

MEDIA REVIEW**“Reality Check Yourself”: A Review of *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times: Identity, Inquiry, and Social Action at the Heart of Instruction*****Michelle Commeret** 

At the onset of my teaching career in the early 2000s, the state of education was complex. Standards-based teaching, high-stakes testing, and funding challenges were some of the many often controversial topics at the forefront of education policy and practice. Despite the complexities, it was presumed that educators could and should instruct all students in the same manner to achieve the same results. Sure, differentiated instruction was highlighted in my teacher preparation program, but when I secured my first job, all I had prepared for seemed irrelevant. I felt as though I was inadequate to teach effectively given the intricacies of my teaching context and the standardized state of education at large. I struggled teaching third grade students who read mostly at a kindergarten level, navigating administration whose idea of support was to assign lengthy books to read when I just needed help, and attempting to incorporate classroom management tactics that were not responsive to my urban classroom. My students needed to be seen and valued, not categorized by what they could not yet do.

Little did I know, that challenging first-year teaching experience was the catalyst I needed to seek new ways for providing relevant learning opportunities for my students. I did not stay teaching at that first school, a decision that was simultaneously heart-wrenching and life-giving. Over the next number of years, I taught in a variety of schools, grade levels, and contexts. I challenged myself to think differently and to see each of my students for who they were, acknowledging the variability more intentionally as assets to the learning environment. I developed a heart for social justice in educational spaces and have become committed, through my current work in teacher education, to equip all teachers for teaching equitably despite the myriad troubles we inevitably endure in this profession.

My experience is a common one for teachers new and old, and the state of education is really not all that different today than it was two decades ago. In fact, it could be argued that teaching, over the past few years, has become increasingly more troubled given

the unaddressed disparities of and purposeful attacks against non-dominant groups of people (i.e., BIPOC, LGBTQ+, immigrants, etc.). Recently I discovered the book, *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times: Identity, Inquiry, and Social Action at the Heart of Instruction*, written by Allison Skerrett and Peter Smagorinsky (2023), which explores invaluable approaches for teaching (literacy, in particular) during challenging circumstances to equip our students with the critical knowledge and skills needed to enact positive societal change for the future. Throughout each of the book's six chapters, three central themes emerge as reality checks for its readers: (1) troubling times call for troubling the status quo, (2) students deserve to learn about and address societal issues, and (3) teachers are responsible for taking action.

REALITY CHECK # 1: TROUBLING TIMES CALL FOR TROUBLING THE STATUS QUO

Times are becoming increasingly *more* troubled given the “triple pandemic” of COVID-19, racial equity, and public policy (Harper-Anderson et al., 2023). Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023) posit that if teachers do not address the social concerns that were exposed and exacerbated as a result of the pandemic(s), students will continue to experience severe gaps in learning. This does not refer merely to the academic loss of learning that educators claim so many students experienced as a result of the pandemic and extreme disruptions to schooling. While that may hold some validity, the true loss refers to skirting over or ignoring entirely the plethora of sociocultural disparities and deliberate discrimination that prevent equitable access to education and success.

Though we are now a few years beyond the onset of the global pandemic and heightened awareness of long-existing racial inequities and public policies, we are still facing the aftermath of these troubling realities,

causing continued struggles for teachers as they navigate these uncharted waters in hopes of bettering society for all moving forward. The purpose of *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times* is to equip teachers with the knowledge, resources, and support for engaging students in literacy learning for social action. As the late scholar bell hooks (1994) proclaimed, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). Providing such conditions for all students to learn under this umbrella of deep respect promotes teaching for social action to actualize justice and equity. This requires teachers to be committed to critical awareness, empathy, and inquiry alongside their students. Heeding hooks’ (1994) call for bold, transgressive teaching in the face of adversity, Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023), acknowledge and act upon our nation’s social afflictions that were more fully exposed in 2020; in doing so, they boldly challenge the status quo by positing identity, inquiry, and social action as foundational for effective literacy teaching in troubled times.

REALITY CHECK # 2: STUDENTS DESERVE TO LEARN ABOUT AND ADDRESS SOCIETAL ISSUES

Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times is a must-read for literacy educators committed to equipping students with perhaps unprecedented knowledge, skills, and tools necessary for understanding and behaving in society. Standardized approaches to teaching often ignore the fact that large social issues are greatly troubling our nation’s schools. This book presents six topics—deemed controversial to some, but essential for all—that must be taught in schools in order to make progress toward social justice. These topics, each of which has an entire chapter devoted to it, include the exploration of identity, discrimination and civil rights, social change, cultural conflict, the distribution of power, and patriotism. Each themed unit of inquiry includes instructional strategies, critical content knowledge, and relevant steps toward social action in students’ local and global communities.

