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Review: Essay Review: Research for and within Literacy Instruction in Secondary Schools

Reviewed Work(s): Reclaiming the Local in Language Policy and Practice by A. Suresh Canagarajah: English-Only Instruction and Immigrant Students in Secondary Schools: A Critical Examination by Lee Gunderson: Effective Literacy Instruction: Building Successful Reading and Writing Programs by Judith A. Langer: Secondary School Literacy: What Research Reveals for Classroom Practice by Leslie S. Rush, A. Jonathan Eakle and Allen Berger: Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change by Peter Smagorinsky

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# Essay Review

## Research for and Within Literacy Instruction in Secondary Schools

*Reclaiming the Local in Language Policy and Practice* (A. Suresh Canagarajah, Ed. 2005. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 224 pages.)

*English-Only Instruction and Immigrant Students in Secondary Schools: A Critical Examination* (Lee Gunderson. 2007. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum. 320 pages.)

*Effective Literacy Instruction: Building Successful Reading and Writing Programs* (Judith A. Langer. 2002. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. 197 pages.)

*Secondary School Literacy: What Research Reveals for Classroom Practice* (Leslie S. Rush, A. Jonathan Eakle, & Allen Berger, Eds. 2007. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English. 323 pages.)

*Research on Composition: Multiple Perspectives on Two Decades of Change* (Peter Smagorinsky, Ed. 2006. New York: Teachers College Press. 308 pages.)

reviewed by

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How is research currently informing literacy education in secondary schools? Peter Smagorinsky introduces his edited collection of review articles by observing how conceptualizations of research on literacy have changed over the past 2 decades. Scientific methods of experimentation—the established and prominent means from the 1960s through 1980s to analyze literacy learning and teaching—have persisted in recent decades and taken on refined forms. But they now appear alongside an ever-emerging array of qualitative methods of inquiry, teacher-based research, multimodal concepts of literacy, analyses of community and institutional contexts, and socio-cultural theories of learning.

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Moreover, the fundamental relations between research and literacy education have shifted. In past decades, research on literacy mostly involved applying principles or evaluating hypotheses to shape teaching and educational policies. Such research was, with a nearly utilitarian enthusiasm, conducted *for* literacy educators. Theories were adopted from such fields as psychology or linguistics, then applied to and evaluated in education. Recently, though, research has tended to derive from analyses of literacy and pedagogical practices *within* active curriculum and related settings. Researchers try to understand what literacy learning and education actually involve, as people practice and experience them. This, it is argued, is the proper basis for knowing how to recommend what literacy education should or should not be. Such research arises *within* education, involving educators themselves, in-depth analyses of multifaceted phenomena, and critical scrutiny of natural events and specific contexts. Research continues to aim to inform and improve education, to be sure. But that purpose exists alongside aims of explaining curriculum events, refining theories of learning, elucidating policy dilemmas, and identifying systemic variability. The sources, directions, and potential impact of knowledge transfer between research and literacy education are reciprocal and also equivocal.

The five books under review here exemplify these shifts in the landscape of research on literacy instruction in secondary schools. Compared to studies of adult, community, or elementary school literacy, the pace of change in inquiry about secondary schools may seem more glacial than to be a deluge. But distinct, notable changes have certainly appeared. Many valuable insights from research are documented in these five books.

## SYNOPSIS AND ORIENTATIONS TO RESEARCH

The books edited by Peter Smagorinsky (2006) and by Leslie Rush, Jonathan Eakle, and Allen Berger (2007) offer authoritative reviews of research in separate chapters prepared by leading scholars of literacy education. Chapters in both books are organized by themes that define subdomains of activity and illuminate key issues. Their intended readership differs, however, as do the themes and orientations of either book. Rush, Eakle, and Berger's authors address teachers, educational administrators, and policy makers. The style of writing is engaging at the same time as it is informative. Authors propose, and often vividly portray, compelling recommendations for best practices in various aspects of literacy instruction. Educators here will learn about rationales for useful pedagogical or curricular approaches, current trends and social dimensions of literacy relevant to adolescents, and crucial policy issues.

