



Literacy Beyond the Mainstream: Bridging Pedagogy and Social Equity

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As literacy educators, how often do we stop and consider our role in improving the life opportunities of students who fall outside of the cultural mainstream? There are educators who think about this a lot, and we call them “teachers for social equity” or “social equity literacy teachers”. They strive to teach children to read because they see their work within the broader spheres of power and opportunity. They recognize that the educational playing field for students who live in high poverty communities is often unequal. Many are students of color who have been historically disenfranchised by public education, and many come to school with diverse language abilities that are not recognized in school. These students are often under-served by low-resourced classrooms, inexperienced teachers, and culturally foreign curricula.

Teachers for social equity know they cannot change these things without help from many corners of society, but they do their part by: 1) seeing students’ inherent literate capacities, 2) helping students realize their fullest literacy potential, and 3) challenging the policies and practices that undermine students’ literacy achievement. They not only assess students’ literacy abilities and use this information to inform instruction, but they also *assume a political orientation to literacy teaching where issues of race, class, culture, literacy, language, and teaching intersect.*

Societal Factors

Social equity literacy teachers understand the societal factors that influence literacy

achievement. We live in a society stratified by race, class, and other social and structural factors where the distribution of wealth and opportunity is uneven. Institutional racism and poverty are major factors that undermine students’ access to mainstream knowledge and the literacies valued in school. Understanding how these societal factors influence literacy acquisition helps us question the assumption that our nation is a meritocracy (everyone can succeed if they work hard). Literacy failure cannot be attributed to students’ efforts alone; it must be examined through the lens of this complex ecology. Yet this does not mean that we should attribute students’ literacy problems to a “culture of poverty.” Such deficit thinking ignores the varieties of economic, social, and cultural capital that impact students’ literacy lives (Compton-Lilly, 2007; Yosso, 2005).

Complexity of Culture

Literacy teachers for social equity recognize the complexity and significance of culture. Culture is not just about the foods we eat or holidays we celebrate, although these are often the focus of “multicultural” celebrations in school. Culture is multifaceted, dynamic, and shaped by power. On a deeper level, cultural attributes include beliefs, values, and ways of interacting. These attributes constantly change as we move in and out of various social communities over time. Understanding the complexity of culture is necessary for acknowledging and celebrating students’ cultural knowledge and is key to helping students identify with school.

Language-Culture Nexus

Social equity literacy teachers understand the culturally situated nature of literacy and language. Society assigns values to literacies and languages based on different groups’ access to power. School literacy practices are molded around mainstream lifestyles and practices. The literacies and languages of non-dominant groups may or may not align with those of the mainstream but are just as legitimate and serve particular purposes. Such is the case with non-dominant varieties of English, such as African American Language and Spanglish. Telling a child that his language is wrong will prevent him from identifying with school (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). What we need to do is build onto the language and literacy knowledge that children bring to school. Teachers can empower children through various literacy teaching practices such as validating children’s home language and aiming for biliteracy.

Teaching from Cultural Perception

Social equity literacy teachers draw from students’ lives and cultural worlds to build instruction. Hybrid or third-space teaching (Gutierrez & Lee, 2009) is based on the belief that robust learning must be built on the everyday “funds of knowledge” and discourse patterns of students (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti, 2005). Learning about the church literacies of African American students and using this information to inform literacy instruction is one example of third-space teaching (McMillon & Edwards, 2008). Another example is

helping students investigate sophisticated literary forms that are contained in hip hop lyrics and using this knowledge to examine these forms in school literature. (Morrell, 2004)

Transforming Practices

Social equity literacy teaching also involves using critical-socially transformative practices. Literacy curricula and teaching practices can either reproduce the status quo or change it. Too many classrooms are structured around having children “practice literacy” for the specific goal of getting better at it. Students’ literacy development should be a target goal, but we have to ask: “For what greater purpose is literacy being developed? How can we engage students in more meaningful work of improving the world through literacy?” This means that students need to be able to read, write, and think critically so they may participate actively in society. We need to get students involved in challenging oppressive systems through literacy-rich campaigns and projects. These types of projects can be designed to help children question the status quo and work as activists to make the world a more equitable place.

Cultural Self-Perspective

Finally, social equity literacy teachers strive to understand who they are from the perspectives of race, class, and culture. By exploring your own history of access to school-valued literacies and language and comparing it to the histories of the students and families you serve, you may discover that not everyone has the same educational opportunities. For many students in culturally non-dominant communities, this access is often compromised by factors of racism and poverty. It is still the case that students of color and non-English speaking students are most compromised by poverty in the U.S. Investigating our own social positions relative to our students’ allows us to see how schools often perpetuate racism through bottom-tracking students of color or maintaining a “colorblind” curriculum. Such study and self-reflection moves us toward a place where we can notice and talk about sensitive issues such as race and poverty in the classroom.

For a very long time the literacy field has been focused on understanding the best methods for teaching reading. The result is a rich repository of literacy teaching practices. One thing is true, however: it doesn’t matter how many of these practices you know—you will not be able to teach a student to read if you don’t respect him, know him or his community, or see yourself as his advocate. Literacy teachers for social equity know this and have helped us understand that social equity literacy teaching is possible, even in low-resourced classrooms and even when the climate for literacy teaching is restricted by high stakes testing and prescriptive teaching.

References

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The authors’ new book *Bridging Literacy and Equity: The Essential Guide to Social Equity Teaching* is now available from Teachers College Press. ■

