

P R E F A C E

Young people have an extraordinary capacity to pursue learning that engages them—*outside* of school. Surrounded by and marketed an attractive set of options, from the media to the Internet to the friendship group, young people find ways to pursue issues that matter to them with tremendous energy. *Inside* of schools, though, teachers struggle to harness that energy for the purposes, knowledge, and skills that schooling is supposed to foster. Recent educational policy has focused on articulating and systematizing those purposes, knowledge, and skills while raising the stakes of their mastery for both teachers and students. Teachers may be experiencing something like Dewey’s classic contradiction of the child versus the curriculum (Dewey, 1956). Do we attend to the interests of the students, perhaps fostering engagement at the expense of covering the standards and curriculum? Or do we push on through the expanding curriculum and battery of tests, perhaps sacrificing student engagement or choice? And what if the central focus of your curriculum—for example, the teaching of writing—can only be fully addressed when the child is really engaged with the task at hand? Writing about the tendency to see attention to the child and his needs as in conflict with attention to curriculum, Dewey argued, “Any significant problem involves conditions that for the

moment contradict each other. Solution comes only by . . . coming to see the conditions from another point of view, and hence in a fresh light” (Dewey, 1956, pp. 3–4).

SHINING A FRESH LIGHT

Harnessing students’ enormous energy, facilitating their engagement in learning, and managing high-stakes curricular pressures are some of the issues that led teachers and leaders affiliated with the National Writing Project (NWP) to begin a multiyear collaboration with practitioners engaged in youth work at the Centre for Social Action (CSA), based in England. For over twenty years, the CSA has been developing principles and practices for youth-driven action by working with young people in a range of settings outside of school. Experienced at working with young people in community settings where they can easily vote with their feet, the center’s practitioners emphasize engaging and facilitating groups of young people in work that matters to them because it addresses and acts on the content of their lives and communities. Drawing on intellectual antecedents like Paulo Freire, these practitioners have refined an approach to group and community work they call *Social Action*. In the Social Action approach, youth workers support young people in sharing and examining issues that affect them in their daily lives, then learning skills and implementing plans to take productive action in their lives and communities.

In 2001, a team of educators at the National Writing Project, a U.S.-based teacher network with a thirty-year history of improving the teaching of writing, became intrigued by the Social Action approach and wondered whether it could shine a fresh light on the contradictions they were experiencing as teachers. As literacy educators, they too expected young people to engage in projects that mattered to them and to learn and use complex literacy skills to act in their lives and communities. They knew that in learning any set of skills, whether personal, athletic, or academic, engagement mattered. Young people cannot learn what they won’t engage with. Social Action workers had figured out how to get the most marginalized young people engaged in complex and demanding work outside of school. NWP teachers interested in a more student-driven learning environment wondered, Could CSA approaches work with American young people *inside* of

school, with its prescribed curriculum and compulsory demands? Practitioners at the Centre for Social Action wondered too.

Thus began an inquiry into the potential for the Social Action work inside schools. Through a four-year collaboration, NWP teachers and CSA trainers worked together to see how teachers would make sense of Social Action ideas in their practice. Although the center's experiences and ways of working initially seemed distant from the realities of U.S. schools, teachers from the National Writing Project soon identified important insights for their work and began exploring new opportunities for student-driven learning and literacy in their schools and curriculum. Together, they found that Social Action had tremendous potential for engaging students and creating a context for boosting literacy and achievement in schools. Working through processes facilitated by a leadership and editorial team, participating teachers refined those lessons with a view toward sharing their experiences with their colleagues.

In this book, some of the teachers and trainers who took part in the NWP-CSA collaboration share their successes, challenges, and continuing questions about using Social Action in their teaching. Following their accounts, workers from the Centre for Social Action describe the theory and principles that form the foundation of the Social Action approach and share some of the activities and resources used during the cross-national workshops, including a wide set of activities to get groups of people involved with Social Action.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