Smagorinsky's authors, in contrast, pitch their chapters at other scholars, researchers, or graduate students. Their aims are to synthesize comprehensively the range, focus, and historical development of research

specifically on written composition (but without much explicit consideration of reading literacy). This is a research handbook or compendium, though the contributing authors also aim to reflect and guide educational practices. Scholars here will learn about the fundamental topics, trends, methods, findings, and limitations of recent research on writing. Smagorinsky's book follows from two influential predecessors that had synthesized previous generations of research on written composition, respectively, up to 1962 (by Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963 in the form of a monograph), and from 1963 to 1983 (by Hillocks, 1986, in the form of a single meta-analysis). In the present volume, George Hillocks reviews research on composition in middle and high schools, and Bob Fecho, JoBeth Allen, Claudia Mazaros, and Hellen Inyega provide a unique and thorough synthesis of teacher research in writing classrooms. Other chapters in Smagorinsky's book address research in contexts—such as preschool, elementary, postsecondary, community, or professional settings—which, although of notable value, extend beyond the scope of the present review.

Judith Langer (2002) and Lee Gunderson (2007) have each produced monographs that report and discuss findings from long-term empirical studies of educational practices, policies, and situations in secondary schools. Langer synthesizes results from a 5-year study of 44 teachers in 25 secondary schools in California, Florida, New York, and Texas. The research aimed to describe and identify the integral characteristics of "effective literacy teaching." Langer summarizes the findings succinctly as follows:

Effective English and literacy learning and instruction took place as separated and simulated as well as integrated experiences; test preparation was integrated into the ongoing instructional program; overt connections were constantly made across lessons, classes, and grades; students were taught strategies for thinking as well as doing; the goals of lessons involved generative thinking; and high literacy in English was treated as a social activity. (p. 163)

In several initial chapters, Langer introduces details of these findings as well as the approach and context of the inquiry. Then chapters by collaborating researchers—Steven Ostrowski, Ester Helmar-Salasoo, and Eija Rougle—provide case studies that exemplify, respectively, effective teaching in an urban setting, in a school for newcomers to the United States, and in regards to teachers' professional development. The perspective achieved is credible and complete. Langer and colleagues present precisely grounded but wide-ranging and balanced accounts of elements integral to teaching reading and writing in a purposive selection of secondary schools across the United States.

Gunderson's focus is on the literacy experiences of culturally diverse students in schools in one city. Gunderson traces longitudinally the profiles

and comparative achievements in secondary schools of 25,000 students for whom English was a second language as they settled in Vancouver. His research serves as a microcosm of issues about reading literacy in first and second languages that are playing out in other urban secondary schools throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa. Instead of conclusions, Gunderson arrives at a set of “conundrums” about contextual and policy issues that are difficult to reconcile for students whose first language is not English. Students wish to achieve proficiency in English and success in literacy and at school, yet they remain outsiders culturally, perceiving ESL classes both as supports and as obstacles to goals of integration to the educational and societal mainstream. Ambivalence and uncertainty likewise prevail for the educational programs struggling to provide English-medium teaching as well as second-language and cross-cultural supports. Further complicating these situations are issues of group membership. There is nothing like a single, homogeneous group or category of ESL learners. On the contrary, literacy experiences and achievements are disparate among subpopulations of these immigrant students. Even trying to aggregate, for the purposes of analysis, subgroups in these situations of extreme diversity is problematic, as Gunderson demonstrates. For instance, many (but certainly not all) Chinese-background students prove to excel in formal tests, scaffolded by supports from tutors and their parents’ socio-economic status, whereas many refugee students from Latin America or the Middle East drop out of education early, seemingly to pursue work or fulfill financial obligations to their families. Gunderson reviews recent models of literacy learning and teaching, bilingual development, and intergroup relations to show how they address some of these issues, but they fail to explain them or offer definitive guidance to educators or researchers about how best to approach them.

