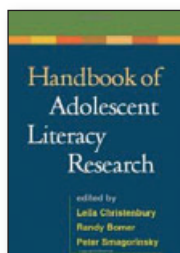


Reviews

Professional Resources

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Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research

Leila Christenbury, Randy Bomer, and Peter Smagorinsky (Eds.).
2010. New York: Guildford.

The *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research* presents a multifaceted view of adolescents and methods for helping them succeed in a complex literate world.

Adolescents have long been disengaged from schools, due mostly to the pedantic nature of traditional classroom practices and standard textbook materials, which leave little space and time for students to write and talk critically about the subjects that matter most to them. These disengaged students, some of whom are struggling in their academic performance, are actually thriving outside the classroom as they efficiently surf through multiple multimodal texts and compose texts of their own through blogs, online forums, and multiplayer games.

The disconnect between schools and community spaces is one of the greatest flaws in public schooling and teacher education programs, according to the contributing authors. They explain that school curricula and related textbooks are antiquated, standardized assessments; educational policies are oversimplified to the point of obsolescence; and teachers have little experience or expertise with current technology in the classroom. The reader is rendered breathless when considering what needs to be done to reengage our youth.

Although this book presents a wealth of research on adolescent literacy and offers some solid guiding principles for revolutionizing secondary education, the targeted audience—teachers, teacher educators, policy makers, and educational researchers—will need more than general principles to make the needed changes. In this sense, the book is not a practical handbook (as implied by the title), but an anthology of research that may serve as a catalyst for deeper thinking about our youth and the ways in which schools can better serve them.

The editors (Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky) organized 27 chapters from 49 contributing authors into four sections, the first of which provides a three-chapter overview of adolescent literacy and its historical roots. The second section, consisting of 12 chapters, focuses on literacy practices and policies in the school context.

The third section consists of four chapters that are devoted to literacy practices outside school, with particular emphasis on high school graduates who lack the analytic communication skills needed to thrive in workplace or university settings. The final eight chapters of the handbook highlight the varying culture-specific literacy practices of adolescents and their burgeoning identities.

The book begins with an overview of the historical development of the terms *adolescence* and *literacy* and how these terms are interpreted in secondary schooling. Editors and contributing authors explain the need to move away from traditional views of adolescents as “inadequate adults” and from literacy practices that involve little more than reading and recalling content in printed texts. Instead, adolescents are viewed as highly capable individuals who are actively involved in literacy-rich activities outside of school that command their attention (e.g., blogging, texting).

This disconnect between the schools and the various literacy practices of adolescents is generally attributed to policies and standardized assessments that reflect a view of literacy as a set of discrete skills used to comprehend printed texts. Extensive research presented in these chapters supports an alternative, ideological viewpoint that reframes literacy practices as multimodal and situated within particular contexts.

The contributing authors also advocate general principles for building positive connections with students through open dialogue. However, from the perspective of teachers seeking handbook guidance, the paucity of clearly described suggestions and examples of critical, multimodal literacy practices in the classroom may constitute the biggest shortcoming of this volume. For example, while Schoenbach and Greenleaf (Chapter 7) describe two different cases of how teachers have encouraged students to develop a reading disposition, suggesting a helpful link to view online video of these classroom practices, such information is not provided in most other chapters.

An immense dissatisfaction echoes throughout the book about large-scale, standardized assessments of reading ability, which largely ignore the social relevance of literacy and fall short of measuring the abilities required to engage in critical, multimodal literacy practices. The general argument that a single standardized reading score is an inadequate indicator of ability is sound and highly defensible; high-stakes tests may be the greatest factor prohibiting real changes in school policies and classroom practices, as suggested by Marshall (Chapter 8) and Luke and Woods (Chapter 14).

However, the overwhelming focus on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as an example of what is wrong with education seems

a bit misguided, in that state assessments have a more direct impact on respective district and school policies and practices. Furthermore, recent efforts in the field of educational assessment and psychometrics highlight the importance of diverse student viewpoints via cognitive labs and think-aloud sessions (e.g., Mislevy & Riconscente, 2006; Wilson, 2005). These efforts may provide more meaningful information about the abilities of our ever-expanding population, which is the intended goal of the NAEP.

A major theme running through the second section of this book is the issue of texts. The authors contend that classroom literacy practices should not be limited to merely comprehending declarative information in printed texts; students should critically explore and reflect on relevant issues through multimodal texts, which include films and various types of digitized images as well as online discussions and presentations.

The argument for relevant, engaging texts and instructional approaches is hardly objectionable, but an important question remains unaddressed: How does a teacher identify which digitized texts and publications should be used in a targeted curriculum? Not all texts are considered equal, especially in a digital age. A teacher needs to consider not just the relevancy of a text, but also the purpose for using it in a classroom activity.

Issues of accuracy (especially for content area courses like science) and readability also play a role in determining the appropriateness of a text. Including students in the process of choosing texts is a good beginning, but a set of constructive, guiding principles is needed to facilitate this task.

