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Pp. 210

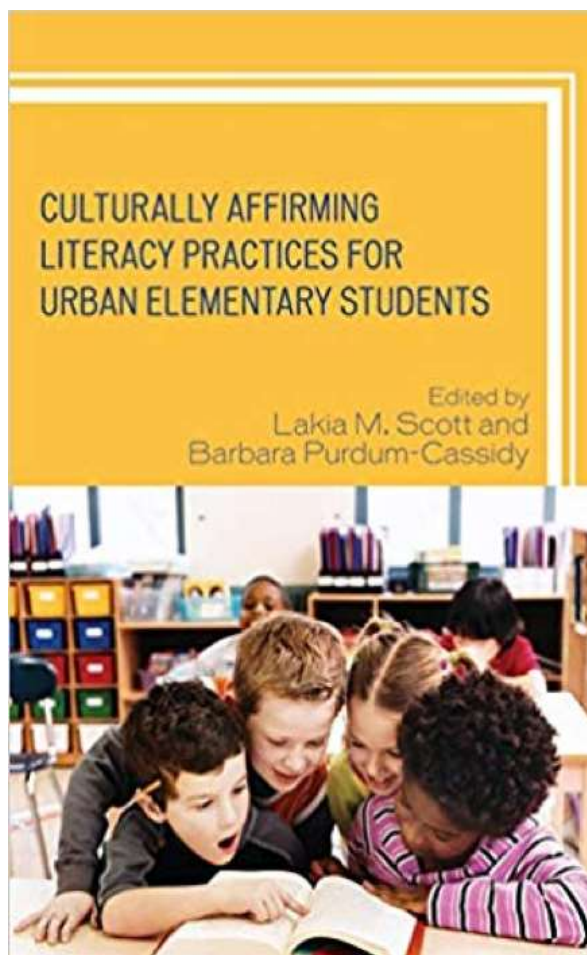
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The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves. (Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*)

In *Culturally Affirming Literacy Practices for Urban Elementary Students*, Lakia M. Scott and Barbara Purdum-Cassidy gather a diverse set of contributors who provide some strategies to enrich the learning of all students in urban elementary school settings in the United States. The frameworks, practices, and research included in the text push educators to think beyond traditional literacy in preparing and shaping students' academic trajectories. In doing so, they highlight conceptual and practical approaches that educators in K-12 and higher education can use to guide their teaching in ways that celebrate students' experiences in the classroom.

This review focuses on three overarching themes that are central to the text – Critical



Pedagogies, Culturally Appropriate Literacy Instructional Practices, and Teacher Education Programs and Models – and highlights some of the strengths and weaknesses of the research and practice examples in the book. While one cannot talk about critical pedagogies without talking about culturally appropriate literacy instructional practices, the former focuses on examples of pedagogical practices that go beyond teaching students as subjects, and in contrast, places students as active learners. Student voice is central to their learning and it is also bidirectional – student and teacher are continuously learning from one another. For culturally appropriate literacy instructional practices, the focus is on the integration of student voices and experiences in curricula and activities. Lastly, teacher education programs and models center on professional development practices that teachers can use to better support the literacy development of diverse learners.

Critical Pedagogies

According to the contributors, critical pedagogies in schools allow students to “think critically about social issues” (p. 14). For example, critical literacy gives students an opportunity to use their existing knowledge to analyze text that explicitly or implicitly touches on subjects about justice, race, and power. A critical social justice framework can help bridge both culturally relevant pedagogies and critical literacy. The contributors to this book walk readers through the components of a critical social justice framework for literacy. This framework first involves students immersing themselves in a topic by doing a close read of the text. This practice allows students to look at the text through an anti-oppressive lens, that is, question word-choices, arguments, and evidence that will then help them to think about these issues outside the text and to consider everyday systems of oppression. Following close readings, students generate their own ideas about social justice topics, read and research more about this given topic, and finally, encourage social justice by thinking beyond the classroom. An example of

the latter is having students write and deliver “a letter to the superintendent about changing the discrimination policy to have inclusive language for LGBTQ students” (p. 23).

Some of the authors highlight how teacher perspectives impact teaching and how recognizing this positionality guides educators towards better educating diverse students. Acosta (2015) described how previous research did the opposite, and did not capture teacher perspectives that undoubtedly influence instructional practices such as beliefs about student abilities, perspectives on the purpose of literacy and education, or the ideological construction of blackness.