Suresh Canagarajah’s (2005) edited volume extends these and other issues into various corners of the world stage. In the process, we are reminded that policy, demographic, and research assumptions about literacy and language education based on North American contexts are just that—limited to one dominant language, English, and to one society and set of institutional contexts. Canagarajah and a truly diverse group of authors, each describing unique cases from around the globe, urge educators to question these assumptions. Their chief approach is through analyses that illuminate competing tensions between global and local orientations to education, policies, language, literacy, identity, and research. Setting the tone for the book as a whole, Canagarajah’s introductory chapter proposes a shift in professional discourse from what he calls “hierarchical” to “leveled” norms. Instead of conventional norms for language or literacy that extol literate, native-speaker varieties of, for example, English, we are urged to value plural variants, local vernaculars, or nativized forms of international languages and literacy as well. Instead of conceiving of expertise solely as established knowledge, we should also embrace local,

multilateral, and practitioner-generated knowledge. Instead of top-down, mandated curricula, we should encourage ground-up innovations and continuity with local traditions and concerns. Instead of methods-dominated or skills-based pedagogy, we should promote hybrid, project-based, and locally relevant educational practices.

At first glance, these radically pluralistic values may seem relevant primarily to multilingual, post-colonial educational contexts such as Canagarajah's native Sri Lanka, or the situations in Hong Kong, Malaysia, India, Brazil, New York City, or aboriginal communities documented by other contributors to this book. They arise from and convey a worldly awareness of global variability rather than provincial complacency. But at a deeper level, juxtapositions of global/local, insider/outsider, or emic/etic perspectives are, in fact, a strong undercurrent in each of the other four studies of literacy education in secondary schools under review here. Indeed, they are inherent in most other instances of literacy policy in education (Bascia, Cumming, Datnow, Leithwood, & Livingstone, 2005).

The interface between research and educational policies entails inherent competitions between innovations and traditions, local and global concerns, as well as moral values and empirical issues (Levin, 2005). These tensions are especially prominent in literacy education for the basic reason that literacy fundamentally involves competing societal, community, individual, and institutional practices and values. Such concerns play out through contradictions in the emerging identities of adolescent students and so too in their education. In turn, research that analyzes closely the actual practices and principles of literacy education inevitably seeks to unveil the knowledge that educators, educational contexts, and students possess, perform, and represent. Researcher-outsiders seek educator-insider knowledge. They strive to understand then share that knowledge with others. This "anthropological impulse" characterizes much of the research in these five books, as it does for much other recent research on literacy education, even though most of the present authors have come to these matters, not as anthropologists, but with backgrounds in educational psychology, teacher education, or applied linguistics.

### THREE MESSAGES

What does the research in these books tell educators about literacy instruction in secondary schools? I take three messages from these authors collectively:

- Effective literacy instruction is balanced, concerted, and comprehensive.
- Be cognizant and wary of policies for and functions of assessment.

- Organize classroom interactions to respect, nurture, and promote students' cultural diversity and personal identities.

### **Balanced Instruction**

Langer's (2002) research focused directly on identifying the characteristics of effective literacy instruction in secondary schools. Langer and colleagues observed that effective instructors took multifaceted, complementary approaches to teaching reading and writing. They prepared students for tests by focusing on underlying knowledge and skills needed for the tests but also useful for students' lives and ongoing courses. Effective teachers constantly made explicit connections "between knowledge, skills, and ideas across lessons, classes, and grades as well as across in-school and out-of-school applications" (p. 23). They taught strategies that enabled students to think and to act while writing and reading by planning, organizing, self-monitoring, and reflecting. Effective teachers pushed students to go beyond, so as to expand further their knowledge and abilities, merely accomplishing goals of completing literacy tasks. Importantly, schools with effective teachers fostered academic literacy as a social activity within schools and extending to contexts and people beyond classrooms, including teachers' ongoing professional development.