A major focus across all the sections is the population of struggling students who represent a wide range of abilities, cultural identities, and instructional needs. Schoenbach and Greenleaf (Chapter 7), for example, suggest that many students are struggling because they lack the explicit demonstration of specific skills and strategies (e.g., K-W-L, reciprocal teaching) that are necessary for comprehending school texts. Langer (Chapter 4) seems to equate struggling readers as unfortunate members of failing schools (identified by failing NAEP results), which also tend to have negative relationships between teachers and students.

Several authors highlight the instructional strengths and needs of students who are generally marginalized from dominant, mainstream policies and practices. Cooks and Ball (Chapter 10), for example, provide a review of research that suggests that difficulties experienced by many African American students are due to a general disparity between students' home/community language structure and practices and the standard academic English that is implicitly and explicitly valued over alternate versions of English. Martinez-Roldan and Franquiz (Chapter 21) contend that schools would do well to learn more about the culturally rich home and community practices of Latina/o students, viewing them as valuable funds of knowledge to use as instructional tools rather than as deficient habits to supplant with academic discourse.

The current policies and practices of schools described throughout this book require dramatic changes in order to close the widening gap that Yancey (Chapter 17) describes between the skills of graduating high school students and the requirements of incoming college students. Burroughs and Smagorinsky (Chapter 12) explain that the standard, five-paragraph essay is insufficient and "bears almost no resemblance to the texts produced within disciplinary genres" (p. 174).

The general take-away message from many of these chapters is that in order to thrive in current workplace and university contexts, teachers need more complex understandings of texts and alternate viewpoints; improvement in reading comprehension, writing, and critical reading skills; and increased student agency and interest. However, specific instances of how teachers can incite useful discussions would have offered readers greater clarity about the kinds of changes that are needed for such principles to be realized in the classroom.

A few contributing authors focus on the current state of boys' literacy practices and the notion of a gender gap (i.e., girls outperforming boys) in school literacy performance. However, it is less clear whether or not these authors agree that adolescent males are truly struggling compared to girls.

Smith and Wilhelm (Chapter 23) suggest that the performance gap may have more to do with girls succeeding than boys plummeting. They claim that boys are not engaged in school literacy practices, though they are engaged in many different literacy activities

outside the school (e.g., reading newspapers, surfing the Internet, rap).

Guzzetti (Chapter 24) argues that boys dominate classroom discussions and small group projects, leaving little opportunity for girls' viewpoints. It is possible that these two views are complementary, but perhaps some coordination between these chapters would have clarified the authors' views on the gender gap (if there truly is one) and streamlined suggestions for addressing the strengths and needs of girls and boys.

In conclusion, the *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research* presents the reader with historical accounts, theoretical perspectives, and reviews of empirical studies about issues related to adolescent literacy. Although many chapters inspire revolutionary thinking in terms of how schools and governing policies can be changed so that students can thrive as literate, critical thinkers inside and outside the classroom, the targeted audience for this book will need more than an inspiring vision to incite a revolution, which is desperately needed in schools.

In particular, teachers need (and, frankly, deserve) more constructive guidance in how to negotiate the various demands placed upon them. Summaries of key principles, resources (in addition to the reference citations), and guiding questions would have elevated this book from being an anthology of research voices to a resource for implementing real change in schools.

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Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids: Bringing Digital Media Into the Classroom, Grades 5–12

Jessica K. Parker. 2010. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

"Our jobs as teachers are drastically improved if we can come from a perspective that understands the

behaviors of our students” (p. 9), states Jessica Parker, author of *Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids: Bringing Digital Media Into the Classroom, Grades 5–12*. Parker invites teachers to investigate the new media that is available to them for use in their own lives and in their classrooms.

Exploring new media will not only help teachers examine their current practices, but it can also enhance their teaching skills. Perhaps most importantly, teachers will be able to use the new media to make better connections to today’s youths and potentially improve teachers’ relationships with their students.

In *Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids*, Parker “draws on research funded by the MacArthur Foundation and leaders in the fields of new media and education” (p. xi). She combines this research with field experience to show how concentrating on literacy and learning in the context of numerous out-of-school media activities can help today’s students flourish and make essential connections between literacy and their own lives.

Parker argues that even though the out-of-school media activities are usually more casual and less structured than school-based activities, a society of collective involvement can help students develop a sense of connection and identity. Parker goes on to explain that young people can become personally empowered and motivated by sharing their work and providing feedback to peers. In interest-driven settings, learners are motivated to observe and communicate with others who share the same interests (Ito et al., 2008).

At the core of *Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids* is the relationship between youth and their new media activities. Parker’s purpose for the book is to move the discussion beyond negative aspects of new media to the potential influence it could have on learning for today’s youth.

