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Brief reviews for April 2009

Akhavan, Nancy. (2008). *The Content-Rich Reading and Writing Workshop: a Time-Saving Approach for Making the Most of Your Literacy Block.* New York: Scholastic.

Pages: 160 Price: $19.99 ISBN: 978-0-545-04706-7

This practitioner workbook is designed to support the work of teachers who may or may not be literacy experts, yet seek to integrate literacy strategies with content area instruction across the areas of mathematics, science, English and the social sciences. The book is 160 pages in length, and is written in two parts. Part one is entitled "The Content-Rich Workshop" and offers information on activating content knowledge, reading informational texts, comprehension strategies, and writing in the content areas. Part two makes visible methods that the general classroom teacher can use for teaching reading in the context of content area texts. Part two contains multiple pictures of graphic organizers, text books and student projects that illustrate methods discussed. All are focused on incorporating reading strategies into content area instruction.

The book begins with three key arguments as to why teachers should focus on content area instruction while incorporating literacy strategies (p. 5):

1. Standardized test scores elicited by the National Assessment of Education Progress show that the achievement gap between white and minority students has remained the same between 1992-2007.

2. Elementary school students are not prepared to take up middle school or high school content knowledge (Slater, 2004).

3. Children need to be challenged during their reading blocks (Brown, 2002; Hirsch 2003, 2006; Vacca, 2006). This means that in addition to reading strategies children need to also be challenged with rigorous content material.

While clearly presented in the introduction of the book, the three arguments are problematic for two reasons. First is the argument that students would achieve more academically if more teachers would focus on content knowledge while incorporating reading strategies into instruction, instead of focusing solely on reading strategies. This over-simplifies complex social and cognitive processes involved with knowledge construction and sufficient empirical support of this claim is not made available.

Secondly, the arguments are grounded in deficit perspectives of student academic achievement derived from standardized scores. Oftentimes, standardized test scores are perceived by classroom teachers as unrelated to what they actually construct with students in classrooms. Since this book is designed for classroom teachers, this may not be the most persuasive argument to present.

Despite the problematic introduction, the rest of the book proves to be a helpful guide for teachers who are interested in this topic. According to three of my pre-service teachers here at Pepperdine University, the book offers specific, practical suggestions that can easily be adapted according to grade and content area. They used Akhavan's suggestions of planning teaching units that incorporated reading strategies into content area lessons, and offering opportunities for what Akhavan names culminating projects. They also used her suggestions for graphic organizers that support content knowledge construction and literacy skills. These perspectives alone indicate that Akhavan has offered valuable information for pre-service teachers, and potentially to veteran teachers seeking to teach content knowledge in conjunction with literacy strategies.

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Reviewed by Dr. Damian Corbin Jenkins, Assistant Professor of Education, Pepperdine University, Seaver College.

Burris, Carol C. & Garrity, Delia T (2008). *Detracking for Excellence and Equity.* Alexandria, VA Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. .

Pages: 178 Price: $26.95 ISBN: 978-1-4166-0708-3

In a recent differentiation of instruction in-service, I met with teachers and administrators in a high school struggling to adjust after the district elected to drop all general-level courses. This reduction in class levels meant that students could now enroll in only two tracks: college preparatory and honors level courses. After spending several days in this school, I became entrenched in the difficult process associated with detracking reform. Teachers were asking very real and difficult questions about the impacts of such a policy. I tried my best to respond to these questions, but struggled to fully address their needs. It was difficult for the teachers to see, holistically, how detracking increases student success. This experience prompted me to read *Detracking for Excellence and Equity*, by Carol Corbett Burris and Delia T. Garrity. This book chronicles one New York school district's 20 year-long effort to completely do away with tracking--meaning that all students, regardless of readiness level, strengths, weaknesses, etc., take the same courses from elementary through high school. The initial reaction that follows such a decision is often similar: Why would any district decide to detrack their schools, fundamentally altering the learning environment many believe to be most effective? It is this very question that *Detracking for Excellence and Equity* thoroughly and practically answers. Although keeping students in tracks makes realistic sense to most, there are very real benefits associated with detracking reform.

To help make the case for detracking reform, the authors begin with an account of their own school district's successes with student achievement (both authors spent time as administrators and teachers in the district cited throughout this book). Higher test scores have consistently been registered for all student populations in the 20-plus years since tracks were eliminated. The authors illustrate an example of two students with almost identical backgrounds who end up with very different achievement levels based on the tracks they were placed in during their elementary years. The authors then define tracking and present research that outlines failures with tracking students. Their argument is that students who begin in low tracks often remain in these throughout their schooling. Proponents of tracks, sometimes unknowingly, operate under the perception that schools can do very little to impact the capacity of students to learn. The reality of tracking students is that subjective social constructs are often used to place them in initial tracks, based on the belief that the capability to learn is shaped solely by childhood environment and biology. As a result, the tracks in which students are placed (often beginning in elementary school) can exacerbate the achievement gap. Through logical and convincing sequencing, detailed suggestions, practical examples, and research to support their arguments, the authors convince readers that schools do in fact possess the power to increase the learning capacity of students.

