full identity of participants out of the picture, and reason very often masks the will to power, if not total domination (I think of Colin Powell's "reasonable" presentation to the U.N. for the case for war against Iraq).

DeStitger argues that instead of clinging exclusively to the deliberative democratic model that enlightened teachers have long cherished, we need to "[emphasize] inclusive human relationships" and find ways "to include in democratizing action people (like Bartleby or Mondale) whom we might otherwise ignore because they prefer not to think and act like us" (140). Such an unyielding embrace of inclusive social justice, DeStitger realizes, also "justifies a vigorous, perhaps even an unyielding stance toward people with whom we disagree" (140). In other words, you can't have social justice, especially when it upsets the status quo, without fighting for it. We can and should create a fourthspace, of which the present volume is an example, in which we can tell our

stories, share our struggles, and develop strategies, in which we can "reflect, reconsider, reconceptualize, rejuvenate, and re-engage," *and* we each must also muster the courage to fight the good fight, often against all odds, in our own little corner of the world. As DeStitger puts it, "whatever solutions with which we respond to injustice must be of our own making. Such responses will be contextualized, provisional, agile, even as our commitment to justice does not waiver" (143).

In the language of Composition and Rhetoric, everything depends on the rhetorical situation and how we position ourselves in it, whether as agents of change or custodians of received values. *NSJT* takes us on a tour of multiple and multiply inflected rhetorical situations from which those pursuing social justice in education can gain much insight and inspiration.

Notes

[1] "Inservice" refers, perhaps self-evidently, to active teachers and "preservice" to those who are still in training in university and college programs.

[2] See *The Political Psyche* by Andrew Samuels (Routlege, 1993) for an illuminating discussion of the political nature of emotion and feeling.