Langer and colleagues' findings resemble those already established in studies that, likewise, examined effective literacy teaching in elementary schools and so established principles of "balanced literacy teaching" (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Related findings emerge from Fecho, Allen, Mazaros, and Inyega's synthesis of studies of teacher research in their chapter in Smagorinsky (2006). They conclude that teachers who have undertaken action research strive to focus on five elements of composition instruction: "creating a literate environment, investigating writing genres, writing to learn across content areas, focusing on the writing process, and developing assessments" (p. 119). There is congruence as well with the findings (from a very different methodological approach and data set) of Graham and Perin's (2007) recent meta-analysis of experimental studies on instructional interventions that have effectively promoted adolescents' writing development. These interventions proved to involve diverse, complementary pedagogical practices, most notably, strategy instruction, summarization, peer assistance, goal setting, word processing, sentence combining, inquiry tasks, prewriting, process writing, and the study of rhetorical models.

Comprehensive, strategic, and balanced approaches to literacy pedagogy are also characteristic of what Hillocks (1986) called "environmental instruction." He argued in his 1986 book for its pedagogical effectiveness, as he has implicitly in his chapter in Smagorinsky (2006) while reviewing studies of literacy teaching over the past 2 decades, including Langer



(2002). Several chapters in Rush, Eakle, and Berger (2007) make related arguments for balanced, comprehensive, strategic, and socially situated literacy instruction. Terry Underwood, Monica Yoo, and David Pearson's chapter does so by adopting the viewpoint of Freebody and Luke's Four Resources Model (1990). James Damico, Gerald Campano, and Jerome Harste's chapter advocates ideas arising from the New London Group's conception of multiliteracies (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). Jeannine Richison, Anita Hernandez, and Marcia Carter's chapter exemplifies Vygotskian notions of scaffolding as applied to literacy teaching. Gunderson (2007) makes similar endorsements as he reviews and encompasses the range of research on teaching and learning reading in first and second languages.

### Assessment

Authors in these five books all express cautions about the negative consequences of standardized tests. They charge primarily that such tests reduce the construct and requirements of literacy education for secondary school students. Jill Lewis and Gary Moorman's chapter in Rush, Eakle, and Berger (2007) is a direct criticism of the emphasis on literacy tests that has arisen from the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States. They conclude their chapter with recommendations on how to advocate against the Act. Hillocks' chapter in Smagorinsky (2006) provides a more detailed history of literacy testing in the United States, but he is equally vocal in his criticisms, highlighting his own (Hillocks, 2002) interview study in five U.S. states that concluded, "state assessments affect the standards for good writing adopted by teachers, the kind of instruction offered, and the writing curriculum available to students" (p. 55).

Manifestations of these trends appear in Langer's (2002) conclusion that the vast majority of the typical (i.e., less than effective) teachers in her study tended to separate sessions of test preparation from their usual curriculum by "primarily teaching test preparation skills and knowledge apart from the ongoing curriculum" (p. 17). In contrast, "effective schools seemed to focus on students' learning, using the tests to be certain that the skills and knowledge tested were being learned within the framework of improved language arts instruction" (p. 23). That is, effective schools approached mandated testing by aligning their curricula with the assessments and by articulating school improvement plans for teacher and curriculum development. In turn, effective teachers shaped their curricula to encompass the knowledge and skills to be tested while linking those broadly to students' interests and lives outside of school.

In addition to describing educationally strategic responses to formal literacy tests, many authors in these books advise teachers and school administrators to develop professional awareness about the limitations of such tests. Richard Allington and Danielle Dennis's chapter in Rush, Eakle,



and Berger (2007) is enlightening in demonstrating how the methods of literacy assessments in large-scale tests of reading are, on the one hand, suited to reveal gross distinctions in proficiency among large populations of students, making the tests suitable for national or state surveys that account for trends in whole educational systems. But the same tests are also technically deficient in offering any fine-grained analyses of individual students' literacy abilities that could be informative for the purposes of planning teaching, demonstrating students' personal achievement, or diagnosing needs for learning. The chapter by Underwood, Yoo, and Pearson in the same book demonstrates how curriculum standards in California and Massachusetts have recently established sophisticated definitions of literacy achievement for secondary students, but the methods and content specifications for testing these literacy abilities lag dramatically behind the curriculum standards.