The process of implementing detracking reform is a daunting undertaking. The authors first suggest that schools and districts take baby steps to begin dismantling existing tracks. Specific essentials to detracking are then discussed, beginning with the role of curriculum. Inherent in the elimination of tracks is the necessity of incorporating a challenging curriculum for all courses. Said differently, moving all students into one track does not mean that the curricula can be "dumbed-down" in each and every class. The authors suggest that school districts look to revamp the curricula used. This process is outlined, along with examples and questions to guide school personnel.

Detracking changes the fundamental environment in which teachers are expected to meet the needs of students. It is important that school districts provide professional development to teachers to move away from a one-sized-fits-all approach to education. Diverse, heterogeneous classrooms that result when tracks are eliminated require teachers to employ differentiated instruction to meet the needs of a vast range of learners (Tomlinson, 2003). Further, the authors suggest that teachers be trained on how to employ both cooperative learning strategies and a student-centered approach to classroom instruction. Example lesson plans, expert advice, and first-hand teacher accounts help build the argument that these instructional strategies, properly implemented, can help a wide range of learners realize success, from the highest achieving to the most struggling.

The authors also identify and discuss some political issues that can arise from detracking reform. The political themes that often block detracking--prejudice, prestige, and power--are presented to the reader. They are followed by suggestions on how to patiently and consistently rebuff such political arguments made by parents, community members, and even fellow educators. The remainder of the book is devoted to maintaining detracking reform initiatives. Teachers and administrators need continued support, and schools must constantly examine which practices are successful and identify those that need

revision. In the concluding section, the authors do an excellent job of summarizing previous chapters, as well as driving their original point home; that detracking, although difficult at times, is something that can greatly benefit students, equipping them with knowledge, understandings, and skills that extend well beyond school walls.

Although *Detracking for Excellence and Equity* presents a comprehensive overview of why and how schools and school districts should detrack, one noticeable omission is a lack of attention to the use of alternative assessments for students. The authors do mention the need to use more performance or authentic assessments, and even provide examples of such measures. However, the success they describe from their own district is singularly based on test scores. As a piece to an overall greater picture of school success, test scores (i.e. end of year state assessments required by No Child Left Behind, Advanced Placement tests, or International Baccalaureate exams) are a viable example of student achievement. An over-reliance on these indicators of success presents only a singular, outcome-based illustration that can fail to measure any significant depth of understanding. Instead, an entire portfolio of assessment data that also measure complex thought processes, inferences, and applications (Marzano, 2006) can provide a broader, deeper measure of student achievement. Assessing students this way is particularly essential given the authors' discussion of employing challenging, meaningful curricula for all classes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). One cannot entirely fault the authors for focusing on test scores in an educational environment driven by a singular outcome measure of success. However, failing to present a greater range of data does little to model their own view of success. That is, the authors are clearly in favor of measuring student achievement in multiple, meaningful ways, and yet they only mention success in terms of test scores.

This omission aside, *Detracking for Excellence and Equity* is a must read for anyone interested in reforming education from the bottom up. This book will also resonate with those who believe the potential for student success goes well beyond biological or environmental factors, and that schools can indeed impact student achievement. The practical insights provided throughout are exemplars of the need to truly rethink our country's vision for education. Even though change is often met with resistance, this book is a blueprint for change that, although difficult, rewards students, teachers, parents, and administrators with successes that might never be envisioned without such reform.

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Reviewed by Eric M. Carbugh, Ph.D., Department of Middle and Secondary Education, James Madison University.

Corgill, Ann Marie. (2008). *Of Primary Importance: What's Essential in Teaching Young Writers.* Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.

Pages: 236 Price: $24.00 ISBN: 978-1-57110-374-1

IF you are passionate about effectively developing young learners as writers and *IF* names such as Calkins, Fletcher, Graves, Harwayne, Heard, Portalupi, and Ray are among those whose books you read as mentoring texts, prepare to add a new name and a new book to your professional treasury. Although Ann Marie Corgill is not new to teaching primary-age children and writing articles and presenting, *Of Primary Importance* is her first book-length text--a piece of work that, I believe, will have a tremendous impact on the field of literacy education, specifically the teaching of writing in the primary/elementary grades.

To begin, Ann Marie Corgill writes from the perspective of a teacher who has taught first through fourth grade for fifteen years and who has taught in both rural and urban settings. In 2007, the National Council of Teachers of English honored Corgill with the Donald H. Graves Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Writing. In addition, she is a National Board certified teacher. Corgill's experience and teaching honors suggests a certain level of authority when it comes to developing our youngest writers. In an era when teachers' voices are silenced and their expertise ignored in favor of federally mandated scripted curricula, it is refreshing to hear directly from a practicing teacher of strategies that not only guarantee achieving Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) but strategies that deeply engage learners in their reading, writing, and thinking.

Potential readers beware: *Of Primary Importance* is not a "how-to" manual. In fact, in her introduction Corgill writes, "It's important when reading this book to recognize that the goal is not to replicate what I've done . . . but to use this information as support for your thinking and inspiration for your own original ideas" (p. 3). On the other hand, through referencing literacy experts and citing her own anecdotal evidence, Corgill does a satisfactory job of scaffolding those new to the writing workshop to a fundamental understanding of the philosophy behind the approach. Furthermore, Corgill provides a myriad of strategies for everything from setting up a classroom to support a writing workshop to actual writing strategies.

