

○ **F. CHRISTIE & A. SIMPSON, (EDS.),
*LITERACY AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY:
MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES***

(LONDON, EQUINOX. 2010. PP. VI, 141)

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This timely volume assembles current perspectives on literacy and social responsibility from the point of view of scholars and practitioners in language and literacy education and social work. The authors provide theoretical and practical explanations of why literacy is such an urgent factor for overcoming social disadvantage and for providing all groups in our society the opportunity to enjoy lives enriched by the opportunities literacy affords. While the discussions are situated in an Australian context, each of the ten chapters references global research and examples, thus reinforcing the ubiquity of the challenges and the urgency of building literate communities in the 21st century. Readers should not be misled by the title into thinking this is a book about the importance of being “literate at social responsibility”, as the subtitle suggests, the book provides multiple perspectives about why the provision of access to literacy is an urgent social responsibility.

In bringing together the views and experience of educators on the one hand, and social workers on the other, the book encompasses the educational and social consequences of poor literacy and the shared view that as a ‘just society’ we have a social responsibility to provide literacy to all (p.4). Further, being a cross disciplinary volume, discipline specific jargon is kept to a minimum, consequently, this text is written in language that is highly accessible to a wide, albeit “literate”, audience.

The book is comprised of ten chapters: (1) Literacy and Social Responsibility; (2) Literacy as a Theme in Educational Theory and in Policy; (3) Multiple Literacies: Implications for Changed Pedagogy; (4) Socially Responsible Literacy Education: Towards an ‘Organic Relation’ to our Place and Time; (5) Literacy and the Arts; (6) The Social Context of Literacy Acquisition: Achieving Good Beginnings; (7) The Experience of Youth Off the Streets; (8) Beating Educational Inequality with an Integrated Reading Pedagogy; (9) Enhancing Literacy Education for Refugee Children; and (10) Envoi.

The chapters are organised to provide first the context and inspiration for this examination of literacy as an essential social responsibility. Following this, the historical and changing nature of literacy and literacy pedagogy, and the implications on pedagogy for teaching literacy is discussed. Building on these understandings, the relationship between literacy and social disadvantage is explained with a focus on particular disadvantaged groups, including those of a pre-school age, disadvantaged youth, Indigenous children in remote communities and refugee

children. Examples of practices that have improved literacy in these settings are provided. The final chapter sums up the issues under key themes examined in the previous chapters.

A range of pedagogic initiatives are described throughout the book, including using the arts to build literacy; engagement in literacy learning that encompasses the backgrounds and context of students; and the need to utilise an explicit holistic pedagogy that addresses gaps in students literacy development. Other themes, common across a number of the chapters, are: the importance of early intervention; and building literacy through constructive talk and shared learning tasks as a way of enhancing students' passion and interest in engaging with text and their understanding of the structures of writing. A final key theme emphasises the necessity of learning literacy through context specific, meaningful learning experiences at all stages of the education journey.

Christie reviews the history of the term literacy and raises a concern that literacy is often only associated with reading. She goes on to explain and exemplify the importance of the recognition of writing as essential for developing our capacity to think in abstract ways. Freebody also stresses the importance of literacy integration and teacher led talk for building literacy in all subject disciplines as students progress through school. The connection between successful mastery of literacy for achieving a sense of positive self-worth is highlighted by Riley's "Youth Off the Streets" program and in Lynch's discussion of refugee children. The complexities of literacy in the current multiliterate and multimodal context are raised by Simpson and Walsh who expand traditional definitions of literacy beyond reading and writing text to encompassing skills for reading and writing through a combination of written, visual and verbal text.

Importantly, the authors remind us not to assume that students arrive at school with the same foundations in literacy; foundations on which school curriculums are based. Some students from low socio-economic and/or disadvantaged backgrounds have little or no exposure to books and meaningful language exchanges with adults. This scenario is starkly illustrated by Vinson, who paints a vivid and alarming picture of the current situation of literacy for the disadvantaged and, in effect, provides the clarion call for the considerations of the rest of the book. His informative summary of the literature regarding the importance of early intervention is further supported by heart-rending examples, gathered through a study conducted in "not-well-off" communities in NSW, of the minimal literacy levels of some children starting preschool. For example, he describes a four year boy who arrived at school with only two words in his vocabulary, 'bad boy' (p.71).

Rose, describing the successful "scaffolding reading and writing" program developed with his colleagues Gray and Cowey (2009) to bridge such literacy gaps (in this instance amongst Pitjantjatjarra Aboriginal desert communities), complements Vinson's chapter. It does this by providing a detailed description of a literacy pedagogy that actually provides solutions to this

seemingly intractable problem of a literacy gap that has students at a disadvantage from the moment they start pre-school. Rose explains that this fundamental disadvantage occurs because of assumptions in our education system that all students have experienced the essential preparatory reading and language experiences in the home prior to starting their formal education (p.104). The application of this highly effective scaffolding methodology, further refined by Rose in his “Reading to Learn” program, is described for application across all levels of education.

The descriptions of other disadvantaged groups in society (disadvantaged youth and refugee children) and examples of the role literacy plays in empowering them, along with the possibilities afforded through arts based literacy teaching, serve to further build up an arsenal of strategies for improving literacy outcomes in a range of contexts and at all stages of the school curriculum. The final chapter, by the editors, provides an elegant summary of the issues raised in the book. This chapter and the one by Vinson should be essential reading for policy makers as between them the current state of literacy and the options for addressing this are succinctly and eloquently summarised.

While it covers the broader historical and theoretical perspectives as well as providing inspiring practical examples of the liberating capacity of literacy for the disadvantaged, including homeless children, refugees and Indigenous children and children in general from low socio-economic backgrounds, this book could perhaps have spent more time examining the importance of literacy building and strategies for **all** young people in these times when the formal language of learning and knowledge has been somewhat overtaken by more immediate forms of technology enabled communication and multiliteracies. The effect of the current state of literacy on the readiness of students in general for university, especially in a deregulated education markets, has enormous implications for academic literacies and student success (Evans, 2000; Kirkness, 2006).

Adult literacy is another area that warrants closer examination and, along with this, literacy for the workplace and for VET training, an essential conduit for addressing social disadvantage. Hot off the press is the example of the pending closure of Ford manufacturing plants in Australia where a key issue highlighted was the need to address the literacy capabilities of laid-off workers, 54% of whom, along with other Victorian manufacturing workers, scored the lowest functional literacy scores in an ABS study of adult competencies (Riddle, 2013).

However, despite the omission of specific chapters on these post school and adult literacy issues, this book provides an informative and worthwhile introduction to essential considerations for literacy and social responsibility from a group of authors who are all highly experienced and valued contributors to their respective fields. There are no strident agendas save for the shared agenda that literacy is the right of all and the conduit to equal

opportunity. At a time when there is plentiful evidence that there is a huge gap in the literacy outcomes between the socially disadvantaged and the rest of the population (Thomson et al., 2009), that early literacy experiences for school readiness are essential (Karoly, Kilburn & Cannon 2005) and that literacy is key to lifting people out of the poverty trap (OECD, 2000), books such as this are essential reading for parents, educators, welfare providers and policy makers. The next volume from these highly qualified, experienced and committed authors should provide a step by step approach to integrating effective literacy curriculum for all ages and stages from pre early childhood to VET and Higher education.

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