



education review // reseñas educativas

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a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

August 20, 2010

ISSN 1094-5296

Spears-Bunton, Linda A. & Powell, Rebecca (Eds.) (2009). *Toward a Literacy of Promise: Joining the African American Struggle*. New York: Routledge.

Pp. vii + 208

ISBN 978-0-8058-4536-5

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Toward a Literacy of Promise is an unashamed, courageous and deeply reflective look at literacy education in the lives of African American adolescents. It is theoretically rich, and practically clever, culturally complex and highly relevant to teacher education in the American context and teaching literacy in the 21st century. Editors Linda Spears-Bunton and Rebecca Powell arrange and present writings on literacy pedagogy and practice for African American youth in three areas: Problems and Promises; Realizing a Literacy of Promise through Literary Texts; and, Realizing a Literacy of Promise through Oral and Popular Texts.

Literacy, in this book, forwards an emancipatory, social justice agenda. Authors raise discomfoting issues around the historic place of literacy as a weapon against progress for

Citation: Bryce, Nadine. (2010 August 20) Review of *Toward a Literacy of Promise* by Spears-Bunton, Linda A. & Powell, Rebecca (Eds.) *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev962.pdf>

African Americans, in service of ideological, economic and daily social practices forwarding a White privilege agenda. African Americans' struggle for access to literacy during enslavement is tied to the struggle for a quality education and the political, social and economic upheavals during the Jim Crow era. Authors identify the failed promise of literacy that neither becoming literate, nor attending integrated schools has resulted in a reduction of racism and classism in America. African Americans and other underrepresented groups are still among the poorest and most underemployed people in the nation. In this book, schools are potential sites for a type of literacy that allows for critique of educational and social inequities and a pedagogy that promotes a more just society. By sharing many examples of teachers engaged in instructional practices with African American youth that examine and challenge this failed literacy, acting on its power and enacting its "promise," Spears-Buntun and Powell provide hope for change. The book begins with a vehement memory of little Irma Johnson as she and her parents embarked on the hellish journey to her new second grade class in 1964, when schools in Kentucky were desegregated. Neighbors were pitted against neighbors as an angry White crowd swarmed Black families walking toward the newly integrated, formerly all-White, school. As Irma and her parents advanced, she was pelted across her face and brand new dress with a thick mess of saliva blackened with tobacco juice. This despicable act was committed by a man her family knew, and had done business with many times, as he screamed, "Go back home; we don't want you here!" (p. 3). Readers are propelled into the historic and political agenda of literacy, and the power of literacy as an instrument of liberation.

The editors and authors make an explicit link between access to schooling, social power, literacy, and African Americans' struggle for civil rights and empowerment. They advance the message that language and literacy can serve as a means for increasing awareness, advancing social critique, and working for a more equitable social agenda. The elusive promise of literacy, equated with personal, social, economic and political freedoms is contrasted with the limited schooled literacy which attempts to divorce literacy from

politics, framing it as an “in the head” cognitive process without social, cultural, or political dimensions. Schooled literacy is charged with maintaining the status quo, “...ignoring questions of race, ethnicity and power in an effort to find the “best” way to teach reading and writing to our children” (p. 5). Spears-Bunton and Powell outline major debates in literacy education (e.g., phonics versus whole language approach; basal reading versus literature for use as instructional materials; standardized tests versus portfolio assessment) as carried out without resolving issues of school failure for thousands of children. They raise the question that perhaps some children are intentionally disconnecting with school, and school success, relegating their act of failure as deliberate defiance of a literacy and pedagogy that is devoid of personal and political meaning. In these cases, children are seeking to remove themselves from literacy practices that “...[denigrate] their cultural knowledge, that [deny] their voice (Delpit, 1988; Fox, 1994; Kohl, 1995; Ogbu, 1987)” (p. 5). Some children would rather fail in school than subject themselves to the dehumanizing literacy that renders them as educationally, culturally and linguistically inferior. Spears-Bunton and Powell suggest educators examine their concept of what counts as literacy, for whom, under what conditions, and toward what social and political ends. If literacy is only equated with the cultural knowledge of White, middle/upper-class norms, what results is marginalization of all others whose language and literacy practices differ.