Of Primary Importance is basically divided into three parts. Chapters one through four focus on many of the "So What" and "Why" questions teachers should ask (and answer) before making any type of curricular decision. For example in chapter one, "What's Essential in Teaching Young Writers?", Corgill discusses at length the "Six As." She writes, "The teachers I

believe are most successful in helping young writers grow strong are the ones who Analyze, Ask, Applaud, Assist, Assess, and Advocate" (p. 7). Corgill then weaves these "As" throughout the next four chapters that explore the issues of establishing purposes for writing, cultivating a love for writing, setting reasonable expectations and obtainable goals, planning a writing curriculum based on student choice, designing writing classrooms, launching routines, and incorporating appropriate tools and strategies.

With the "Whys" of Corgill's approach to teaching writing to primary students answered in the first four chapters, the next four chapters address more specifically the "Hows." What's especially powerful about these chapters is that Corgill begins each one with a "Unit of Study Curriculum Map" in which she presents five columns:

1. Key Provisions (what students must have—e.g. choice, daily writing time, etc.)

2. Big Ideas (What students need to understand—a.k.a. "goals')

3. Essential Skills and Concepts (what students should be able to do—a.k.a. "objectives")

4. Possible Text Support (what students might use to support their work—a.k.a. "mentoring texts")

5. Assessment (what students will complete as documentation of their growth)

In chapters, six, seven, and eight, Corgill focuses on developing writers within specific genres: poetry, nonfiction, and picture books.

In the appendices of the book, Corgill offers readers several of the support sheets she uses to help her organize the writing workshop, as well as help her writers develop as self-reflective and autonomous as writers. Corgill also lists children's books that she and her primary students use as mentoring texts or simply as pleasure reads.

Ann Marie Corgill writes *Of Primary Importance* in a conversational and accessible tone; however, potential readers should be wary of mistaking "conversational" for "naïve." Corgill facilitates the conversation with passion and as JoAnn Portalupi notes in the foreward, as a "teacher who knows her subjects, understands her students, and isn't cowed by political pundits into turning away from her beliefs" (p. viii). Certainly, Corgill takes a solid stance against scripts, top-down mandates, cookie-cutter curriculum plans, and politicians/school officials who have spent little to no time in a classroom. Still, never does her tone become acerbic, nor does it become preachy.

Teachers, new or experienced, who want to maximize their learners' growth as writers and people, will best utilize this book. As stated in the third paragraph, readers will be best served if they bring their own thinking, questions, and ideas to the book, as Corgill provides no recipes or scripts to follow. For this reason, Corgill respects her readers as learners and thinkers just as she respects her young learners. Ultimately, it is her respect for people (young and mature) as well as her interest in everyone's development as writers and humans that will advance Ann Marie Corgill as a leader in her field.

Reviewed by Shannon D. Collins, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Literacy, Tennessee Technological University, Cookeville, TN.

Edelsky, Carole, Smith, Karen, Faltis, Christian. (2008). *Side by Side Learning: Exemplary Literacy Practice for English Language Learners and English Speakers in the Mainstream Classroom.* New York: Scholastic.

Pages: 96 Price: $31.99 ISBN: 978-0545035163

In *Side by Side Learning: Exemplary Literacy Practice for English Language Learners and English Speakers in the Mainstream Classroom*, Edelsky, Smith, and Faltis provide a clear introductory text to inquiry-based learning that specifically details how such a method benefits English language learners. The authors invite readers to try out this method in their own classrooms by using an instructive style in the text and accompanying DVD which provides readers with unambiguous presentations of key concepts, classroom examples, and outside resources.

The strength of this text is the thorough and informative definitional work done by the authors. Edelsky, Smith, and Faltis support readers by providing clear definitions of key components of inquiry-based learning, such as building background knowledge, foregrounding student questions, focusing and conducting an actual study, and presenting new learning. Explicit descriptions are supported by classroom examples, graphic organizers, outside references, and references to the DVD. Additionally, definitional work is grounded in well-documented research that can serve as signposts to readers interested in learning more about the topics they presented.

The text and DVD, which primarily use the real world examples of teachers Ernestina Aragón and Rebecca Osorio, are ideal for professional learning groups who seek to create meaningful learning opportunities for both English language learners and English speakers in their classrooms, and/or those who seek to modify commercial curriculum to an inquiry-based approach. Professional learning groups can use the lenses for viewing and reflective questions provided in the second chapter of the book to facilitate discussions. Additionally, professional learning groups will be able to use the provided viewing guide to help structure their reading and viewing experience as well as to enhance those experiences.

The final chapter of the book is particularly interesting as the authors focus on a different way to augment the curriculum--a critical turn that questions the status quo and how things got to be the way they are, which by necessity, requires inquiry. Such an approach, the authors argue, is central towards social justice and the development of citizens. The authors suggest such a method might work best with a language arts and/or social studies unit of study because these areas lend themselves to questioning the existing conditions of a particular topic. For example, Casey Bilger, a teacher featured in the extra clips of the DVD, studied immigrant issues. It appears that Bilger used a critical turn in his unit. Yet, a more prominent discussion of Bilger's classroom with more specific examples of his work might better support readers interested in critical inquiry.