A history of the NWP-CSA collaboration and an overview of key questions that informed the work is presented in Chapter One. In Part One, nine teachers and many students describe their experiences with Social Action in the classroom and the community. In some cases, teachers and students describe full efforts to use Social Action and learn about its implications. In other cases, teachers describe how specific practices or principles of Social Action led them to reevaluate and sometimes change aspects of their teaching or curriculum. Chapters Two through Six illustrate the flexibility of Social Action in school settings. In Chapter Two, Paula Laub shows how she wove Social Action into the fabric of her first-grade classroom as she describes her journey from sole problem solver to one of twenty problem solvers in her classroom. In Chapter Three, Dietta Hitchcock shares how

Social Action led her to design a new curriculum, with her students' help. Student members of Youth Dreamers write about the long, difficult process of creating a youth-run youth center in Chapter Four, while their teacher, Kristina Berdan, reflects on the role of Social Action in their work and in her English and language arts classroom in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six, Chinwe Obijiofor describes how she used the Social Action process in a summer program while also portraying the tension between engaging young people in social or political activism as understood by adults and the youth-driven process of Social Action.

Chapters Seven through Ten share the reflections of teachers and students who took on particular aspects of Social Action as a way to expand and rethink student involvement in curriculum and in the social life of schools. In Chapter Seven, Lori Farias and her students highlight how Social Action helped students take greater control of their choices in service learning, a requirement of her high school English elective course. In Chapter Eight, Maggie Folkers, another high school teacher, shares how she used Social Action activities at the start of her semester to create a community of learners, who then used these activities when participating in critical reflection throughout the course. Connie Bunch, in Chapter Nine, writes about how she used Social Action to help students find ways to defuse explosive situations among peers. And in Chapter Ten, Elizabeth Davis shares how what started as a lesson on the civil rights movement turned into an opportunity for her middle school students to save their school. Concluding Part One, Chapter Eleven presents a window into Social Action work with adults through the story of how Mildred Serra collaborated with parents from a marginalized community near her school in Puerto Rico. In Serra's chapter, we see that these parents not only attended a series of Social Action workshops but also took their experiences from these workshops and continued to better their community long after the workshops were over.

These examples of practice, which come from teachers working in a range of public schools, urban and rural, illustrate the flexibility and adaptability of Social Action to a wide range of purposes and settings. In Part Two, the editors look back at this diversity of examples and tie it to the theory, processes, and principles developed by the CSA over time. Chapter Twelve synthesizes what NWP teachers found to be the tensions between Social Action practice and traditional teaching practice and explores both the challenges and benefits of integrating Social Action in the classroom. In Chapter Thirteen Jennie Fleming, director of the Centre for Social Action at De Montfort University in Leicester, and Ian Boulton, director of the Social Action Com-

pany and a former trainer at the Centre for Social Action, present the theory and practice of Social Action as developed at the center. Finally, in Chapter Fourteen, Fleming and Boulton present a series of questions and issues for consideration by teachers who are interested in exploring Social Action in their own teaching. Readers who wish to explore the theory first should begin with Part Two.

For teachers who are interested in taking some steps with Social Action, Part Three offers practical advice and activities for beginning Social Action work in various settings. Part Three provides detailed descriptions of activities that were used in cross-national training sessions or created by practitioners. This is followed by References and then by Resources for Further Reading, which were selected to help you get started on your own journeys with Social Action. Together, these closing sections aim to support the idea that there is nothing so practical as a good theory—and that practitioners working together within a theoretical tradition, in praxis, can sharpen and develop its insights.

Now, from the vantage point of our four-year collaboration, we can say that Dewey was right, that even at a time when we feel caught between the energies of youth and the escalating demands of curriculum, there are ways out of the contradiction. The teacher-facilitators whose essays are collected in this volume would not say that learning and applying the Social Action approach has always been easy; as Dewey slyly observed, recasting contradictions “means travail of thought” (Dewey, 1956, p. 4). The pressures and contradictions of teaching in the current policy environment cannot be wished away. But we don’t have to choose between our students and our curriculum. The Social Action approach is not about simply giving young people what they want or giving up on learning at the highest levels. It is a disciplined and focused process of engagement in collective action. Together, we saw that our students—many of whom were not engaged in traditional school activities—engaged with the Social Action process because it was based on their interests and concerns and because they directed what was happening. A sense of control, for both students and for teachers, creates powerful conditions for learning. Despite the unconventional approach, the carefully managed process of Social Action could result in traditional learning being valued by students in school and in college—not the child versus the curriculum but the child *and* the curriculum.