The Literacy Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions

by Jeff McQuillan

Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1998.
$15.00; 109 pages

Reviewed by Janet A. Isonhour

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Before you begin reading Jeff McQuillan’s book, take a few minutes to do some writing. Think back to your own early attempts toward becoming a literate person or think about the students you teach and their literacy successes and challenges.

You’ll need this real-world grounding before you tackle McQuillan’s book, which in 109 pages of text surveys 275 literacy studies of the last 30 years. McQuillan covers this minefield in seven dense chapters. He begins by exploding popular myths about the so-called literacy crisis in this country. According to McQuillan’s interpretation of the research, reading achievement in the U.S. over the last 25 years has not declined, and California’s supposed drop in test scores is not attributable to whole language instruction.

Subsequent chapters examine the research related to other literacy questions:

What does it take to learn how to read? To get the alphabetic principle? What is the relationship between age and reading? Between sound and reading? How do context and eye movement affect reading ability?

McQuillan’s underlying assumptions about reading are based on models of language acquisition formulated by Ken and Yetta Goodman and Frank Smith: reading development is a result of understanding meaningful written language. McQuillan expands the Goodman-Smith model to include two more factors which can help us understand differences in reading ability. These factors include the access we have to reading materials and the types of external assistance we receive in helping us understand written messages.

McQuillan distinguishes two types of external assistance: metalinguistic and elaborative. Metalinguistic assistance includes formal instruction in reading (phonics instruction is one such form), while elaborative assistance includes all forms of instruction other than those related to the language system’s structure. Elaborative assistance might be provided, for example, by someone who gives background information for a story or explains the meaning of some words. McQuillan asserts that the ability to read comes primarily from exposure to comprehensible text with appropriate elaborative assistance, even in the absence of explicit metalinguistic instruction.

McQuillan’s ultimate conclusion is that becoming a successful reader depends in large measure on access to print materials. “The availability of books to read — and the subsequent amount of reading done,” he writes, “appears to be as critical, and certainly no less so, in determining success in reading as classroom instructional methods.” It’s hard to argue with such a conclusion, especially if you’ve been thinking back to your own early literacy experiences. You may remember, as I do, a print-rich environment in which unlimited trips to the library and an endless supply of bedside paperbacks
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One of the endorsements on the book cover haunts me. Jim Trelease, author of The Read Aloud Handbook, warns, “McQuillan offers all the evidence needed to stop the silly reading wars, if the generals will only READ IT.” I came away fearful that the generals—such folks as legislators and policymakers—won’t read this book. That puts pressure on the rest of us to deliver the message to headquarters. McQuillan has surveyed the battlefield and organized and summarized the information. Now it’s up to us to see that it gets into the right hands.

I remember my students by the stories they tell, not by their names I briefly learn...—Kim Stafford

The more I remember my own adolescence, the more I watch the world through the eyes of my own teenage daughters, the more I read about mental and physical illness, violence, and tragic loss...the less I wonder why so many first-year students choose, first, to write about death, disease, and dysfunction and, second, to repress in the end what they have just written. In fact, I’ve grown so used to these essays that my question is no longer ‘Why do they write about these things?’ but ‘How could they not write about them?’—Lad Tobin

The writer in me knows that to tell celebratory stories as I have just done is to tell half-truths only. To tell better stories, I need to uncover the ordinary along with the exceptional, the dark along with the light, and admit to complications in my narrative.—Toby Fulwiler

I’ve tried to write this story several times during the thirty years since Dane and I shared a year together, each time attempting to lead up, as I thought fine narrative should, to moments of joy and lamentation, a moral to the story—potent and ripe with possibility—of lessons learned and those unspoken. What I found instead was that the story could not be tamed—one story led to others and each one singly was demonstrably incoherent and irrational. ... You can’t cage memory neatly into words or form.—Ruth Vinz

I tell them that I am often blinded by my own history. I ask them if they are blinded by theirs.—Lilian Bridwell-Bowles

In a significant way the credibility of the course rests on how I behave.... Unless all the students sitting around the table are involved in the process of meaning making, what good does it do to tout the virtues of a participatory pedagogy? —John Clifford

I go to the classroom for connection. I can even say, for love.—Wendy Bishop

Narration as Knowledge:
Tales of the Teaching Life

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