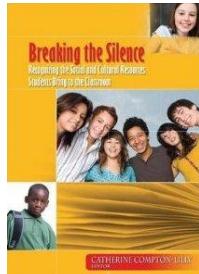


Professional Book Review

Compton-Lilly, Catherine, (Ed.) (2009). *Breaking the Silence: Recognizing the Social and Cultural Resources Students Bring to the Classroom*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association. 158 pp., ISBN: 978-0872074668 (pbk). \$29.95.

Reviewed by Alyson Smith Bass, Middle Tennessee State University, U. S. A.



Literacy denotes language, and language is inextricably bound in a culture that defines how a person thinks, acts, learns, and comes to be in a community. Therefore, literacy is social practice, contextualizing individuals in particular communities. Critiquing the simplistic instructional paradigm of skills-based learning, which in essence hinders the opportunity to attend to students' voices, notable researchers and educators in this edited text illuminate the notion that literacy is more than an accumulated assemblage of isolated skills. Breaking the silence of students necessitates restructuring our thinking so that literacy instructional practices reveal their ways of knowing and learning. Rather than limiting the instruction to a reductionist set of skills, the pedagogy of literacy, a function of culture, should broaden and enrich student potential in classrooms as well as strengthen relationships between the school and students and families. Learning should be authentic and have significant consequences to students in their social groups.

Compton-Lilly has assembled intriguing texts that expose common flawed reasoning that has resulted in damaging practices and that provide rationale and clarification for practices that support literacy as social practice. They argue that in such practices students, parents, the community, and educators flourish.

There are two main sections to the book. Part 1 includes topics grounded in an array of related underpinnings: socio-cultural theory, socio-historic theory, new literacy studies, cultural-historical theory, and critical race theory. In each theoretical lens, the implication for practice is knowing students and connecting the literacy practices of schools to those at home and in their communities. On the surface, these two sets of practices may seem incongruent, but the authors illustrate that connecting them is indeed possible. First, it is important to acknowledge the funds of knowledge that students possess as a result of living in a particular culture; there is value in what they know and how they know. Further, acquiring knowledge of students' cultures is not merely having additional pieces of information about them but understanding where *their meaning exists*. Once the essence of students' social practices is understood, educators then will

be able to create the necessary tools for culturally relevant instruction. The authors of each chapter clearly address the development of these tools.

The second part of the book includes accounts of introspective teachers who have put into practice the theories asserted in previous chapters. The authors underscore the ease of maintaining cultural relevance by engaging students in oral and written language literacy practices familiar to them as well as in topics pertinent to them. For example, students may write in various genres, including *pop culture* genres, and subsequently perform their own texts. The teachers demonstrate what it means to build on what students know so that outcomes not only meet standards but also, more importantly, have significance and the capacity to apply to the individual students' homes and communities. This approach will help educators treat what students bring to school as an asset rather than a deficit that leads to frustration and ultimate disillusion among teachers, students, and parents.

Educators of any grade level, including those at the university, may appreciate several outstanding features of the book, not the least of which is the contribution of respected researchers and educators in the field. Two other features are worth emphasizing. First, each chapter ends with the section, "Recommendations for Educators and Classroom Applications." Taking into consideration the potential complexity of accommodating culturally relevant pedagogy, authors present the sections in a straightforward manner and provide guidance with little ambiguity. After illustrating literacy practices that educators can implement in schools, authors suggest ways to help the educators make profound, and necessary, changes. One such practice is offered in "Cultural-Historical Approaches to Literacy Teaching and Learning" by Pacheco and Gutiérrez. They critique the commonly practiced Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) pattern of classroom discourse in which the teacher proposes a question (I), receives an answer (R), and verbally—and briefly—evaluates the answer (E). The preponderance of *talk* belongs to the teacher in this discourse. The not-so-hidden message signifies that the teacher holds the power and authentic discourse among all classroom participants is non-existent because students' voices are silenced. In the Recommendations section, one alternative the authors pose to this inadequate practice requires rethinking about who should be engaged in discussions and how the class should be configured to do so. For this purpose, student desks are arranged to accommodate reading, writing, listening, and speaking among pairs, small groups, and whole group—an uncomplicated task with big benefits.

The second welcome feature is a deliberate prod by authors to create a sense of reader discomfiture—about beliefs and action that educators have *assumed* were empowering to effect and ensure social justice for all. In the evolution of cultural awareness and sensitivity, some beliefs and actions—once considered a progressive stance—turn out to have an opposite effect. For example, in their chapter about culturally relevant pedagogy, Dixson and Fasching-Varner argue that teachers who adopt the *color blindness* perspective do not affirm students of color but create the opposite effect: perceived *color*

blindness is actually detrimental since students' cultures are negated. They equate ignoring their cultures with ignoring their authentic ways of thinking and learning. Such ignorance blocks their ability to utilize their own languages and literacy practices. In the provocative discussion of difficult issues, intrinsic impediments are revealed and appropriate practice is highlighted.

The entire book leads the reader to the idea that breaking the silence of students means restructuring our own view of students and their communities so that instruction becomes socially and culturally relevant. As a result, we *can* know students beyond surface familiarity, we *can* use what we have learned about students as a basis for a relevant curriculum for teaching and learning, we *can* capitalize on the opportunity to acknowledge and act on students' abilities and interests...that is, we *can* break the silence of students' voices. The various authors' depiction of hope is gratifying.