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Literacy in Times of Crisis

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Literacy in Times of Crisis: Practices and Perspectives is an edited volume of research perspectives on the dynamic relationship between literacy and crisis. Crisis is defined as “a turning point around which things change” (p. 1). Crisis can take many forms including the effects of a natural disaster, poverty, divorce, the loss of a family member, the incarceration of a parent, the diagnosis of a disability, homelessness, or teenage pregnancy. A crisis may also result from cultural or religious differences when value clashes lead to intense conflicts. This book explores all of these types of crisis, both individual and societal, in relation to literacy practices. This exploration is pertinent to educators because many students in classrooms often face life-altering changes.

The volume is organized into three main sections. Part one is the most extensive section and offers educators a detailed look into the ways that people in a variety of contexts used literacy to “recognize, cope with, and avoid crisis” (p. x). Part two briefly examines literacy from a more critical perspective and explains how literacy can cause or exacerbate crisis. In part three, entitled *Contributor’s Insights*, a new teacher, a veteran teacher, and a teacher educator share their reactions to these studies on literacy and crisis.

Several themes developed across the studies of literacy and crisis presented in the first section of the book. One dominant theme was the importance of connecting school and home literacies. For instance, in a chapter entitled “*Hallelujah!*” *Bible-based Literacy Practices of Children Living in a Homeless Shelter*, MacGillivray examined the ways that children in a homeless shelter used bible-centered literacy practices to cope with the instability in their lives. MacGillivray pointed out that literacy practices related to religion are often neglected in literacy research despite the fact that these practices play an important role in many students’ lives. Activities such as bible reading were particularly essential for the homeless children in this study because they supported an affiliation with Christianity that students could retain in the transient environment of homeless shelters. The children were able to sustain literacy practices such as bible discussions, note taking during sermons, and shared readings of sacred texts as part of a larger religious

community that “created a desirable space that was not tethered to where they slept” (p. 41). MacGillivray emphasized the value of recognizing family literacy practices and building upon them to support students’ literacy growth. For example, she argued that familiarity with the features of students’ religious texts can help teachers make more explicit and meaningful connections to texts read in school.

In another chapter entitled *Reactions to Divorce: Communication and Child Writing Practices*, Ragusa described the vital role of literacy in times of family crisis by documenting the power of journal writing as a tool for coping with divorce. In her study, Ragusa noted how parents and children going through divorce used interactive journals to communicate about highly emotional topics that are difficult to discuss. This chapter emphasized the value of considering the often hidden emotional lives of students and their families and of writing as a cathartic practice.

Ragusa also looked at the ways in which literacy practices shifted within families when a child was labeled with a disability in her second chapter, *Disability Identification: Shifts in Home Literacy Practices*. She found that families replaced reading for pleasure with informational reading in an effort to understand the disability diagnosis, the possible causes, and ways to cope. She argued that families dealing with disability need access to a wide variety of informational materials including access to the internet. Ragusa’s studies reveal the importance of honoring the literacy practices that students and families use outside of school.

Another prevalent theme in part one was the value of nontraditional literacy practices that are often banned in schools such as posting on Facebook and text messaging. These activities, along with other nontraditional literacy practices, proved to be crucial to people in crisis situations. For instance, Bedford and Brenner explored the literacy practices used in New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. People in New Orleans used innovative and adaptive literacy practices to deal with the chaos of the aftermath such as texting when phone lines were down, communicating with signs, and tagging houses to record rescue efforts. Thompson explored similar themes through her examination of how one teenager, Lo, used fanfiction and poetry to deal with the incarceration of her father. Within the context of an after school program, Thompson explored the ways in which Lo used multiple literacy practices to create an alternative identity and to create a safe haven in her time of crisis. Through poetry and anime fanfiction, Lo was able to direct her anger, frustration, and loss in a productive and creative manner. Thompson’s work can encourage teachers to provide spaces for students to express themselves through multimodal literacy practices within formal educational settings. Furthermore, teachers should support a wide variety of literacy experiences rather than treating literacy as a static and uniform practice.

The necessity of adaptive literacy practices was apparent in many of the studies presented in part one. When faced with crisis, people often turned to alternative forms of to quickly revise their literacy practices in order to deal with immediate concerns. For example, Lycke emphasized the importance of adaption in her study of how two teenage mothers modified their literacy practices to include reading parenting magazines and the internet in order to provide quality care for their children and to establish their identity and status as competent young mothers. For these two teenage mothers, motherhood did not inhibit their learning but rather enhanced their existing literacy practices in meaningful ways. Schools can help to prepare students for crisis by ensuring

that all students have access to a wide range of literacy practices and opportunities to use them in flexible ways. As Bedford and Brenner stated, “perhaps what we need to do in school is not so much teach specific new literacies... but teach the skills and strategies of critique, adaptation, and innovation” (p. 29).

