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**Larson, Joanne (Ed.) (2007). *Literacy as Snake Oil: Beyond the Quick Fix* (Revised Edition). New York: Peter Lang.**

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Careful review of information is required to understand the *how* and *why* of reading research in support of student-centered instruction contained in *Literacy as Snake Oil: Beyond the Quick Fix, Revised Edition* edited by Joanne Larson, who wrote the introductory chapter and co-authored another, "Literacy Packages in Practice: Constructing Academic Disadvantage." This book requires more than one sitting to digest the detailed information. The ten chapters in this scholarly, well-researched, and documented text examine the social, political, cultural, educational aspects of "one-size fits all" literacy programs, which followed *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB) and the Reading First instructional directive forced upon teachers, students, school districts, and communities.

Three new chapters have been added to this edition, and seven chapters from the first edition have been extended and revised by original contributors. Based on the apropos chapter titles, readers immediately recognize the perspective taken by the researchers. Three examples include: (1) "Success Guaranteed Literacy Programs: I Don't Buy It!" (2) "Forging "Facts" to Fit an Explanation: How to make Reading Research Support Skills-Emphasis Instruction" and (3) "Fattening Frogs for Snakes: Virtues for Sale."

One point made by Lynn Astarita Gatto is "literacy is a practice, something that gets done, not skills to be learned for use at a later date." (p. 78) In her class, young students are provided time to read silently in books of their own choosing, to develop questions for exploration, to form study groups to share and to develop understanding of text. Students observe and integrate the use of post-its to record information they think important. Her students draw, label, take notes, collect data, take trips, and create models among other learning experiences to become stronger readers, writers, and thinkers. There are no prefabricated spelling lists, word lists, or writing topics. These are generated from her own students' daily reading and writing. Gatto's chapter shows what is effective literacy learning as contrasted to publisher programs. She makes the point, "Commercial programs endorse themselves as foolproof. Who are the fools in foolproof? (p. 88)

Essayists Irvine and Larson emphasize their objective to provide “theoretical understanding between autonomous and ideological approaches to literacy.” (p. 69) Their research discovered that by relying on prepackaged “reading” texts, teachers present discrete skills without context and without guiding student comprehension. Further, teachers, in their study, accepted the scope and sequence of a published text without question and centered instruction on language subskills referencing student lack of language abilities. Critical thinking, critical reading and critical writing are not integrated into any series’ instructional package. This message is echoed in a later chapter on the literacy strategy adopted in Britain researched by Street, Leftstein, and Pahl. Their chapter, “The National Literacy Strategy in England,” further presents the misleading quick-fix approach of commercial reading series. Again, readers are presented with the damages of mechanized instruction (follow the script) when teachers give up pedagogy for routine and skill worksheets, focused on time and management as opposed to student engagement with, and exploration of ideas.

In “Forging ‘Facts’ to Fit an Explanation” Coles writes that a “teacher proof” or “magic bullet” packaged curriculum prevents teachers from designing lessons for the youngsters in front of them, lessons that meet the needs of their students. Rather, the prepackaged reading programs are “the perfect education for creating unthinking, conformist students who will grow up to be unthinking, conformist citizens, the citizens desired by those who increasingly promote authoritarian social rule (p. 28). Wow! This essay is sure to create a reaction from readers.

Reflected in the entire text is the central theme that reading has become a commodity for political purpose. Gutiérrez argues against learning environments that “facilitate the homogenization of vastly different students.” (p. 111) Her essay presents evidence of students in sheltered English classes devoid of creativity, higher order thinking, or independent, purposeful writing. She also describes opportunities for authentic learning in one district through the visual arts for students to create meaningful texts incorporating music, photography, technology, and writing. Alas, the point is made that this school where children and teachers are engaged in a multilingual program has been closed because of the one criteria used to measure “success” – weak standardized test scores. This chapter succinctly emphasizes how the “snake oil” of an educational policy that values sameness and one measurement of learning proves false. More than that, readers clearly understand the social, cultural, economic, and politic inequities of adherence to mandated testing and one pre-packaged learning program.

Earlier in the text, Gee’s chapter similarly presents the impact of economic and political inequities that surround early language preparation. While he describes the “fourth-grade slump” Gee presents how improvements in early language learning of “specialist” or “academic” vocabulary supports children through challenges of textbook content area reading. By early preparation through reinforcing children’s interest, engagement in a selected topic via multiple sources and conversation, use of card games or video games, youngsters develop “impressive language abilities . . . with large vocabularies, complex grammar, and deep understandings of experiences and stories” (p. 15) regardless of socio-economics.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the common philosophy behind the essays, reading the book is certain to generate important conversations among those interested in educational policy. The unifying metaphor of snake oil is an effective device and reinforces the authors’ displeasure with the misunderstanding of literacy as a simple problem that can be fixed with the tonic of commodification and sameness. Some readers may see the text delivery as heavy handed, but the learning needs of 21st century students demand flexibility, multiple modalities, exchange of ideas, varied technologies with emphasis on critical thinking and problem solving, not a pre-fabricated commercial presentation devoid of professional teacher interaction and facilitation in modern, well-equipped facilities. Perhaps, the best audiences for the book are those in so-called failing schools. It is sure to support school administrators and teachers who value student as learner, student as individual, student as a member of a community. Local governance board members engaged in professional development and whose district is contemplating adopting (buying) a

publisher series, might consider reading a chapter or two of *Literacy as Snake Oil* before making a decision affecting literacy.

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