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Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research

reviewed by Achariya T. Rezak ◆ April 07, 2009

Title: Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research
Author(s): Leila Christenbury, Randy Bomer, and Peter Smagorinsky
Publisher: Guilford Press, New York
ISBN: 1593858299, **Pages:** 452, **Year:** 2008
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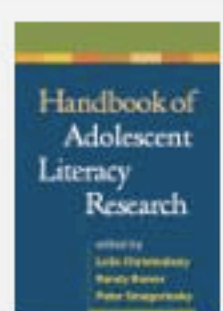
Literacy, according the editors of *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research*, is a complicated puzzle much like a drunkard's search for keys. The drunkard looks for keys under a light instead of where the keys were dropped, because the drunkard is able to see beneath the light. This simile alludes to the fact that governmental policy might be a certain kind of light that illuminates a certain kind of literacy, but not all literacy might be described by research in this setting. The purpose of this handbook is to elaborate upon, describe and trouble the complicated layers of interaction between the government, the researcher, the teacher and the student, and focus upon issues of literacy as problematic and contextual in nature. Literacy Studies has been in need of a handbook on current topics in the field, and this one rewards with a thoughtful and troubling survey of pertinent issues.

The book is broken into four parts that reflect the current major concerns of Literacy Studies. These divisions map researchers' thought processes as they attempt to grapple with the complexity of the terms that define the handbook. As the editors state in the introduction, "neither *adolescent*, *literacy*, nor *research* is a simple, unified, unproblematic term" (p. 3). The tension surrounding these terms is explicated more fully by Alvermann in Chapter 2, an overview of the history of the field, based upon the understanding that none of these terms actually describe every student. Alvermann discusses the way in which one of the terms, *literacy*, can be described by two competing models at work in the field today, the *autonomous model* and the *ideological model*. The autonomous model positions reading and writing as "neutral processes that are largely explained by individual variations in cognitive and physiological functioning" (p. 15). The ideological model, posited by Street (1995), integrates the autonomous model but "simultaneously incorporates an array of social and cultural ways of knowing that can account for seemingly absent but always present power structures" (p. 16). The term *adolescent* is similarly contextualized by Alvermann as one that was constructed to make generalizations about a group defined by age, which might or might not describe all of the members of this group. *Research* is defined by the editors as a concept that shifts according to the previous two terms; literacy researchers must define their research by the people they study and by the phenomena they describe.

The other three sections of the book continue these trains of thought. Each section is framed by a pertinent call to policy, which contextualizes a discussion of literacy within a larger political milieu. Part II, Literacy in School, describes literacy as a term under contention in the classroom as electronic media gains in popularity and older notions of "literature" are left behind. The researchers in this section question the decline of literacy posited by news media and policy makers, arguing that the kinds of literacy that are being practiced are just as meaningful to students as older forms of literacy. Some researchers ask why languages other than English are not represented in reports that describe in-school literacy, pointing to the challenges that arise when students' home cultures are different from their school culture, an issue further addressed in the last portion of the book. These points are neatly summarized in Chapter 4, which elaborates upon the topic of *literate thinking*, or thinking that moves beyond the written word and into a realm where literacy and semiotic meaning-making flow together, emphasizing that the place of school is to give students "the ability to think like a literate person, to call upon the kinds of reasoning abilities people generally use when they read and write (such as the ability to reflect on text and its meanings)" (p. 51). Here, the contextual nature of literacy is emphasized again when Langer raises the issue that "What counts as *smart* and *doing well* often differs from group to group" (p. 51).

In Chapter 13, Zoss describes the richer quality of meaning-making that students can participate in when the definition of literacy shifts from a word-bound model to a more semiotic perspective. Instead of using digital literacies as an example, Zoss focuses upon an "old" literacy, art education, to show that multimodal meaning-making has much to offer even in classrooms on the wrong side of the digital divide. Many of the chapters in Part II describe what happens to classrooms when society outside of the classroom changes. Researchers such as Rhodes and Robnolt describe what happens within a classroom when digital technology changes the ways in which people read and write, and others, such as Harklau and Pinnow, depict the changes within a classroom that occur when the population around a school alters in characteristics. Worthy, Hungerford-Kresser and Hampton take up the contentious notion of ability tracking, examining the effects of detracking on classrooms and suggesting that schools need strong support systems to undo the damage that ability grouping has caused.

Part III, Literacy Out of School, is framed by an extended excerpt from *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*. This excerpt suggests that schools are not adequately preparing students for the expectations of out-of-school realities and the technological needs of the workforce. The report suggests that the answer to this issue lies in "accountability measures," meaning a greater degree of testing throughout all levels of schooling. Beauford argues that analytical writing and critical thinking skills might be the tools that students need to meet these workplace needs; and Yancey suggests that different life situations, such as entering college, demand that students create literate identities that are contextual (such as an academic identity that can enact academic literacies) and answer the needs of each culture. Black and Steinkuhler look to learning outside of institutions to see how students are engaging in literate and textual practices in online spaces such as massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) and fanfiction. These researchers suggest that the richly literate practices of writing fiction and gaming require high levels of motivation that can be examined and understood to "grasp their potential for classroom practice" (p. 272). Looking to students' own practices to see how they are coping with the need to adapt to varied cultural expectations is an important shift in the concept of literacy that emphasizes its usefulness as a toolset that can be applied to any situation rather than a static skill bound to canonical written text.

The final section, Literacy and Culture, focuses upon adolescents embedded within the greater context of culture. Different chapters relate to gender (Guzzetti; Smith and Wilhelm), sexual orientation (Martino), and immigrants and ethnicity issues (the rest of the chapters in Part IV). These chapters describe the implications of government-mandated testing upon curriculum, especially focusing upon "who would benefit and who would suffer from making it more difficult to earn a high school diploma" (p. 306). The discussion raised in these chapters has been pertinent to the field ever since Heath (1983) described different literate communities in the rural South. These issues are becoming more and not less relevant to Literacy Studies, a mark of how difficult a task it is to make schools reflective of culture. Martino speaks especially of the danger of embracing pedagogy without critically engaging with "politics of normalization" (p. 397) that attempt to take away differences and thus privilege a certain kind of person. The handbook ends on this troubling note, leaving researchers with the continuing and vitally important task of unraveling the problematic issues described by the terms *adolescent*, *literacy* and *research*.

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  ACHARIYA T. REZAK is a doctoral candidate at the University of Georgia, specializing in the field of Reading Education. Her dissertation research focuses upon the exchange of learning (and specifically cultural learning) in online anime-based roleplaying games. She is second author on an article pending publication in the Teachers College Record, Reflective practice in an online literacy course: Lessons learned from attempts to fuse reading and science instruction.