To frame the relevance of this text, Spears-Bunton and Powell present the common “mismatch theory” of school failure for African American children grounded in the sociocultural view on language as a discursive practice. Schools, as institutions of socialization, sanction specific forms of language and cultural knowledge that gets recognized as legitimate. In the American context, this includes specific “standard” varieties of oral and written English, coupled with other behavioral cues that show affiliation with social and cultural groups, or Discourse communities (Gee, 1990) that reflect particular values and norms schools wish to perpetuate. Students are expected to conform to the Discourse of schools. According to this

theory, when their home and school Discourses match, children do not experience cultural or linguistic conflict and tend to experience school success. Conversely, when children's home and school Discourses mismatch, failure may result, as children struggle to learn academic prose. Spears-Bunton and Powell acknowledge that home-school Discourse mismatch may explain some incidences of school failure, but not all. Discourse-mismatch theory masks the agency children may enact to directly challenge the school's power to regulate which Discourses count, relegating non-sanctioned Discourses as illegitimate and powerless. It is their attempt to reclaim their power, albeit one that results in a paradoxically counter-productive, yet counter-hegemonic underperformance in school.

What Spears-Bunton and Powell do in this book is provide teachers with a wide variety of options to school failure, or inadequate instruction, for African American and other youth. By sharing an example of how Spears-Bunton's 1960s college English professor resisted including literary texts written by African American authors in the curriculum, and attempted to silence Spears-Bunton's voice as a student because she challenged the exclusion of a wide body of literature written by authors of color. Spears-Bunton and Powell, in chapter 2, "Along the Road to Social Justice," situate the need for a critical pedagogy that advances social and educational change in favor of pedagogy and practice that interrupts a system of marginalization. The authors begin the road to promise by establishing what exists in many schools, a perpetuation of "...the literary traditions of privileged groups" (p. 23), and not "...a literacy that affirms diverse voices, that promotes critique, that inspires transformation" (p. 23). There is a great need for change in the way literacy instruction and literary study occurs for secondary students.

Teachers' efforts to broaden the curriculum through including literary contributions by African American authors and close analysis of both African American and European American students' responses to those readings are featured in two central chapters. In chapter 5, "Educational, Controversial, Provocative, and Personal": Three African

American Adolescent Males Reflect on Critically Framing *A Lesson Before Dying*,” Connor and Willis demonstrate students’ willingness, and appreciation of opportunities, to draw on their own cultural background, language and knowledge while reading. Students enhanced their engagement and ability to offer insights about meanings constructed in the texts. In the following chapter, “The Obscured White Voice in the Multicultural Debate: Race, Space and Gender,” Spears-Bunton articulates the need for a “...multicultural education that can mitigate the superficial and simplistic knowledge of self and others that students acquire when the curriculum lacks substantive content” (p. 120). She argues for analyzing and reflecting on students’ engagement and change in perspectives over time, and building in more opportunities for students to talk with each other in authentic, unscripted dialogue that embodies a critique of social, economic, and political inequities in and beyond the text.

In this book, Spears-Bunton and Powell provide hope that students will be more meaningfully engaged and committed to academic achievement and success. Instead of developing apathy, or choosing to fail school as a form of resistance to an education that denies or denigrates students’ cultural knowledge, this “literacy of promise” makes room for, and celebrates a wide range of perspectives, histories, and textual practices. It unburdens children from beliefs that their heritages and cultural experiences, including oral language and literacy practices learned at home, are not worthy of being represented in school (see chapter 7, “Ebonics and the Struggle for Cultural Voice in U.S. Schools” by Ira Kincade Blake, and chapter 8, “The Potential of Oral Literacy for Empowerment” by Jessica S. Bryant). It frees children to enact the type of school experiences that celebrates them, their histories, and their developing understandings of the world (see chapter 9, “Voices of Our Youth: Antiracist Social Justice Theater Arts Makes A Difference in the Classroom” by Karen B. McLean Donaldson). A “literacy of promise” fosters a love for learning by embodying a wider range of texts (e.g., oral, written, and visual images, including popular media texts, as in chapter 10, “The Promise of Critical Media Literacy” by Rebecca Powell). It

expands what counts as acceptable responses to texts, as it challenges students to represent their learning in multimodal ways (e.g., drama and visual art along with oral and written responses; critical media literacy including examination of songs, film, and advertisements). With the goal that students can and will engage in critical reflection and literacy practices toward justice, for themselves as students, and for members of a wider network of social and cultural groups, this “literacy of promise” enriches learning, and anchors schooling in real world issues that embolden students to challenge silences that may be limiting their potential to think and act. Teachers also gain power to create curricula and learning experiences that foster knowledge production, not just knowledge consumption, and frame education, and literacy more specifically, as a transformative practice that holds promise to improve the lives of students and teachers. Spears-Bunton and Powell authored several chapters, creating a strong and recognizable presence in this book.