Allington and Dennis encourage teachers to focus instead on formative assessments of individual students' reading abilities and practices through systematic, firsthand observations of students through such instruments as reading inventories and longitudinal records. For writing, Hillocks' chapter (in Smagorinsky, 2006) similarly disparages tests that require students "to write on demand in a limited time period" (p. 53), suggesting instead that research demonstrates the value of formative assessment through the careful, judicious design of writing tasks that fulfill purposes of learning, effective responses by teachers and classroom peers to students' written drafts, and portfolio assessments that document students' progressive achievements over time. In advocating these approaches, I was perplexed, however, that none of these authors seemed familiar with the many recent discussions in the United Kingdom that have proposed educationally relevant theories of assessment (e.g., Gipps, 1994), elaborating on distinctions between formative approaches to assessment *for* learning (as in classroom and continuous assessments to foster learning and inform teaching) in contrast to summative approaches *of* learning (as in formal, large-scale tests of achievement or proficiency).

Several authors advise further that educators should be aware of disparities in the results of literacy tests that arise from variables in students' backgrounds such as socio-economic status, ethnicity, race, or gender. This is something of a dual-edged sword for literacy educators. Hillocks' chapter in Smagorinsky (2006) suggests that results from such tests usefully expose the enormous inequities that exist in opportunities for literacy achievement in secondary schools in the United States. For the same reason, however, educators should not be misled into thinking that results on such tests reveal much beyond this prevalence of inequities. That is, low or high scores on literacy tests in particular schools or regions tend to reflect socio-economic variables among student populations but little of the efforts or initiatives of teachers or students. From a research perspective, however, Gunderson (2007) shows how standardized measures of reading ability

(e.g., Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests) demonstrated that immigrant learners of English do, as attested in much previous research (e.g., Cummins, 1984), take 5 or 6 years to reach grade-level norms on such tests, though considerable variation in test scores also related to students' first languages, years of previous schooling, and prior reading instruction and experiences.

### **Cultural Diversity and Student Identities**

A third message for educators from these books concerns acknowledging, nurturing, and organizing instruction to promote the cultural diversity and identities of adolescent students. Three approaches to these matters appear in the present volumes. One approach involves organizing education for specific cultural groups that can benefit particularly from such support. For instance, Alfred Tatum's chapter in Rush, Eakle, and Berger (2007) reviews a large quantity of research that suggests how to teach African-American adolescent males, promote their reading and writing practices, and shape curricula in the interests of enhancing their lives and future opportunities. Robert Jiménez and Brad Teague's chapter in the same book reviews research publications that have identified the needs of English language learners. They conclude that the available research indicates that:

teachers need to know and be able to address specific language and content needs; students must learn about the rules for cultural, social, and linguistic interactions, as well as the content-area expectations of U.S. secondary classrooms; and parents need to be informed about the demands that schooling in the United States places on adolescents and about the roles that they as parents are expected to fulfill. (p. 167)

Sharon Utakis and Marianne Pita's chapter in Canagarajah (2005) takes up the case of Dominican students in New York City. The authors demonstrate how these students' transnational status—situated between two countries, cultures, and languages—can be served by two-way bilingual programs (i.e., involving English and Spanish alternatively at different times of the day, and students learning both languages concurrently). But they caution that such programs need simultaneously to foster students' development of literacy in Spanish (and help to move the Dominicans from a low to a high prestige variety of Spanish) and knowledge about Dominican culture while additively promoting students' continued acquisition of academic literacy in English and capacities to act as balanced bilinguals in the broader U.S. society.

