

Bridging Literacy and Equity

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO SOCIAL EQUITY TEACHING

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Foreword

The authors of *Bridging Literacy and Equity* set out to write a practice-based, easy to read book about educational equity for marginalized students from under-represented groups, raising an issue that is complicated and often contentious. The book is targeted for classroom teachers who do not have the time to read and decipher massive academic texts written in technical research prose and theoretical abstractions, and for prospective teachers who are intimidated by the prospect of working with children of color and poverty. The authors want to relieve these anxieties by synthesizing the major tenets of social equity teaching, and demonstrating what they look like in the context of literacy teaching. They accomplish their goal admirably and produce a user-friendly text that informs, encourages, invites, guides, and empowers, as well as challenges and chastises. In crafting these discourses the authors use several approaches that are noteworthy and valuable for classroom teachers.

This book bridges the gap between theory and practice. In most instances these two perspectives in educational scholarship are divergent since theorists and practitioners are often not the same people, and they operate from different positions in the enterprise. Consequently, theoretical ideas about educational reform are considered too abstract, rather esoteric, and fanciful and unfeasible by classroom practitioners. This book resolves this tension; it provides authentic examples of real teachers engaged in social equity instructional practices and analyzes how they exemplify theoretical principles about social equity teaching. Juxtaposing theory and practice makes both more relevant to and viable for classroom teachers.

Another way to bridge the gap between theory and practice is to integrate multiple perspectives on targeted issues of concern. Unquestionably, the two primary concerns in *Bridging Literacy and Equity* (as identified in the title) are of utmost importance. It is unlikely that any educator would disagree of their significance, although many may argue about meaning and how to best implement them for various student populations. Nor is there any doubt that extensive bodies of research and scholarship exist about both. So, an initial question may be asked about whether yet another book

is needed. But, even a quick read will reveal that this one is different from many of the others. The authors place literacy and equity within the context of each other, and in so doing resolve a common dilemma of many classroom teachers. While they may agree with the need for equity in learning opportunities for ethnically, racially, culturally, and socially diverse students, and endorse the proposals made by scholars, many teachers do not know how to convert these principles into effective practices. Added to this dilemma are the high-stakes and high-status attributes given to some school subjects that make them virtually uncontested. Literacy falls within this category. Without thorough knowledge and careful guidance many teachers shy away from trying to make literacy teaching socially and culturally relevant for marginalized students of color, because they fear compromising its existing quality and integrity. This book solves that dilemma by demonstrating how teaching literacy and equity can (and must) occur simultaneously. All conceivable concerns about this endeavor for all teachers are not resolved, but some powerful foundations and illustrations are presented. Also, feasible parameters and guidance are provided for teachers to develop their own repertoires of practice for social equity literacy instruction.

It is a well-established fact that students learn better when teachers care about and show confidence in their capabilities. The same is true for teachers both as students and professionals. Yet many contemporary discourses disparage their commitments and competencies by emphasizing problems and failures rampant in schools and classrooms attended mostly by children of color and poverty. These “pathological or deficit” orientations are also strongly evident in analyses of students of color and poverty. *Bridging Equity and Literacy* departs from these tendencies; it does not attack teachers or students, doubt their sincerity, or question their potential for doing effective social equity literacy teaching and learning. Instead, there is a strong sense of confidence and trust embedded in the text that teachers can and will develop the attitudes, values, and skills needed to do so once they are provided with the required knowledge and support. Similar confidence is conveyed about poor children of color bringing to school from their lived experiences social capital or funds of literacy knowledge and skills that must be acknowledged, respected, and elicited in teaching them academic and mainstream societal literacies.

The authors of this text are unequivocal about social equity being an integral and obligatory part of literacy teaching, but they do not badger teachers about it. Instead, it is presented as a given, and the discussion moves on to how best to help teachers develop their capacities to do what they must. The sense of trust embedded in these discussions can't help but be encouraging to the readers for it conveys confidence that they can—and will—do what they must to be effective social equity literacy teachers. It also provides

some alternative ways for teachers to enter into these engagements. They do not have to only or always be “saviors,” rescuing children from poverty and cultural marginality, nor “guardians of tradition,” protecting and promoting conventional perceptions of and approaches to literacy teaching. They can assume new transformative roles that include viewing poor children of color as empowered beings, with valuable albeit different cultural literacies, as well as seeing themselves as transformative activists who make literacy learning both an academic and social justice enterprise.