Side by Side Learning will be an excellent resource to those teachers who wish to explore inquiry-based learning and its benefits for all learners. Using the clear definitions founded in research, plentiful strategies as well as the graphic organizers to support those strategies, teachers can easily apply their learning in their classrooms. Edelsky, Smith, and Faltis' instructive book and DVD is a welcome addition to the professional learning group literature.

Reviewed by Susan Nordstrom, a doctoral student in the Language and Literacy Education Department at The University of Georgia.

Keene, Ellin Oliver. (2008). *To Understand: New Horizons in Reading Comprehension.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Pages: 299 Price: $29.00 ISBN: 0-325-00323-8

Since the original publication of *Mosaic of Thought*, Ellin Keene (1997/2007) has positively influenced the ways many teachers think about and approach comprehension strategy instruction. Keene builds upon her discussion of comprehension strategy instruction in her latest book *To Understand*. In *To Understand*, Keene compels readers to consider how to reshape classrooms to create conditions that consistently nurture in children in-depth and enduring understanding. Keene further emphasizes our definition of understanding heavily influences educational policy and practice. Her primary goal is to enable teachers to consistently foster an enduring ability and disposition to engage more deeply with text. Educators and administrators interested in refashioning their policy and practice to foster thoughtful comprehension will find Keene's ideas worthy of more in-depth investigation.

To foster understanding, Keene argues that teachers need knowledge of the processes underlying comprehension as well as supportive instructional conditions. According to Keene, such knowledge permits teachers to deliberately and systematically cultivate in-depth and lasting understanding. Effective instruction requires that teachers utilize research-based practices and are intentional and systematic in their efforts. Keene's goal is to provide teachers with a coherent and manageable synthesis of research, theory, and experience so that teachers can provide the best possible instruction for students. Thus throughout each chapter, Keene employs myriad techniques explicating the processes involved in skilled comprehension and ways to effectively implement instruction. Not only do the various techniques make Keene's claims comprehensible and thought provoking, they also provide readers with clear examples. Keene's discussion is replete with highly engaging descriptions, anecdotes, and vignettes illustrating:

- a view of understanding that encompasses key processes including social, motivational, cognitive, and metacognitive processes;
- how the three models Keene conceived can be implemented to deliberately and systematically foster student ability and disposition to engage more deeply with text;
- and numerous instructional strategies grounded in research and theory.

Because of the immensity of research available and the enormous demands on teachers, a book that coherently bridges research and theory to practice is an invaluable resource. Keene adeptly persuades readers to seriously consider something that the research clearly indicates is lacking in instruction--how to truly teach in-depth comprehension (Rand Reading Study Group, 2002). In support of this goal, Keene skillfully weaves together key elements from multiple disciplines including: metacognitive theory, reader response theory, social constructivist theory, motivational theory, and cognitive psychology. Keene blends these elements into her framework to help teachers foster self-regulated learning, a critical instructional goal (Zimmerman, 1990).

Another strength is the inclusion of specific teaching tactics linked with learning outcomes that sensibly reflect the developmental nature of comprehension. Notably, many of these teaching tactics are associated with improved comprehension. These include explicit modeling emphasizing conditional knowledge (Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991), integrating oral and written language (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000), use of authentic literacy activities (Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall, & Tower, 2005/06), and think aloud as an instructional tool, diagnostic tool, and a means of encouraging socially constructed learning via student think aloud (Kucan & Beck, 1997). To focus instruction, Keene presents the "Outcomes of Understanding" model. These outcomes reflect the long-term and short-term consequences of reading as identified by the RRSG (2002) and characteristics of proficient readers (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995).

While the strong theoretical foundation and accessibility of concepts is a credit to *To Understand*, Keene's heavy reliance on anecdotal experiences as evidence is more problematic. Without clear references to research supporting certain claims, their trustworthiness remains questionable. For instance, Keene recommends that teachers in the primary grades divide instructional time in literacy to include fifty percent in word level skills and fifty percent in higher order skills. Few would

question balancing literacy instruction to include both word level and higher order skills as the concept is widely-established in academic literature (Pressley, 2002a). However, the efficacy of splitting instructional time fifty/fifty is not as well-established, nor does Keene provide any explanation of how to balance instructional time fifty/fifty.

Of additional concern is Keene's presentation of reading processes as it varies from that of many researchers. Although, both Keene and researchers agree that a crucial outcome of the graphophonic system is to help children master the skills needed to establish sight words in memory (Ehri & Rosenthal, 2007); Keene constrains the graphophonics system to permitting rapid word identification. Central to comprehension, researchers argue that the graphophonics system also contributes to vocabulary development (Ehri & Rosenthal, 2007). Without this information, some teachers may not adequately attend to vocabulary in the early grades. In turn, student ability to navigate through more complex text in later grades is likely limited.

Overall, Keene offers a compelling and comprehensible perspective on reading comprehension instruction. Her promising framework integrates key elements from several disciplines and provides suggestions for effective implementation. As with any text, however, readers must take caution in interpreting and implementing Keene's ideas as alternate, credible perspectives exist. Research is needed to investigate the effects of Keene's framework on the impact of both teaching and student learning. Nonetheless, Keene clearly launches readers into a highly valuable discussion that supports efforts in improving literacy instruction.