A second, more nuanced but diffuse approach appeals for educators to appreciate, empathize with, and build constructively on the life experiences and cultural orientations of individual adolescents. The chapters by

Kathleen Hinchman and by Kevin Leander and Jessica Zacher in Rush, Eakle, and Berger (2007) both argue that all adolescent students are at a crucial and complex stage in the development of their individual identities. Adolescents balance shifting affinities between private, peer, community, family, and school demands for their commitments, passions, space, and time (Harklau, 2007). Approaches to literacy instruction should take up issues in each of these spaces, the authors argue, by incorporating their multiple discourses and recognizing that adolescents' identities are shaped through students' positions in, and oppositions to, classroom and school interactions, contradictory and hybrid social identities, and diverse uses of literacy from outside of, not just inside of, school contexts.

In this vein is a telling chapter in Canagarajah (2005), jointly authored by Angel Lin, Wendy Wang, Nobu Akamatsu, and Mehdi Riazi, in which the four authors each recount significant, parallel incidents in their learning of English literacy in their home countries (Hong Kong, China, Japan, and Iran, respectively) before each person came to Canada for graduate degrees then subsequently established careers as university professors of English. As children, English was initially a school subject, rather than a language that people around them used to communicate, but it was a school subject at which they each personally excelled. Their individual inspirations to pursue and eventually acquire fluency in English came from certain teachers who provided supportive guidance and transformative mentoring. But upon arriving later in Canada for university studies, the self-confidence and perceived competence in English they had established in their home countries was shattered as they found themselves marked by foreign accents to be "non-native speakers of English" with identities imposed as Others by the majority population. Over years of struggling to reconcile these dilemmas, each perceived that it was not until they had eventually assumed careers as professors of English—either in North America or in Hong Kong, Japan, or Iran—that they really affirmed their sense of ownership of and personal identification in the language and its written literacy. For literacy educators, these accounts emphasize the inspirational, mentoring roles that teachers can play in students' lives but also the fragility of students' abilities and identities after leaving supportive, school contexts for higher education and to develop adult persona and careers.

The importance of appreciating adolescent students' lived experiences as language and literacy learners is also featured in Gunderson (2007). Midway through his book—after reviews of published theories and research, then statistical analyses of school records, literacy tests, and questionnaires—Gunderson turns to findings from open-ended interviews with several hundred immigrant students. These accounts reveal the particular sense of life these students experience as well as the significance of language, literacy, and culture within these contexts. The students express ambiguities about the value of first and second languages, distinctions

between spoken interactions and written academic literacy in different school subjects, varied beliefs about what literacy involves, ambivalence about the value of ESL courses, extraordinary amounts of time spent on homework, and differences between groups based on immigration status (as refugees, family reunification, or economic migrants), parental expectations (or even presence, for students whose families resided elsewhere), and first languages and cultural affinities (and the relative degree of establishment of a distinct local community related to these).

The salience and shifting boundaries of group membership for these adolescents are a central factor for literacy educators to appreciate and address:

The most obvious feature of life in secondary school is groups. Students are nearly always found in groups, standing in groups, eating in groups, talking in groups, and moving in groups. One finds support and affirmation from group membership (Norton, 2000). Indeed, one's sense of identity and self-worth are often related to membership in a particular group. (Gunderson, 2007, p. 197)

Leander and Zacher's chapter in Rush, Eakle, and Berger (2007) articulates the implications of group affinities and cultural identities for literacy education by synthesizing findings from numerous ethnographic studies of students' interactions in secondary school classrooms. On the basis of this research, they recommend that literacy educators should: conceive of students' identities as hybrid and heterogeneous, shaped by multiple sources of knowledge within and outside of classrooms; think of classroom interactions as processes of negotiating these identities in relation to contradictory discourses and multiple sources of knowledge; and approach teaching as opportunities to incorporate, challenge, and transform individual potentials, new opportunities, and power relations.