It is readily apparent throughout this text that teachers are important to children’s learning; that poor people are not perpetually and universally powerless; that literacy learning is multifaceted and socioculturally contextualized; that teaching social equity is a learned craft acquired over time from deliberate intent and effort; and that teachers must be more conscious and analytical of themselves as cultural, ethnic, and social beings and how this affects their literacy teaching. Therefore, teaching is both a personal and professional enterprise, and teaching and learning are dialectic endeavors. The success stories of teachers doing this work woven throughout the text are personifications of these general ideas. They provide enticing invitations and entrées for others to join the cause of making literacy teaching more relevant, realistic, and effective for children of color. Individuals already involved in the classroom and others preparing to become teachers who are genuinely committed to high quality education for all children will find *Bridging Literacy and Equity* a welcomed and empowering call to action.

Geneva Gay

Preface

The crisis we face today is that too many culturally marginalized students are failing in school. Our focus is on supporting teachers' ability to serve these students well. In this period of prescriptive teaching and high-stakes testing, it is especially important that teachers are supported to see students' limitless potential, design curricula and create instructional moments that are culturally meaningful, nurture students' critical abilities, and advocate for them in and beyond school.

Teachers frequently tell us (Althier, Pat, and Gwen) that they have been locked in a highly prescriptive teaching-to-the-test mode for several years under the No Child Left Behind federal law. Although President Barack Obama announced in 2011 that states are free to design their own accountability and improvement plans for schools, standardized testing will likely remain a fixture in most classrooms for the foreseeable future.

An overemphasis on standardized testing has a detrimental effect on students. These tests narrow the curriculum around an official view of knowledge that often contrasts with the knowledge that students in high-poverty, culturally nondominant communities bring to school (Swope & Miner, 2000). These tests cannot accurately measure students' true capacities, but nonetheless, their results can lead to students being retained, inappropriately assigned to remedial or special education classes, or denied entrance to a preferred school.

For the sake of students, a major shift needs to take place in education—one that focuses on the primacy of teachers making informed instructional decisions based on their expert knowledge of students. We wanted to create a book that would help teachers work past the restrictive policies that negatively impact teaching. This is more likely to happen when teachers see their roles as professionals for social equity.

Inequalities prevent many students in high-poverty and culturally nondominant communities from realizing their in-born literacy potential. Social equity literacy teaching is the means by which teachers can empower students by seeing their literate capacities and helping them access

the literacies and languages needed for full participation in mainstream contexts. The role of the teacher is to recognize inequalities and offset them through their roles as reflective and culturally responsive practitioners and activists. This is not to say that teachers are the only ones responsible for correcting societal injustices, but that teachers, by virtue of their access to students and their knowledge of pedagogy, have a major role to play in this regard.

This cannot be done by prescribing practices, but by empowering teachers to

1. Address the interrelationship between students, literacy, language, teaching, and the ecologies that impact student achievement.
2. Evaluate their own cultural positions and knowledge to determine how they can grow to best serve students.
3. Use this knowledge to create culturally empowering and intellectually rich learning environments.

Our goal is to help empower teachers by presenting a book that synthesizes and clarifies the central tenets of social equity literacy teaching.

Most of the research related to social equity literacy teaching is available in texts and scholarly journals published over the last 3 decades. Teachers would need to spend a considerable amount of time locating and reading the literature to uncover the core principles that would help them serve the literacy needs of students. We hear over and over again that time is what teachers lack. In response, we have produced a short text that synthesizes the issues and principles related to social equity literacy teaching and provides examples of teachers whose practices exemplify these ideas. We hope that K–12 teachers, teacher educators, and administrators can work together to serve the literacy needs of students in culturally and linguistically nondominant communities.

To strengthen and extend readers' understandings of social equity literacy teaching, each chapter ends with "Reflection and Inquiry." These exercises for personal and group exploration do what meaningful professional development should—offer occasions for deep, thoughtful study of issues and empower teachers to build their own research capacities.

Social equity literacy teaching is not simply a set of practices, but rather, it is a political orientation based on understandings about relationships between race, class, culture, literacy, and language. These understandings are cultivated over time, through deep study and intensive work with students, families, and professionals across various cultural communities. They are

also acquired through systematic inquiry and theorizing about one's own practices. We imagine, therefore, that the principles and practices we describe will be tested and expanded on as you inquire about your work and produce new knowledge based on the complexities of your own culturally unique settings. Social equity literacy teaching is never really mastered; it is a constant work-in-progress. The goal of implementing social equity literacy teaching is often realized when teachers see that students and parents are benefiting from their efforts.

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