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Reviewed by Lisa O'Brien, Doctoral Student, Boston University.

Kronman, Anthony T. (2007). *Education's End: Why our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Pages: 308 Price: $27.50 ISBN: 978–0–300–14314–0

Author Anthony Kronman, former Dean of the Yale University Law School, relates that as a sophomore at Williams College in 1965, he had an epiphany. This epiphany was the realization that "the meaning of life is a subject that can be studied in school" (p. 5). He discovered this with delight after a nascent, yet unfulfilling effort to find himself through political organizing work for Students for a Democratic Society. The lesson was inscribed deeply on him – "that a college or university is not just a place for the transmission of knowledge but a forum for the exploration of life's mystery and meaning through the careful but critical reading of the great works of literary and philosophical imagination that we have inherited from the past" (p. 6). But, Kronman laments, "I have watched the question of life's meaning lose its status as a subject of organized academic instruction and seen it pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place" (p. 7).

Kronman's book proposes to answer the question why U.S. colleges and universities have given up on the quest for the

meaning of life. Unfortunately, in developing a complex argument for why this is so, Kronman misses the elephant in the room—or that is to say, two elephants. The first elephant is the expansion of higher education to greater and greater numbers of people, and, hence a broader portion of the economic spectrum of U.S. society. The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862, the G.I. Bill of Rights following World War II, and the post World War II economic expansion were the key drivers to this expansion. The second elephant is greatly a consequence of the first, and that is the "vocationalization of higher education" by which is meant a greater and greater emphasis on college as preparation for a professional career rather than as an opportunity to ask life's great questions.

Kronman does examine the history of college student demographics as part of the development of his arguments. He points out, rightly, that the question of "the meaning of life" was central to the lives of students at Harvard, Yale, and the other pioneering higher education institutions in the American colonies, because those very questions were central to the vocation that the students were seeking, i.e. the ministry.

His next step leads us astray. He argues that, after transitioning from the model of training students for the ministry, that American colleges and universities then entered a period of devotion to "secular humanism." This phrase, if chosen deliberately, is ill-advised as many non-scholars equate "secular humanism" with "nihilism"—-an abandonment of meaning. Some conservative Christians interpret the phrase "secular humanism" to mean denial of God, and have concluded this demonstrates that the academy has long abandoned the search for "the meaning of life" - the very quest Kronman seeks to promote.

Kronman argues that three stages have been the models for higher education in the United States since the founding of Harvard in 1636. Stage one he calls "the age of piety" (p. 46). It was dominated by the search for life's meaning grounded in church dogma. Stage two, "the age of secular humanism," was dominated by the search for meaning of life based on a study of a curriculum that was more or less commonly agreed upon being the great works of Western literature, philosophy, and art. Stage three, which goes without a name, marks the abandonment of the exploration of life's meaning as a recognized and valued subject of instruction. Though nameless, this stage, he argues, is governed by two phenomena: the research ideal and political correctness. Kronman devotes lengthy chapters to each.

Kronman's language does have a few moments where it soars to great heights, and reminds many of us why we longed to go to college in the first place:

> It is the love of man that needs to be restored: the love of the amusing, tragic, contradictory creature who years to be the master of his fate and transforms the world in pursuit of that ambition, but to whom, as Sophocles says, death comes in the end regardless – the inescapable end, foreshadowed from the start, which alone confers meaning on the doomed but magnificent campaign to overcome it (p. 237).
>
> Every living thing is moved by desire. But only human beings are moved by the desire to be different than they are, to transcend their own condition through absolute knowledge, complete power, and perfect self-control. Only human beings yearn to escape the orbit of their natural condition, and this yearning for transcendence is as much a part of who we are as the impossibility of its fulfillment. The yearning and its inevitable defeat, the longing for transcendence and the fateful horizon of mortality within which it arises: this is our human nature, unique among the natures of all the creatures of the earth in its disquietude (p. 238).

Though the academy's frantic search for research funding in more "practical" subject areas (i.e., engineering and the sciences) and the pressures of political correctness have doubtless contributed to the decline of the search for "the meaning of life" as a central focus of the academy, Kronman's argument fails to convince that these are the primary reasons, in particular because he ignores the twin "elephants" noted above. Mainly for this reason, the book fails to deliver on its lofty promise to explain why our colleges and universities have given up on the meaning of life.

Reviewed by Clark Capshaw, PhD, a 2007 graduate of the Higher Education Leadership and Policy program at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Currently, Dr. Capshaw works as an evaluator of aerial intelligence systems for the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command in Alexandria, VA, and as an online instructor for the University of Phoenix.

Leaman, Louisa (2008). *The Perfect Teacher: How to Make the Very Best of Your Teaching Skills.* London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Pages: 132 Price: $21.56 ISBN: 9780826497871

Louisa Leaman admits the title of her book, *The Perfect Teacher*, is used with a "pinch of salt." This practical guide aims to help teachers find their own perfection, or measure of success. Leaman uses insights from discussions with teachers in all career stages, parents, administrative leaders, and students to give readers tips to improve their teaching. She also gives advice based on her own experiences as a teacher.

In each chapter, the author gives practical analysis on topics like creating a learning space or dealing with discipline. Tips are very pragmatic. For instance, Leaman warns teachers against spending 30 minutes to write a lesson plan for an activity that lasts only 10 minutes.