The cultural dimensions of new literacies and digital technologies are also highlighted in Rush, Eakle, and Berger (2007). Donna Alvermann and Cheryl McLean's chapter outlines the educational opportunities for literacy educators to capitalize on arising from adolescents' interests in and identifications with computer-mediated communications. Curricula can be organized as participatory instruction in which students define literacy tasks, media, and topics on the basis of their own interests and aspirations. Digital environments can connect and mediate school and out-of-school learning, thus resolving a long-recognized dilemma in adolescents' literacy development and discontinuity with schooling (see Hull & Schultz, 2001; Moje & O'Brien, 2001). The chapter by Donald Leu and colleagues usefully describes the range of reading abilities required for online reading comprehension in contexts such as the Internet, demonstrating how they tend to differ between online and offline environments, which they suggest constitute relevant foci for literacy instruction, specifically, to assist students in identifying important questions and then locating, critically evaluating,

synthesizing, and communicating information. Likewise, literacy educators will find Robert Tierney's chapter instructive in its recommendations for organizing school activities to engage students in navigating multiple forms of digital literacies while establishing communities of learning to carry out research, development, and design tasks as well as to critique and disseminate their work.

The third, distinctive approach to address cultural diversity and identities in secondary school literacy in these books involves examining educational programs that have successfully organized themselves to achieve this aim. The one striking example of this approach appears in the chapter by Ester Hemar-Salasoo, Sally Jo Bronner, and Paolo Bonissone in Langer (2002), which documents the practices and curriculum of a teacher at International High School in New York City. This is undoubtedly an exemplary, innovative, and successful school, whose curriculum was similarly documented, in a detailed case study of alternative assessment, in Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Falk (1995). In addition to the one teachers' lifelong, ongoing professional commitment, the school seems to have achieved, and also progressively evolved, success with students from extreme ranges of cultural diversity by placing the students' capacities for and achievements of literate and oral interactions and learning in English and their various native languages at the foreground of all aspects of decision making and enacting the curriculum. Hemar-Salasoo, Bronner, and Bonissone emphasize the school's and teacher's unique, multiple, and engaging dimensions of interdisciplinary study, collaborative learning in groups and teams, mentoring, peer support, and school-wide evaluations. This case, if perhaps idealized, appears to represent and enact all of the principles for literacy instruction in secondary schools that other authors in these five books advocate.

## SUMMARY REMARKS

These publications attest that research is illuminating what literacy education in secondary schools is doing. So the authors can recommend with some confidence what educators and researchers alike should attempt to address or continue to do. There are many lessons in these five books to learn about and act on. But two broad limitations also constrain these endeavors.

One constraint is a tendency to consider issues solely in reference to one societal context. For most of the books under review, that society is the English-dominant regions of North America, including Canada but primarily focused on the United States. For this reason, I choose to include Canagarajah (2005) among the selections here, principally because that book opens up perspectives on literacy, language, and culture to a determinedly international viewpoint. That viewpoint is on exceptional cases in

locations where contacts between languages, literacies, and cultures are visibly in transition or tension. But the issues that emerge are telling for that reason. Moreover, they are indicative, as I observed above, of trends appearing in other recent literacy research. These cases suggest further that systematic, comparative research is needed on literacy education, too. Informative, international comparative studies were being undertaken in the 1980s (e.g., Elley, 1992; Purves, 1992), but their impetus and scope (and funding sources) seem to have diminished into large-scale surveys and tests with PISA and various Adult Literacy Surveys that address government policy analysts rather than practicing educators. So their results are seldom even cited by the researchers in the present volumes. In turn, cross-linguistic research on literacy is extensive and flourishing (e.g., Leki, Cumming, & Silva, 2008; Koda, 2007), but that inquiry seldom enters into the discourse of educators working within the English Language Arts tradition—though Gunderson (2007) presents an exception by building productively upon this literature.