In this sense, Acosta viewed “pedagogical hegemony” occurring in academic settings in which teachers maintain educational practices that limit the academic achievement of African American students rather than expand it. This may take the form of keeping the status quo and silencing (1) the voices of teachers of color who may implement equity based instructional practices and (2) the role of race and ethnicity in enacting literacy practices. Pedagogical excellence therefore acknowledges that teachers are not neutral beings, but instead, enter a classroom with ideologies and assumptions about their students that guide their instructional practices. On the other hand, a deficit-based teacher mentality can lead to instructional practices that negatively affect African American student success (e.g., lowering the standards for a group of students).

According to this set of authors, a pedagogical excellence framework allows teachers to reflect and act, according to their positionality as educators. This framework also enables them to make positive strides toward improving the reading achievement of African American children, a group of students who have seen little improvement in reading achievement. Teachers can begin to establish this framework by collaborating with their community to better understand the social and cultural experience of

their students. Taking the initial steps toward pedagogical excellence will help teachers reconceptualize literacy instruction and learning.

While some authors illustrate the benefits of critical pedagogies, there are a few components missing. For example, the book did not provide examples of methods or techniques that teachers can use to talk about gender, race, social class with younger students nor explain why it may look similar or different than with older children. Also, readers would benefit from reading about sites that have utilized a pedagogical excellence framework to get a general sense of implementation feasibility across districts, schools, and communities.

Culturally Appropriate Literacy Instructional Practices

Culture also plays a role in critical pedagogies. Some of the contributors provide different ways that teachers can include student voices and experiences in curricula and activities for different types of learner. One of the examples included in the book is a culturally responsive project based (CRPB) unit of instruction geared for summer English As A Second Language (ESL) programs for early adolescent English learners. These units (1) draw on community resources, (2) integrate multi-genre texts and purposeful writing, (3) create opportunities for rigorous and meaningful academic learning, and (4) engage students in multimodal literacies.

These authors note that these principles have been applied in a SESLA three-week program that brought together ESL teachers, ESL interns, and university professors. The program collaborators focused on units aligned with the Common Core State Standards, such as immigrant business ownership, and recruited businesses (e.g., ethnic grocery stores, beauty salons, ethnic restaurants) to participate in their program unit. Students spoke with immigrant business owners and gathered multimodal information (e.g., narratives, pictures, videos) about the businesses, which students brought back to the classroom to analyze. The students'

culminating project consisted of creating an informational brochure about their assigned business. Throughout the process, students were allowed to reflect on their own experiences and how they fit within a broader context.

Culturally relevant books are important in the process of improving students' academic skills and providing "identity affirmation, and help to address the ELLs need for belonging and self-esteem, and activate prior knowledge" (p. 110). The authors explain the difference between multicultural books and curricula and culturally relevant books and curricula: the latter includes images, characters, languages, places, that directly relate to the students in the classrooms rather than being exposed to culture that may or may not be reflective of their student population. The authors point out that both multicultural and cultural books and curricula are needed in classrooms. Culturally relevant books positively impact ELLs' skills and outcomes. For example, when students are exposed to books that mirror their own experiences, students can "develop a positive affirmation of their ethnic identity" (p. 111). In addition to identity affirmation, culturally relevant books allow students to recollect a time of their own lives that relates to the books theme, characters, and images, while also developing literacy skills like comprehension. The contributors nicely distinguish between multicultural and cultural concepts, which may help teachers understand how their school resources and materials can be better utilized to serve their diverse learners. This differentiation may also shed light on current gaps in their resources and materials inventory.

Teacher Education Programs and Models

The final section of the book is dedicated to a discussion of technology, instructional resources, and professional development as supports for teacher instruction in urban elementary schools. The authors in this section note that professional development is ongoing (e.g. instructional coaching, professional learning networks, and professional learning communities), and should

aid critical and cultural relevant instructional practices. Successful professional development should (1) be research based and not focused on superficial understandings, (2) implement cultural understanding and affirmation to avoid a deficit-thinking mindset where teachers adopt preconceived notions of certain groups of students, (3) have a positive focus to ensure all teachers feel welcomed to discuss student successes and struggles; (4) encourage collaboration among teachers, administrators, and district staff; and (5) provide opportunities for practical, hands-on experience for teachers to apply what they learning in professional development into the classrooms. The authors also provide a list of classroom resources that teachers can use for their planning, such as events, education research centers, websites,

articles, and books that all center around culturally diversity and literacy.

Apart from the strengths and shortcomings already discussed, it would be useful to include information about how schools and districts can adopt some of these frameworks and pedagogical practices. For example, what are the successes and challenges of schools and districts that have implemented these frameworks? How can others follow? What structures are in place that allow for these frameworks and practices? Nonetheless, *Culturally Affirming Literacy Practices for Urban Elementary Students* provides a rich collection of different frameworks and practices to encourage teachers and school and district administrators to serve diverse learners. In doing so, educators become the artists that allow all students to flourish in their learning.

References


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