Far too often, students have been robbed of learning opportunities about relevant topics happening in their real lives and are instead inundated with skills and stories from a different time and place. This instructional approach is detrimental to our students’ future success and will only continue to intensify this treatable loss of learning. Rather than providing remedies for learning loss that occurred due to the pandemic, the authors of this timely text offer suggestions for propelling education forward instead of “back to normal.” “If school is for learning,” they say, “the events and lessons of these

times should be central to the curriculum,” (p. 3). The pages of this book serve as a blueprint for making this plea for justice-centric teaching a reality.

REALITY CHECK # 3: TEACHERS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR TAKING ACTION

Shaking up the status quo in our curriculum and classrooms for the sake of equity and justice is not expected to be easy. Particularly with pushback, controversy, and clashing opinions from legislators, school boards, and other education stakeholders, the easier thing for teachers may be to press on despite the troubled times we face, continue to maintain the status quo, and remain silent about topics that may be deemed controversial by some. I believe I would be hard-pressed to find an educator who entered the profession because it would be easy or because they desired to perpetuate inequities. I argue that most became teachers because they love kids, they love to cultivate learning, and they believe all children are worthy of love and success. Teachers who embrace such humanizing approaches to instruction will do whatever it takes to accomplish each of those goals, even in the midst of troubled times.

To talk about justice-oriented topics, it is imperative for teachers to have a strong sense of who they are in relation to themselves and to others. In this text, teachers are provided with core questions and activities to explore their own identities so that they are then able to do so *alongside* their students. Specifically, thinking points are offered in the text to guide learners through a deep understanding of their own literacy practices and reveal how such practices are uniquely social in nature. Cultivating an asset-based perspective of one’s own literacy practices allows learners to grow in their ability to understand and accept others’ practices as well. This identity work is crucial for developing critical literacy practices toward social action in our classrooms and communities.

Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023) aim to explore literacy practices essential for addressing the previously highlighted topics of identity, discrimination and civil rights, social change, cultural conflict, the distribution of power, and patriotism. These literacy practices include promoting critical inquiry, developing social change, teaching empathy and understanding, teaching racial literacy, and understanding and employing extended definitions of controversial terms. Each of these competencies can be cultivated and transferred to students through intentional instruction rooted in identity, inquiry, and social action. By identifying critical topics, gathering information, deconstructing the problem, and reconstructing a solution, this text equips teachers with essential content knowledge, resources, and skills for enacting social action with their students.

In addition to invaluable content to inform teachers' efforts toward social action through teaching literacy, *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times* provides readers with teacher vignettes (featuring teacher-tested units on each topic), student work samples, relevant vocabulary terms, teaching and learning rubrics that could be adapted to fit other teaching contexts, and closing thoughts on the topic. Finally, each of the book's chapters conclude with four reflection questions for teachers to consider before and/or after the implementation of the social action activities in their own contexts. Supplementary online resources are offered as well for any teacher wishing to extend or support their work further. Each textual feature provides teachers with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions central to providing students with opportunities for learning about and addressing societal issues. While this text was certainly designed with the secondary English language arts or social studies teacher in mind, the thematic units and activities could be adapted and addressed through teacher and student inquiry in any subject area or classroom.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

As an experienced teacher and literacy educator, I do not question the need for this work and would recommend this text without hesitation to any new or veteran teacher embodying deep respect for all students and a commitment to transgressive teaching (hooks, 1994). As a new teacher decades ago, who entered the teaching profession ill-equipped for critical inquiry toward social action, what I needed was relevant professional learning by engaging with a text like *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times*. In doing so, I would have been able to develop a deep understanding of my own identity, as well as the ability to demonstrate genuine empathy, respect, and sociocultural awareness to reach beyond the barriers that paralyzed rather than propelled me. If I had the opportunity to engage in such critical learning, perhaps I may have been the teacher my students needed and deserved.

Teachers are responsible for advocating for their students, affirming their nuanced identities, assessing

how to teach content contextually, and engaging in deep inquiry with them for social justice and equity. *Teaching Literacy in Troubled Times* serves not only as a powerful resource but as a poignant reality check compulsory for teachers today.

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