

Beyond the School Yard

School's Out! Bridging Out-of-School Literacies with Classroom Practice

Glynda Hull and Katherine Schultz (Editors). New York: Teachers College Press, 2002. 288 pp.

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Urban schools are the focus of a multitude of reform initiatives, and one strategy that reappears in places like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and other large cities, is establishing the school as a community center, i.e., keeping it open after school hours for children and the community. After school programs, such as the Beacon program, have been reasonably useful, and anyone interested in youth development work can learn from them. Increasingly, however, funding for such out-of-school programs has been tied to assessments that measure school defined literacies that are premised on remediation rather than development. Aside from the question, "How did schools get to define what counts as literacy?" school literacy has not embraced many forms of and venues for literacy development. Schools are critical in nurturing children's literacy's practices, but they don't need to do the work by themselves. Youth development agencies, community groups and the home can become stronger allies in defining literacy that counts. *School's Out!* does an outstanding job in presenting evidence that out-of-school literacies matter. The range of case studies and essays included in this volume not only demonstrates what out-of-school literacy looks like but it also challenges classroom practitioners to build stronger bridges to connect the school room to life outside of school.

This is not a book that preaches one thing and does another. The very organization of the book is consistent with its goal of closing the gap between out-of-school and school literacies by assembling the voices of classroom practitioners along with those of researchers. Hull and Schultz have designed the format of the book with opening and closing sections of the book (Parts I and IV) that provide theoretical and analytical brackets for the fieldwork they include. Furthermore, Schultz and Hull provide an important context for the book's explorations when they note:

In public discourse, literacy has long been associated with schooling. Talk about literacy crises is often accompanied by calls for better schools and more rigorous curricula, and images of reading and writing are closely connected to school-based or essayist forms of literacy. However, when we widen the lens of what we consider literacy and literate activities, home communities and workplaces become sites for literacy use (p.11).

Part I: Framing the Issues consists of two well crafted and thorough essays co-authored by the editors, Hull and Schultz, that outline the history of research on out-of school literacies. These two essays alone make the book a must for all pre-service teachers, for they provide a comprehensive review of literacy theories that focus on out-of school literacies. After the

editors set the stage, they essentially turn the book over to voices in the field. Each of the next two sections of the book includes the work of literacy researchers working outside of school with a response from a classroom teacher or someone who has had a long history in the classroom.

Part II: Literacy at Home and in the Community includes Ellen Skilton-Sylvester's close observations of a Cambodian girl's playfulness with language and her frustration in meeting school expectations. Both Verda Delp and Marci Resnick cogently use her work to raise questions for the classroom. Also included in this section is Juan C. Guerra and Marcia Farr's study of two Mexicanas who write in two very different settings, one in a prayer circle and the other in a university class. Their goal is to study "variant" language in order to support second language students in gaining control of essayist literacy conventions so that they can succeed in college. Julia Menard-Warwick, in her response, reminds us that essayist literacy is learned in school and seldom used outside of academic circles while Cris Gutierrez notes that the researchers' essay honors the person and his/her context for writing.

Part III: Literacy in After-School Programs makes available Elenore Long, Wayne C. Peck and Joyce A Baskins's research on their community work in Pittsburgh in a project called *STRUGGLE*. *STRUGGLE* is "a model for computer-supported community-based education, one that uses computer technology to strengthen relationships and to support project-based learning" (p.132). Marsha Pincus and Marty Williams offer their responses and appreciation. Gillian Dowley McNamee and Sarah Sivright write about The Fifth Dimension, a five-year after-school program in Chicago's Garden Homes designed to explore curriculum innovations that offer support to urban African American children. Diane Waff and Leif Gustavson respond and note the critical importance of making teaching and learning culturally relevant. Also included in this section is the research conducted by Ellen Cushman and Chalon Emmons in a YMCA outside of Oakland, California. The authors placed university students enrolled in a service-learning course there and their essay reports on the "hybrid literacies" that emerged. While responder Porfirio M. Loeza suggests that "service learning makes available a certain dialogic authenticity" (p. 234), Sarah Jewett is concerned that "university life is situated in the foreground" (p.237) instead of community life.

Part IV: Realities and Possibilities in the Community, effectively provides the other bracket as Elyse Eidman-Aadahl challenges literacy theorists and practitioners to work with community organizations in true partnerships. Mollie Blackburn is the respondent for this essay.

The work of this volume adds to our understanding of how out-of school and school literacies can cross-pollinate each other. Long et al. posit, "We have discovered that community literacy is effective when it develops and sustains the capacity to solve problems, to cope with obstacles, to commit with others, to imagine new possibilities, to achieve what seemed impossible - to act, to trust and to hope" (p. 135). What classroom teacher wouldn't like to know how *STRUGGLE* (the name of a community based literacy project in Pittsburgh) did that and to wonder along with Marty Williams, "[W]hat does it take for a school to reimagine its classrooms and reshape itself into an urban sanctuary?" (p.167). That profound question draws on everything we know and want to know about literacy development and building community.

The answer, though, will not be provided by disconnected research as Eidman-Aahdahl persuasively warns:

Literacy researchers do these organization, and the young people in them, a disservice by conceptualizing them simply as a site for research or placements for university students that we can enter and abandon as we choose. Universities or other sponsors do these [community-based] organizations a disservice if they are unwilling to reconsider outreach policies to make it possible for literacy theorists and practitioners to work in real partnership with organizations in the community.... Finally, literacy theorists and practitioners will find this an important moment to raise such questions as how escalating federal involvement in youth policy has made these organizations into centerpieces of public/private ventures into youth development. (p.250)

Eidman-Aadahl's cautionary note is one that should alert all practitioners and youth development workers that if there aren't authentic community partnerships and research on what constitutes literacy, uninformed policy makers will do it for them, and it will be narrowly confined to a definition of "essayist literacy." This is the moment when all who value the democratic intent of public schooling must work together to insure high levels of literacy not for its own sake but for the good of the wider community.

School's Out does not offer a formula for bridging the gap between the classroom and out-of-school literacies, nor should it. Every context is different, and it is the process of working together toward a bridge that is the solution. However, the book does suggest the kinds of research, teacher inquiry as well as university based, that demonstrate what literacy and literacy development looks like as well as the kind of partnerships that are needed to respect and build on all kinds of literacies.

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