Authors writing about literacy education need to adopt an international scope. The focus on North American contexts by most of the present authors (apart from those in Canagarajah, 2005) cannot arise simply from authors' lack of access to languages other than English, because few references to research, policies, or situations in the United Kingdom, Australia, or New Zealand appear in any of these books. Moreover, references are seldom made to the abundant research on literacy education or situations in comparable, economically developed societies in Europe or Asia. Why should people think of literacy education in secondary schools as something that just happens within one country? The "anthropological impulse" to understand specific cases in depth may be one reason to focus on local events, but I fear the answer to this question may be because such research is undertaken more to influence local policies and programs of teacher education than it is really to understand phenomena of literacy education in a universal sense.

The second constraint is on theories that might explain literacy development in secondary school education. A handful of recently influential theories are cited by many authors in these five books (as I have already noted, e.g., Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Cummins, 1984; Freebody & Luke, 1990). But the scope of theories cited is hardly comprehensive nor is it very wide ranging. Dressman, Wilder, and Connor (2005) have recently taken up this point, asking why theories have not been able to explain failure among adolescent learners of literacy? Their conclusion is that relevant theories are fragmented by epistemological and disciplinary boundaries.

Three theoretical orientations to literacy have recently prevailed, each based on different phenomena and leading to different foci in research and recommendations for pedagogy. Cognitive, psychological orientations focus on students' development of normative components of literate abili-



ties, such as sound-symbol correspondences or metalinguistic awareness for reading or problem-solving or knowledge-building heuristics for writing. Socio-cultural orientations focus on the cultural and historical construction of discourse practices, demonstrating how students gain awareness of or meaningful experiences with the full repertoire of culturally dominant, rhetorically appropriate modes of literate discourse or learn to express, shift, or expand their literate identities with the multiple, competing demands of academic discourse as well as new multi-media technologies and global communications. Socio-structural orientations focus on macro-level forces in societies, such as the reproduction of socio-economic classes; legal, economic and historical bases of privilege; conceptual frameworks of knowledge and discourse; and the structures and functions of institutions and bureaucracies. These social structures may systemically impose social inequities, manifest as literacy practices and semiotic barriers, beyond the agency of individual members of a society.

Rather than treating these orientations as competing or preferable hypotheses, or as issues to be taken up by researchers in other fields, educationally relevant research needs to conceive of them as complementary. Each offers alternative perspectives on different aspects of literacy achievement and education, particularly in culturally diverse contexts. Importantly, research needs to establish which variables related to literacy are within the direct control of educational systems and jurisdictions, and so able to influence the achievement of particular students such as multilingual adolescents in culturally diverse, urban schools. Socio-structural forces may, for instance, not be amenable to change from within educational systems because these forces may depend on the long-term history and status of minority groups, and schools are themselves institutional agents of such forces. Authors in the present five books do accurately, if implicitly, identify the four, main relevant sets of variables for research and educators alike to consider. These are the individual abilities of students, their home and community environments, their peer relations, and school environments. But much future research needs to analyze and explain these, as well as the interactions among them, and compare their manifestations systematically across societies and contexts.

## NOTE

1. The term *balanced literacy instruction* is somewhat elusive though used widely in North America by literacy educators and certain school reform initiatives. Its basis is grounded in studies that have observed and analyzed effective teaching and tried also to reconcile dichotomous tendencies in pedagogical methods such as controversies over whether to advocate either “whole language” or “skills based” reading instruction. Pressley (2005, p. 645) offered the following definition: “What is ‘balanced literacy instruction’ from my perspective? It involves explicit, systematic, and completely thorough teaching of the skills required to



read and write in a classroom environment where there is much reading of authentic literature—including information books, and much composing by students. Balanced literacy instruction is demanding in every way that literacy instruction can be demanding. Students are expected to learn the skills and learn them well enough to be able to transfer them to reading and writing of text. Yes, this is done in a strongly supportive environment, with the teacher providing a great deal of direct teaching, explanations and re-explanations, and hinting to students about the appropriateness of applying skills they have learned to new texts and tasks.” In the remainder of this article, I have assumed that authors are advocating ideal models of literacy instruction that are “balanced, comprehensive, strategic, and socially situated,” although I acknowledge the concept remains opaque and open to diverse interpretations.

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