Reading the World

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Abstract
This is a review of: Ajayi, Lasisi & Collins-Parks, Tamara (2016). *Teaching literacy across content areas: Effective strategies that reach all K-12 students in the era of the common core state standards*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press.

Keywords
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Author Statement
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It is possible to write about reading across the curriculum in a way that relies on a technical focus only. Such an approach would turn learners into collections of skills rather than into growing citizens in a society. What would be stressed would be accuracy rather than meaning-making, meeting established norms such as “reading age” rather than social engagement, and accumulation of decontextualized functions rather than putting them to use in people’s lives. The Common Core State Standards (CCSSs) risk just this kind of problem.

However, the CCSSs are part of the context which this book must help teachers address. Not surprisingly, therefore, the book spends considerable time explaining these standards and exploring how they might be taught, not just by teachers of English language arts but by all teachers.

It is easier to disavow a socially-engaged focus and to maintain a tight technical focus with younger children, of course. However, it is harder to sustain such a blinkered vision as children become older and more sophisticated. As readers become older and more conscious of their place in the world and the opportunities (or lack of them) this place affords them in life, they need to be engaged with the world if they are to gain a purchase on it. Such an approach treats students learning to read, not just as clusters of skills but as growing citizens, using reading not just as a decontextualized skill but as a form of engagement with their social context.

Such an approach stresses meaning, discourse, social exchange, and reading as a socio-political act.

The book, however, treads a fine line between, on the one hand, acknowledging the authority that the CCSSs wield and helping teachers navigate their demands and, on the other hand, recognizing a more socially engaged approach to teaching reading. It tries to achieve a little of both. Moreover, it makes sense to do so, given that the CCSSs are indeed established as a force in the social context that teachers must grapple with.

A clue to the authors’ desire for something more lies in the choices of textual examples given in the book. There are passages by Frederick Douglas about experiences as a slave, about key events in the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, and about the background to the American Civil War. These are topics drawn from history texts. They help readers understand the current American social context. They are balanced by other passages taken from a website, passages from a mathematics textbook and a passage from a science textbook about plants.

The authors also seem to lean in the direction of social engagement in other ways. In the account they give of reading, they make reference to Vygotsky’s account of learning as accomplished in social relationships. They use Jerome Bruner’s concept of scaffolding that arose from Bruner’s interpretation of Vygotsky’s ideas. They
refer to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to make reading into a skill which has socially reproductive consequences. They lay claim to a social constructivist theoretical orientation. They lead eventually into a chapter on “critical reading”, which borrows extensively from the work of Paulo Freire, dismisses a “banking” notion of education, and advises teachers to help learners make connections between what they are reading and aspects of their own lives. Freire called this “reading the world” and contrasted it with a decontextualized version of “reading the word”.

The book comes from California and therefore understandably addresses the learning needs of ELL students, especially those from Spanish-speaking communities. This emphasis also opens up a socially engaged perspective on reading. The authors do not hold back from expressing opinions on Spanish speakers learning English. They do not advocate bilingual education itself, but they do suggest that teachers actively promote the use of Spanish cognates for English vocabulary in order to help students make connections across the languages they are familiar with.

The book is attractively laid out. Otherwise, the topic could become too dry and hard to maintain concentration on. The authors use lots of change-ups to help readers stay involved. These include a number of lists, pull quotes in text boxes, questions for teachers to reflect on, diagrams, suggested journaling topics, tables, discussion topics, exercises for students, photos, graphs, representations of posters, concept maps, cartoons and so on. All of these devices break up the text and make it an attractively presented book. Scarcely a page goes by without one of these devices being used to spice things up.

Unfortunately, especially given the topic, it was not edited or proofread as well as it could have been. I found one page with three errors on it and another page containing a list where one item just said “MISSING”, as if the authors or editors intended to return to this item but forgot to do so. There was also a sprinkling of other errors through the book.

However, it would be churlish to dwell too long on these matters. It is more important to focus on the social purpose that the book serves. In the end, it encourages teachers of subjects other than English language arts to think of themselves as teachers of reading. It does this by suggesting approaches that might embody this purpose, not so much as a technical goal in itself, but as necessary if you are going to read the world. In this sense, it has in mind a larger purpose than just a technical one. Reading is, of course, a tool. But it is treated here not just as a tool designed for the purpose of learning to use tools but for the sake of building a practical identity in a social context.