Quotes from the discussion participants are sprinkled throughout, which adds interest to the text. Leaman includes

comments that reflect positive and negative reactions from the various groups she consulted. For example, one newer teacher explains her first year position in a school, "I feel like I've been thrown into the shark pit…I look forward to next year, when I will have properly settled in and got to know the students" (p. 26).

The tone of the book is encouraging and realistic. The chapter on work-life balance is one example. The teachers who will read The Perfect Teacher are the same ones who need to be reminded that a quest for perfection can come at a price. Reflection questions are included after topical sections to help the reader begin an analysis of his or her own teaching. The few questions graze the surface and start the thinking process. Readers will really need to dig deeper if they truly want to reflect on their own practices.

In one section, Leaman talks about how teaching is sometimes viewed as a solitary endeavor. She reminds the reader of how the individual teacher and classroom fit into the larger school community. This is one of the text's strengths; it approaches teaching as a part of a larger system. Other topics Leaman addresses are teacher personality and self-confidence, student motivation and self-esteem, communication with parents and conflict resolution.

If a reader desires advanced analysis, he or she will find this text lacking in specific connections to learning theory and research. It is essentially a gathering of thoughts from discussion groups. Readers may find comfort in knowing other teachers are expressing similar thoughts, and the participants Leaman consulted may feel like their contributions were actually disseminated to an audience. But the text is primarily a tip sheet for improving teaching in primary and secondary education. Teachers with many classroom years will find some of the advice too basic. One area that disappoints is the lack of resource listings for additional study.

An idea for how to use this book in a school might be to incorporate the reflection questions or chapter summary bullets points (provided by the author after each topic) in staff meetings as a way to talk about teaching. Or teachers could post a tip of the day on the staff room bulletin board, like be "firm with the rules, friendly with individuals" (p. 7). In a teacher training setting, I would have undergraduate students attempt to connect Leaman's tips with teaching and learning theories from other texts.

Readers need to be realistic when they select this book. The secret answer to becoming the perfect teacher is not inside. Leaman's *The Perfect Teacher* helps a teacher to begin thinking about ways to improve.

Reviewed by Sarah Maben, a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at the University of North Texas.

Leograndis, Denise. (2008). *Launching the Writing Workshop: A Step-by-Step Guide in Photographs.* New York: Scholastic.

Pages: 144 Price: $19.99 ISBN: 978-0-545-02121-9

Are you a first year teacher wondering how to design your writing workshop or do you learn best through visual means? If so, Denise Leograndis writes a text which will meet your needs. The author used the *Classroom Management in Photographs* (Chang, 2004) design as a basis for her edition of establishing a writing workshop in the elementary classroom. She explains that "every learner, including teachers, needs visuals" (p. 9). To provide these much-needed visuals, she says, "I have taken a camera into my classroom and photographed every element of my writing workshop launch---the room, the mentor texts, students in action, and mostly, the charts" (p. 9).

The author organized the text in a four-week beginning-of-the-year launch. The weeks are: collecting meaningful entries in the writer's notebook; writing with sensory details; choosing, developing, and drafting an idea for publishing; and revising, editing, publishing, reflecting, and celebrating. Included in the photographs are the pre-planning events such as seating, conference sheets, chart displays, and mini-lesson ideas. Appendixes include reproducibles like a calendar, conferences guidelines, and a scoring rubric.

I particularly enjoyed using the mini-lesson on heart maps which will provide writers with meaningful topics to explore. Students draw an outline of a heart on a standard sized sheet of paper (or teacher provided photo-copied version) and students divide their heart according to what is important to them in their lives. In turn, students use the heart map as a way to "write about and share what is important to them, what they care about" (p. 59).

Leograndis completes the book with a celebrating day or a means for students to share and reflect on their writing. Photographs consist of the layout of the room, author's chair, readers' comments sheets, and a "drink" toast to the students for their hard work. A final section on displaying student work is included.

If you have been teaching for awhile, this how-to piece will probably not offer anything new as it's geared to new teachers. University teacher candidates would benefit the most from this well-organized, visual text.

References

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Reviewed by Darryn Diuguid, an instructor of Children's Literature and Methods of Teaching Language Arts at McKendree University. Previously, he taught 2nd grade in a high poverty school district.

Mannix, Darlene. (2009). *Social Skills Activities for Special Children (Second Edition).* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Pages: 444 Price: $29.95 ISBN: 978-0-470-25935-1

"What is not good for the hive is not good for the bee." Marcus Aurelius, Roman Emperor from 161-180

Perhaps no place is "buzzing" with as much activity as is the elementary classroom on a typical school day, and in the midst of the academic curriculum, there is another one at work---that of social skills. As such, every educator knows that it is imperative that students and teacher get along in order to have productive school days. Mannix's book, a whopping collection of 164 social skills activities, seeks to provide the adults in a school building with a veritable tool chest of strategies designed to help children use social skills both inside and outside the classroom. The book is divided into three parts---"Accepting Rules and Authority at School," "Relating to Peers," and "Developing Positive Social Skills." Each section contains parent letters, a story that relates to the social skill being addressed, and several activities that reinforce the particular topic.