The chapters were skillfully organized, moving from the historical to theoretical perspectives that framed the social and legal limitations to literacy for African Americans. It culminates in several chapters that share practical examples of teachers in contemporary settings challenging inequitable social expectations and failed literacy practices that limit students’ engagement. Teachers and students are empowered as they challenge the status quo, with the aim of advancing all students’ exposure to a widened multicultural literary curriculum, and expansive literacy practices that draw on students’ incoming knowledge. *Toward a Literacy of Promise* advances and supports acquisition of academic prose, while it recognizes that students do not have to divorce their cultural knowledge, oral or written language forms, or background experiences, in order to acquire the dominant discourses of schools. Students are not expected to unquestioningly engage in school discourses, conforming to hegemonic relationships between the curriculum, teacher and traditional student roles in order to ensure school success. Instead, they are encouraged to use their voices to interpret and express understanding of what they read, write, and talk about in light of their developing knowledge of themselves and the world.

Authors stated the primary audience for this book is graduate teacher education candidates who are studying literacy theory and practice. I agree, and add that this book would also support scholarly inquiry of teacher educators, practicing teachers who are not enrolled in graduate school, school administrators, and education researchers who are interested in learning more about enhancing the literacy and school experiences of children in urban, suburban, and other communities. It is an ideal book for education study groups whose members want to read and discuss how to improve the education of all students, not just African American youth. End of chapter discussion questions are helpful guides that support critical analysis of literacy educational theory and practice.

Unlike *Literacy in African American Communities* edited by Harris, Kamhi and Pollock (2001), which provides a wider range of research on language and literacy that spans the lifetime of African Americans from childhood to older adulthood, *Toward a Literacy of Promise* (Spears-Bunton & Powell, 2009) hones in on the promises of a changed literacy approach for African American youth. Both books are quite relevant for educators. Harris, Kamhi and Pollock provide a much more comprehensive presentation of literacy profiles of African Americans currently, and include more research on subgroups such as African Caribbean Americans. One particular chapter in *Literacy in African American Communities* entitled, "Language Variation and Literacy Acquisition in African American Students" (LeMoine, 2001) parallels the "literacy of promise" approach, as it recommends similarly, that effective teachers need to: learn more about the language varieties spoken by African American students; integrate knowledge of non-mainstream ways of using language into instruction; incorporate historic and cultural understandings of African Americans into a broadened curriculum; and use teaching approaches that build on the language and learning styles of African American students.

In this chapter, LeMoine goes beyond Spears-Bunton and Powell by recommending that teachers use specific pedagogical approaches, such as second language acquisition

theories and practices, and the balanced literacy approach that builds curriculum around students' language experiences, provides access to literature, and incorporates phonics instruction. Because *Literacy in African American Communities* addresses literacy instruction for emergent and early literacy learners, these recommendations are highly valuable. Spears-Bunton and Powell primarily address secondary learners who are fluent readers; phonics instruction, and perhaps, the balanced literacy model, may not be quite as relevant. Additionally, while LeMoin provides a wonderful list of pedagogical suggestions to support improved literacy instruction for African American students, Spears-Bunton and Powell dedicate whole chapters to stories of teachers and students engaging in a "literacy of promise." They showcase how these individuals carried out literacy practices in classrooms and instructional theater-arts settings that disrupted hegemonic literacy traditions which limited students' access to a wider variety of texts and responses to texts.

As in *A Literacy of Promise*, the power of literacy is echoed in *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* (Berlin, Favreau & Miller, 1998). Mary Bell, daughter of Spotswood Rice, an enslaved skilled and literate man in Missouri, told of her father's plight with his owner over his fight for freedom. Her father ran away many times from the tobacco plantation owned by Mr. Lewis, who beat him often. But Lewis refused to sell Rice because he was such a valuable worker. Mary Bell explained,

Lewis owned a large tobacco plantation and my father was de head man on dat plantation. He cured all de tobacco, as it was brought in from the field, made all the twists and plugs of tobacco. His owner's son taught him to read, and dat made his owner so mad, because my father read de emancipation for freedom to de other slaves, and it made dem so happy, dey could not work well, and dey got so no one could manage dem, when dey found out dey were to be freed in such a short time. (Berlin, Favreau & Miller, 1998, p. 247)

To be literate as an enslaved African in America posed a direct challenge to the system of chattel slavery, and provided hope for many who understood that knowing how to read and write meant access to personal and social emancipation, and a possibility for self-determination. Plantation owners knew it, and those who were enslaved knew it. That literacy is coupled with a critical lens is a long tradition of African American struggle for emancipation. This perspective was later reflected in critical literacy education of poor farmers and laborers in Brazil by educator, philosopher and activist, Paulo Friere (2000). He taught adults to read while harnessing their awareness that to learn to read and write meant being able to use literacy to change inequities in their worlds. By using typical situations embodied in images and language of the local Brazilian people, Freire proposed that other adult educators engage in discussions with their students that lead to a critical consciousness, framing everyday situations codified in pictures and text, in an analysis of local and national problems. In that context, and in ours, engaging in literacy is an act of personal, social, economic, and political liberation.

