Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research
edited by Leila Christenbury
Randy Bomer
Peter Smagorinsky
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Teachers might find it hard to imagine that reading a research handbook could possibly equate to feeling, and breathing-in, a blast of fresh air. Goodness knows the air needs clearing, given the Superman mentality we live with on a daily basis, accompanied by the current, and stifling, test-centric approach to accountability that's the current rage. But such a feeling awaits you--it really awaits you--if you care to pick up and read the *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research,* edited by Leila Christenbury, Ed.D., Randy Bomer, Ph.D. (both past presidents of NCTE), and Peter Smagorinsky, Ph.D. and written by 48 especially articulate and clear educational writers of our time who, it appears to me, insist on staying relevant. Truthfully, I don't remember reading and enjoying this *type* of text in my lifetime as an educator--not as a teacher, researcher, educational writer, college professor or visiting scholar.

The *Handbook* is carefully divided into four parts, not by our traditional reading, writing, listening, and speaking demarcations, but rather by the contexts in which literacy develops: in school, out of school, and in the multiple worlds of individual identities. The editors explain the decision to their prospective readers this way:

"Although you, our readers, will certainly find within this volume a variety of voices and ideas, we also want you...to notice that this *Handbook* is a deliberate attempt to contextualize: In almost every chapter you will see a consistent thread of argument that neither *adolescent*, *literacy*, nor *research* is a simple, unified, unproblematic term. Each depends on particular kinds of contexts: Adolescent identity emerges in the culture in which young people's development takes place..." (p. 3).

Part I: Overview (Chapters 1-3)

And so, readers begin on their journey with a supple overview that 1) defines the adolescent population, for example, "not as individuals in crisis, and not in deficit, but as those who have a true 'degree of agency' and whose expertise is something we can use and foster"; 2) the nature of literacy in today's world, which the editors see as a social and cultural practice not bound by correct oral pronunciation and comprehension of printed text; and 3) the limitations of research, with a concomitant appreciation for the range of research approaches (for example experimental, descriptive, and case study research). Before heading into the "context" journey, however, the *Handbook* deftly steps back and authors explore what **adolescents** have to say about their curricular experiences. I submit that it is here, in Chapter 3, that readers will truly discover what good hands they're in. What *do* youth have to say about their curricular experiences? And, just as importantly, what can student voice contribute to literacy efforts? Regarding the latter question, readers will find that it's vital to focus on classroom dialogue, connectedness, higher-order thinking, opportunities for offering choice and flexibility and the chance to go public with their work in meaningful ways. Fresh air!

Part II: Literacy in School (Chapters 4-15)

The introduction to this section begins with a point/counterpoint provocation (as do the rest of the sections), in this case asking readers to be clear about the true nature of the literacy crises perceived and vocalized in national reports: If there is any sort of a crisis, it's surely multifaceted, with plenty of cause for concern coming from the reports themselves. For example, the editors ask, "Will it be effective to control, regiment, and standardize adolescent literacy in preparing students for the contemporary world of work," when it's clear that "literacies required by the workplace are complex, social, and flexible and that they are highly specific to particular contexts?"(p. 48). Food for thought, which is amply provided by the next dozen chapters. Readers will find discussions about the relationship of literate thinking to classroom contexts, with delineations of effective school contexts that shed light on attitudes, for example, about "diversity, student behavior, or tolerance" (p. 62). Readers will also find explorations of the relationship between the literacy development of those who struggle and the

establishment of supportive relationships, the cultivation of family partnerships, and the refinement of teaching practices; broadened definitions of proficient reading that challenge educators, for instance, to rethink the leveling of texts as well as the very definition of reading proficiency. The volume also explores how to foster engagement, which among other suggestions includes advocacy for an apprenticeship model that develops *affective* aspects of interaction with texts and for coming to grips, seriously, with the divide between what teachers are taught in schools of education, where dialogic approaches are encouraged and multifaceted assessments are the norm, with what mandated standards and high-stakes assessments force teachers to actually do. The remainder of Part II examines second-language writing, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), digital literacies in the classroom (that is, how the secondary curriculum is not only *planned* and *enacted*, but how it is *received)*; the visual arts and literacy, where it is argued that multiple sign systems for communication must be valued. There is a full chapter on public policy, where the authors examine the problem/solution approach to fixing the ills associated with student under-achievement in our middle and high schools is a weak assessment (the "problem" being teachers and the "solution," government) *and* incomplete, at best; and, lastly, a chapter on the roller-coaster ride student tracking has taken, followed by some reasonable suggestions for teachers and administrators to ponder.