There is no doubt that Mannix's collection runs the gamut of possible social skills topics. Activities range from "My Teacher is a Person!" to "Taking Turns" to "Keeping Track of Assignments" to "Apologizing and Accepting the Blame." In short, one is hard pressed to think of a social skill that isn't addressed and, because of that, this book is a valuable resource for any educator to have on their bookshelf. However, for those who purchase this book, I would urge them to considering the following "do's and don'ts."

Don't let the title fool you. These activities are not just for "special children." After all, even typically developing children need instruction in "Having Fun, But Knowing When to Stop" or "Listening to Other People's Ideas." In other words, this isn't a book that would be helpful only for special education teachers or school psychologists.

Do expect to make some changes. Even though the activity "Different Ways of Learning" stresses that people can learn in a number of different ways, the lessons themselves do not reflect this. All of the activities follow the discussion/questions/worksheet/follow-up discussion format. As such, you may want to consider incorporating cooperative groups or role play into the lessons.

Don't assume that all activities are appropriate for all grade levels. Although this book is a K-5 resource, many topics just aren't suitable for some grades (for example, "Cheating" or "Using a Cell Phone"). In addition, since reading and writing are heavily emphasized, it is likely that younger students will need significant teacher assistance to complete many of the activities.

Do integrate these activities into the curriculum. As mentioned previously, this book covers a very wide range of topics. As such, it might be tempting to start with page one and keep going until you get to page 444 in order to cover everything. While perhaps thorough, this method denies the impact and importance of "the teachable moment," a key aspect to any successful social skills curriculum (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2005). For example, Thanksgiving might be an appropriate time for an activity on Table Manners and the activity "I Don't Speak English!" might help students better understand the experiences of immigrants to the United States.

In sum, Mannix's book is a very useful collection of ideas to help students become more socially adept. Since classrooms are "hives" of both academic and social activity, *Social Skills Activities for Special Children* is recommended for the "beekeepers" who hope to help their students become more responsible, caring, and sensitive individuals.

References

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Reviewed by Karrin S. Lukacs, an adjunct faculty member at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia.

Miletta, Maureen & Miletta, Alexandra. (Eds.). (2008). *Classroom Conversations: A Collection of Classics for Parents and Teachers.* New York: The New Press.

Pages: 320 Price: $24.95 ISBN: 978-1595581570

In *Classroom Conversations: A Collection of Classics for Parents and Teachers* mother and daughter team of authors share very intimate and heart-felt reflections on many facets of the teaching profession through the eyes of timeless classics. Authors Alexandra and Maureen Miletta inspire teachers and parents alike to explore various educational philosophies and, in some instances, to challenge age-old practices and perspectives. The authors' efforts culminate in a magnificent work that is devoted to uniting educators and parents in their efforts to realize educational goals. Each of the 19 carefully selected educational writings by various authors is both preceded and followed by a deeply reflective narrative by the Milettas. In these reflections, they share how the ideas in these writings have profoundly impacted them as educators, and how these particular selections contribute immeasurably toward efforts to find answers to many of the challenges facing

today's education systems. The book is divided into 5 parts dedicated to specific themes: "Understanding Children", "What's Worth Learning," "The Work of Teaching," "On Equity and Issues of Social Justice," and "The Final Word: Purposes of Education in a Democracy."

Part 1 contains four essays which explain the value of information that is collected by critically analyzing the many actions, thoughts and words of school-age children. Using the writings of Patricia Carini, David Hansen, Vivian Gussin Paley and Loris Maluguzzi, authors Alexandra and Maureen Miletta explain that parents and teachers must use critical observation as a tool in painting a complete picture of who each child is. By using this complete portrait as an educational tool, educators' and parents' roles and approaches are better understood and more clearly defined.

The second part of the book, "What's Worth Learning," challenges the reader to think outside the box with respect to curriculum and subject area content. The Milettas argue that curriculum is much more complex and comprehensive than what is lived out in many of today's school systems. The writings of authors Maxine Greene, Caroline Pratt, Brian Cambourne, and Christopher Clark are the avenues through which this argument is made. Educators should venture beyond the status quo by allowing students' natural tendencies and inquiries to draw a curricular map that reaches far beyond traditional curricular frameworks.

The essays that comprise part 3 of this book are essentially an extension of ideas presented in earlier sections. These writings focus on pedagogy as well as the role of the teacher as a researcher. The works of Eleanor Duckworth, Sylvia Ashton Warner, and Cynthia Ballenger stress the importance and value of using diversified instructional methods to teach children of all ages. It is argued that incorporating opportunities for students to make personal connections with the material and embrace new ideas in their own individual ways, rather than systematically using direct instructional methods (lecture), is paramount. In short, the works in this section of the book are a collection of essential ideas about the very nature of teaching and learning.