The studies in part two complicated the relationship between literacy and crisis by demonstrating the possible conflicts that arise over the control and dissemination of literacy. For example, in another chapter entitled *Finding Husbands, Finding Wives: How Being Literate Creates Crisis*, Sarroub analyzed the ways in which western literacy practices can hinder relationships and the search for spouses among Yemeni, Iraqi, and Kurdish immigrants. The young women in Sarroub’s study had to negotiate conflicting, transnational literacies in order to create identities that could bridge two cultures. Sarroub interviewed a Yemeni American woman who shared that “everyday there’s a crisis” (p. 128) in her marriage to a non-English speaking, print-illiterate Yemeni immigrant. Her literacy skills were a source of power because they gave her access to the wider literate community, but they were also a source of stress due to increased household responsibilities as the only literate, English-speaking member of the family.

Several chapters within part two take up the issue of power within an organizational literacy crisis. In *State Takeover: The Language of a School District in Crisis*, Rogers and Pole analyzed how policy makers used public discourse as an exercise of power in manufacturing an educational crisis within the Saint Louis Public Schools in order to promote a state takeover of the district. In the case of the school district takeover the ability to enact a political agenda was fueled by a specific set of literacy practices. This made it difficult for people without insider knowledge to enter the debate. In the final chapter of part two entitled *Brewing a Crisis: Language, Educational Reform and the Defense of a Nation*, Florio-Ruane reviewed the national public rhetoric of educational crisis and a call to change from the launch of Sputnik to the enactment of No Child Left Behind. She argued that national educational crises are constructed based on common metaphors such as the “nation as family” (p. 161) and that these national crises are inauthentic in that they are divorced from local school contexts and the lived experiences of students, teachers, and parents.

This view of literacy as conflict could be uncomfortable for educators who deeply value literacy learning. However, this perspective can help teachers to understand why students may resist certain literacy practices. The research presented in this volume illustrates that literacy practices serve to shape identities and as such, can require students to alter their understandings of themselves and their place in society. By acknowledging that literacy is a deeply personal undertaking, teachers may be better prepared to connect with students and to provide safe spaces for literacy learning. Additionally, this perspective of literacy as conflict can help teachers to respond proactively to the manufactured reading crisis by using their own unique set of literacy practices to speak to power and to establish identities as competent professionals. Although the view of literacy as conflict presented in part two was not as well developed as the more hopeful view presented in part one, it provides a solid starting point for future research into the complex relationships between literacy and crisis.

The purpose of the third part of the volume is to ground the research presented within the book within professional practice. Part Three presented the reactions of a new high school teacher, a

veteran elementary teacher and a teacher educator to the studies presented in the book. These special contributors also wrote short personal introductions and posed questions about literacy and crisis. In part three, they reflected on how the research presented in parts one and two answered their opening questions and inspired new questions. Their insights illustrated the applicability and relevance of the research within classrooms and across educational levels.

I think that *Literacy in Times of Crisis* has the potential to push teachers' understandings of their students and of the purposes of literacy instruction. Within the context of crisis, literacy instruction is more than just a means for achievement on standardized tests. The purpose becomes more than instilling a love of reading or promoting lifelong learning. Literacy instruction can provide students with the tools that will help them to construct their very identities and navigate through difficult situations. It is a nurturing factor that can provide stability and comfort in difficult times. As Bedford and Brenner stated, literacy practices can be used in many ways "to make contact, to preserve connections to the known and the familiar, to make sense of the unexplainable, and to transform experiences of loss and despair into opportunities for healing and hope" (p. 28). All educators work with students in crisis, so it is imperative to understand how literacy can serve to mitigate the effects and how teachers can help students develop the flexible skills necessary to adjust to changes throughout their lives. The book does not offer teachers many specific instructional strategies for working with students in crisis, but it does offer a foundation for understanding how crisis affects literacy learning.

I believe that literacy researchers will find the book to be a valuable addition to literacy research based in sociocultural and critical pedagogy perspectives. The contributors expanded on existing literacy research by offering "a deeper understanding of literacy practices as situated in social practices" (p. x). They also invited further inquiry by raising thought-provoking questions regarding such issues as connecting home and school literacies, addressing the digital divide, and supporting families in crisis. In the contributor's insights section, Moje presented questions that have the potential to deepen the examination of literacy and crisis. For instance, she questioned the voyeuristic nature of looking in on students' traumas. Do we run the risk of marginalizing students or lowering expectations? She raised questions concerning power as well. Does literacy empower students or is a preexisting sense of agency necessary to use literacy in powerful ways? Is literacy enough to sustain students "when everything is crumbling around a person" (p. 189) or are literacy practices just temporary salves?

Literacy in Times of Crisis presents readers with a wide range of perspectives. It gives educators a look into the situated ways in which people practice literacy, and it demonstrates how personal literacy can be. It provides an interesting lens for exploring literacy instruction. Through this lens, we see the whole person rather than reducing literacy to what we do *to* students in the classroom. It showcases the sophisticated ways that students and families already *do* literacy for their own purposes and in unique ways. The authors provide insight into the power and complexity of literacy. They reveal literacy as both a solace and an obstacle, but throughout the book we see that literacy remains a hopeful endeavor.