Part III, Literacy Out of School (Chapters 16-19)
A relationship must exist between what students learn in school and what they need to know and to be able to do in college and/or the workplace. The cumulative effect of the chapters in this section on the reader, and obvious to the editors, is to understand that literacy must be thought of as a *tool*, not as "a measurable commodity having a direct and immediate application in the workplace" (p. 238). Take writing. The need to be able to write well in today's world, whether as a blue or white collar professional, while as crucial as ever, is rightly painted as idiosyncratic; so, one answer is to help students develop a truly "robust" process: "Writers need the metacognitive and creative abilities to use varied approaches to getting writing done" (p. 243). I would add that to enable metacognition, teachers must begin to name the literacy practices students use as they

engage in out of school writing, practices such as reflecting on their tone in an e-mail or blog entry.

Entering college freshman, maintains another author, literally write their way into the college culture and within that culture invent themselves. A robust writing process is needed here, too, but with attention to argument "composed through a reiterative and reflective multidraft process" (p. 262); and, as in the workplace, students must learn how to work on texts with their peers. The last two chapters in this section address media literacy, especially in youth's social worlds--from instant messaging to gaming to the use of video, movies, and the Internet--and describe sophisticated literacy practices such as creating unique, hybrid fan fiction texts, successful gameplay, and digital video texts. It's clear that "adolescents' leisure, work, and academic activities have shifted to 'virtual' or online spaces in recent years" (271). Our job as educators is to acknowledge this sophistication, embrace the passion, and allow students to use what they know in the service of schooling, though there is caution expressed on how to approach this in Part IV.

Part IV: Literacy and Culture (Chapters 20-27)

By the time readers reach Part IV, it's clear that there's much give and take that needs to be recognized as we attempt to promote enhanced adolescent literacy. For example, there's no question that many adolescents literally write their way into understanding themselves in the 21st century, as I noted above. That's new! Blogs, on-line journals, zines tip the iceberg. So it's natural that teachers would want to leash this passion. But authors in Part IV caution that accomplishing this is not straightforward. A case in point: In the chapter on listening to adolescent girls, the authors astutely go directly to the girls themselves and find some "whoa" factors: "...[A]adolescent girls ... caution against appropriating their out-of-school literacy practices, such as zining, into classroom instruction and rebel against possible misappropriations, such as making zines writing assignments (Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004)" (p. 381). Instead the authors reveal what girls wouldn't mind: For example, students want to talk about their blogging and zining in

school as a literacy practice; they want their prior knowledge, such as "choosing a punk rocker" fodder for their research projects; they want to create reports with hyperlinks. Researchers have also found that teenage girls want to write about their concerns and about issues that impact them.

Several of the chapters in this last section address 'the ways in which high school completion is not evenly distributed' and "raise questions about who would benefit and who would suffer from making it more difficult to earn a high school diploma" (p.305). Just as the literacy practices youths engage in as they work in virtual worlds are often under-acknowledged and under-appreciated, the literacy practices of Latina/o, new immigrant youth, GLBTQ youth (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer), and American Indian adolescents, remain unrecognized, which results in depressed [tepid?] interest in schooling. This also makes the job of "inventing oneself" tougher at school. How does one "invent oneself" when issues like race, gender, sexual orientation are simply not acknowledged? This must change, though chapter authors acknowledge that much more research is necessary. Likewise, we must study the many issues related to biliteracy--its place in school, who may teach it, and the roles it plays in learning English (p. 426). The authors of the chapter on American Indian youth make a point that, in my opinion, is really about all youth: "Indigenous adolescents live in two worlds and ... they can thrive in both (pp. 426-427). Is it not true that all adolescents live in multiple worlds, and isn't it possible for them to thrive everywhere?

Conclusion
I have taken you on a journey, and I'll wager that several of the chapters I've described have caught your interest. May I suggest that, if this is the case, you read the *Handbook of Adolescent Literacy Research* with your entire staff, perhaps grouping yourselves into chapters-of-interest and reporting back to the whole--a sort of jigsaw approach. The *Handbook* will help you and your peers clear the air of the Superman mentality we're living in by enriching your knowledge base and inspiring your own passions. You will deservedly feel the breeze from this *Handbook* window, while

gaining new insights that will affect you on Monday morning (despite the claim that this is NOT all this book is about) and for years to come.