Throughout a *Literacy of Promise*, authors explicitly addressed the notion that the literacy of schools was established by those with the social and cultural power to determine what kinds of literacy counted, referring to the literacy of privileged groups. By engaging in recommended practices to broaden the notion of what counted as literacy, while soliciting literacy practices and resources children brought to school from their home communities, educators can build on students' incoming literacy practices, and help them develop fluency in academic literacy and standard varieties of spoken and written English. As a reader, and educator, I wondered if this goal of providing children with greater access to language and literacy practices of those in power was sufficient for student empowerment. I wondered whether students could go beyond merely gaining access to 'more powerful' forms of literacy and begin to critically question the system that is organized and structured to divide literacy practices as more or less powerful, based on

perceptions of human beings as more or less valuable practitioners of these forms of literacy. This perspective is grounded in social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of our society that appear to tie literacy to forms of liberation and cultural determination for some, and on the contrary, domination and oppression for others. To rearticulate that point, is it sufficient to provide African American students with access to literacy practices that are perceived as powerful? Or, can we as educators, enact a pedagogy that promotes students' mastery of dominant forms of literacy, while also questioning the system of language and literacy domination and subordination, to re-imagine a more inclusive dialogic practice where the forms of literacy that count as powerful become dynamic, negotiable and based on the real lives of people in a given community?

Toward the end of *A Literacy of Promise*, author Jessica Bryant advocates the need to incorporate oral literacy to promote aesthetic responses to text, including poetry, song, drama and other forms of artistic expressions using oral language. Incorporating a wider variety of oral discourse styles is an important pedagogical practice that can empower students by encouraging them to learn more about codeswitching between home and school ways of talking. Bryant urges teachers to support content-area learning through infusing relevant ways of talking about subject area knowledge. By talking about the actual study of content, comprehension improves. Bryant suggests students be videotaped as individuals or groups as a form of oral literacy assessment. Students can be empowered to take ownership over their learning process by selecting the samples they want to represent their best learning which can become a part of their portfolio evaluation. What Bryant did not emphasize much was the need for both teachers and students to evaluate the videotape for an assessment of the content of students' learning, in addition to an evaluation of their oral proficiency, in whatever discourse style they choose. A focus on content is just as important for learning, as a focus on delivery or oral performance.

A final comment refers to the philosophical (or semantic, depending on your view) contention that a “literacy of promise” *gives voice* to students. “In this volume, a “literacy of promise” refers to a literacy that potentially empowers students and teachers and that gives them a voice” (Spears-Bunton & Powell, 2009, p. xiii). By “giving voice,” I question the power of who gives voice to whom. Does the assumption that one can “give voice” also include the notion that those who ‘receive voice’ are essentially ‘voiceless?’ According to Freire (2000), to speak one’s word, to use one’s voice to name and act on the world, is a primordial right of every human being. People have their own voices. If they are unaware that they indeed have a voice, or if they lack the development to express that voice, it does not negate that their voice already exists. Critical literacy is an activation of that voice, in service of language practices, both oral and written, that are intended to question hegemonic, oppressive structures and practices that render people as ‘less than powerful’ (powerless?) agents or objects that are acted on by others, even those who claim to be empowering them. To assume that one can give voice to anyone, in this interpretation, is to assume people who are less than privileged are objects that can be acted upon by more powerful others who can give (or take away) voice. What I hoped authors would say is that this critical literacy approach can channel or bolster students’ voices, in service of a pedagogy and practice that promotes liberation, self-determination, and empowerment.

As an educator, and teacher-educator, I thoroughly enjoyed reading *Toward a Literacy with Promise*, and use it to broaden the discussion of literacy theory and practice with my graduate literacy teacher candidates. It is my hope that teacher candidates can read the book thoroughly for alternative perspectives about African American students’ language and literacy practices, in support of a much more challenging literacy pedagogy that will result in increased consciousness about how best to support African American (and other) students’ access to a high quality education in America.

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