She asks all educators to reflect on three questions: (1) “What does learning look like in the 21st century?” (2) “What does literacy look like in the 21st century?” and (3) “What is knowledge in the 21st century?” (p. 2). As teachers answer these questions, they will have to reflect on how new media technologies are being integrated into their own lives as well as their classrooms. Teachers can then view student’s participation with digital media, including how they

produce and distribute media and engage in appropriating, recirculating, archiving, and annotating media content in powerful new ways (Jenkins, 2006).

Parker explains that having teachers engage in such a discussion can help them understand how “learning, literacy, and knowledge in new media environments differ from traditional school-based experiences” (p. 4). This will help teachers be able to know how to integrate new media into the content they are required to teach, and make meaningful connections with their students’ lives.

In *Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids*, Parker acknowledges that teachers in fifth through 12th grade have varying levels of technological proficiency and awareness. Teachers who have a basic understanding of technology will find useful descriptions of Facebook and Wikipedia, definitions of basic terms, and explanations of activities to implement in their personal lives and in their classrooms.

Teachers who have an advanced understanding of technology will appreciate Parker’s presentation of current research and online and offline resources to expand their understanding of new media. Parker has explained new media so that “beginning teachers can take away implications for their pedagogical practice and mull over a changing communicative landscape. And veteran teachers can broaden their understanding of interesting phenomena such as virtual worlds and remix culture” (p. xiii).

Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids is a very readable book. The organization made it easy to become familiar with the new media that are available and understand how to begin using them to enhance teaching and learning. Parker has organized the book by themes and includes some of the most popular youth media found online or with other computer functions. Parker focused on “key characteristics of new media environments such as a community of learners, creative production, peer sharing and feedback” (p. xiii).

The chapters on social network sites review My Space, Facebook, and YouTube. Within this context, Parker offers educators the opportunity to understand important parts of youth culture while challenging educators to think about how aspects of peer sharing and feedback can increase student learning.

The chapters on communities in cyberspace review Wikipedia and online role playing. Parker

provides insight into individual user-made pages and challenges teachers to become members and participate online. The chapters on creative media productions review virtual worlds and remix culture. Parker offers instances of “participatory culture and outlines how educators can capitalize on specific characteristics of this culture” (p. xiv).

Teaching Tech-Savvy Kids is not a teacher’s guide with units and lesson plans on individual subjects. Parker designed this book as a “practice-based guide not a content-based guide”(p. xii). One of the goals of this book was to help fifth through 12th grade teachers to understand the connections that their students have with new media and how to utilize these connections with new media when planning instruction for their specific content areas.

Each chapter follows a similar format so teachers can easily find pertinent information to their teaching situations. There were several features Parker included that I felt were useful in guiding my reading and understanding.

One feature that I found helpful was the *Myth and Reality Sidebar*. It outlined common misconceptions of youths and their relationship to digital media and shared examples to help increase understanding. This allowed me to be able to reexamine my own perceptions of youths. Another feature that I found useful was *Story From the Field*, which presents current research of youths’ experiences with new media. A different feature that helped my reading was *Pedagogical Implications and the References*. It showed classroom activities and gave ideas for teachers to consider, explore, and discuss.

It was helpful to see what other teachers were doing that worked that I could apply to my own classroom. While some of these strategies may not be research supported at this point, they seem creative and worthwhile. Another valuable feature of the book was *References and Helpful Resources*, which contained key readings, websites, and other resources for teachers. It was helpful to know where I could look for more in-depth information.

The Online Community Forum that teachers were invited to join at www.teachingtechsavvykids.com seemed to be a timely and appropriate feature. Within that community, teachers can continue the conversation with other educators.

Toward the end of the book, Parker revisits the three questions she stated at the beginning about learning, literacy, and knowledge in the 21st century. She states that the questions posed do not have straightforward answers and to “grapple with these questions is to be a contemporary educator: to view learning as complex and socially constructed, to be open to new understandings of communication, and to appreciate a diversity of learning experiences” (p. 168).

For educators who are interested in creating engaging and motivating curricula in a digital era, Parker reminds that technology is not at the core of pedagogy. At the core of pedagogy are the learning, knowledge, and critical thinking of a discipline (Beatham, 2008). Technology is a tool to help further the learning, knowledge, and critical thinking of a discipline. Like any tool, it is up to us to use it well.

Teachers, parents, and administrators are well aware of the substantial time students use “playing video games, texting, writing blogs, surfing the Internet, role playing, and making media” (p. 171). These activities are tremendously empowering and motivating for kids (Ito, 2008). Parker argues that rather than seeing such activities as a waste of time, teachers should reflect about how to use them to help students become active participants in their learning.

Educators who give students the opportunity to select a topic that they are curious about and use new media to gather information help students to become responsible for their learning and enhance its meaning by making the connection both inside and outside of the school walls. Parker envisions that after reading this book, teachers and students will be able to build the relationships needed to use new media in a moment when school-based notions of literacy and learning can potentially serve many more functions and be more deeply implicated in the thinking processes (Hull & Schultz, 2002).

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