Part 4, titled "On Equity and Issues of Social Justice," is my personal favorite. The writings that are visited in this section come from authors Peggy McIntosh, Diana Hess, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Sonia Nieto, and Lisa Delpit. To simply say that this section of the book is about the importance of a multicultural education would be a profound understatement. Alexandra and Maureen Miletta take the reader on a fascinating journey that explores educational diversity, equality, pluralism and multiculturalism, and reaches far beyond traditional multicultural education concepts and ideas. For example, the reader is instructed on how to give children the opportunity to openly explore and critically reflect on the privileges certain ethnic groups enjoy that other groups do not. In addition, the reader is taught the difference between simply conveying historical events that are related to equality and social justice as iconic rather than allowing students to scrutinize these events to determine the essence of their role in history. To attempt to put into words the level of enlightenment that this section of the book offers the reader would be an injustice in and of itself. The ideas discussed, as in several other parts of the book, must be experienced thereby making it a must to read.

The book concludes with part 5, "The Final Word: Purposes of Education in a Democracy." A timeless essay by John Dewey, along with the writings of authors Carla Rinaldi and Joseph Featherstone contend that the educational system, as it currently exists, does not fully live out the basic principles of democracy. Part 5 represents a succinct conclusion to the ideas that have been shared throughout the book-- that many of the practices and philosophies emphasized in modern school systems do not allow for flexibility, choice, or the opportunity to fully utilize alternative approaches. Rather, school systems cling to the status quo.

Classroom Conversations: A Collection of Classics for Parents and Teachers is an excellent resource for novice and experienced teachers, teacher education candidates, parents, and administrators alike. As a result of reading these selected writings, along with the reflections of authors Alexandra and Maureen Miletta, the reader becomes part of a unified effort to attain the ultimate educational goal of providing the very best and most effective educational experience for our school-aged children.

Reviewed by Dr. Ramona A. Hall, Associate Professor, Department of Education, Cameron University.

Plaut, Suzanne. (2009). *The Right To Literacy In Secondary School: Creating a Culture of Thinking.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Pages: 203 Price: $24.95 ISBN: 978-0-8077-4918-0

The authors of this edited volume argue that, "Secondary schools can and must be the vanguard of a social movement that asserts and secures literacy as a civil right for all students" (p. 186). They proceed to compellingly make the argument that "thinking requires the same skills as literacy," (p. 13) and that no matter what subject one teaches, everyone teaches students to think. Though the message is not new, the clarity and fervor with which it is explicated and parsed into particulars of practice set this book far apart from all other books on content area reading. Each chapter is written by a teacher or staff developer, and is followed by questions and topics for collegial discussion that will truly spark debate, and critical reflection. The end-of-chapter sections are organized into practical steps for "How to Begin," and discussion points in the form of "Lingering Questions." These are followed by "Leadership Perspectives," which offer discussion starters, and a list of related readings for further inquiry. This is the quintessential "book study" book, and a text well worth reading and discussing with an entire middle or high school staff.

The Right To Literacy in Secondary Classrooms adds to ongoing discussions about adolescent literacy and reading in

content classrooms by providing a lucid and practical explanation with examples of the value of formative assessments for monitoring and developing students' thinking. In her chapter on literacy in a math classroom, Angela Zehner makes the argument that analyzing student work should be a mini-physical, not an autopsy. Wendy Ward Hoffer similarly writes that assessment is archaeology, not accounting. They both give concrete examples from their own practice of how formative assessments drive differentiated, responsive practice that builds engagement and critical thinking in secondary students. They thus address the missing link between theory and practice, good intentions, and good teaching, by writing from teachers' perspectives and explaining the details of instruction that ensure adolescents have real and unwavering access to the right to literacy.

Though some chapters verge on didactic rehashings of classrooms tips and suggestions best laid out in their source texts (Keene & Zimmerman, 2007; and McTighe & Wiggins, 2005), each chapter presents a strong starting point for any teacher or administrator trying to envision literacy instruction in all classrooms that both engages and empowers adolescents. The contribution of math teachers to this volume makes it a unique and long awaited addition to every professional library, which claims "reading across the curriculum" as its theme. Before this book, math has always been the subject slighted by workshops and books on content area reading. The tide has effectively turned with this volume. The chapters written by math teachers are two of the highlights of the book because they make the connection between literacy and critical thinking so vivid, and compelling.

The book is written from actual classroom experiences with the "lingering questions" sections raising realistic, pragmatic questions. Each chapter is followed by discussion starters written by principals, which challenge readers to situate their discussion in the larger context of teaching and learning across a school. Plaut thus leads us from practical and pragmatic, to the theoretical, and back again with her suggestions of related readings.

As a final bonus, this book also offers a rare peek into the classroom of Cris Tovani, the author of several books on supporting struggling readers. The structures in Tovani's classroom are described as examples of the workshop model for reading and writing instruction. Descriptions of her lessons provide multiple examples of the gradual releases of responsibility from teacher to student discussed in previous chapters, which scaffold and differentiate student learning.

Through its varied chapters, vignettes of classrooms, and voices of teachers, this book presents a multitude of starting points for powerful literacy instruction, which are galvanized by enormously rich resources from which to draw both conviction and vision. It is a treasure for any teacher who believes that we need students to "understand the major concepts of our disciplines not only because of a curriculum guide or district policy, but because we believe that the material presented will make a difference in their lives" (p. 37). The authors collectively nail the argument that students must grow to become active meaning-makers, whether making meaning from text in a book or the "texts" of the world around them. It is only through access to their right to literacy that students will be able to make meaning out of the world they live in, and thereby, one day, change that world for the better.

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Reviewed by Rachael Gabriel, Doctoral Student, Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.
