Olivia Farrington

INT-381

11.08.14

**Summary and Review of Literacy for Diverse Learners: Finding Common Ground in Today’s**

**Classrooms**

Honchell, B., Schulz, M. (2007). *Literacy for Diverse Learners: Finding Common Ground in Today’s Classrooms.* Norwood, MA: Christopher~Gordon Publishers, Inc. 292 pages.

 As we were looking over all of the different options for professional texts there were many titles about how to differentiate for the classroom, and they all looked very valuable in different ways. However, there was one in particular that stood out to me called *Literacy for Diverse Learners*. This book stood out for the simple reason that literacy is not optional for students. As teachers we cannot simply look at students who are struggling with literacy and tell them that it is too bad but they can succeed in other areas. Being literate is the basis for student’s entire education. Without a focus on this fundamental skill, the student will most likely not succeed and this cannot be ignored. It is fairly common sense that students do not learn the same, and there have to be adjustments made for this. This concept applies to literacy as well in regards to how they learn, where they are coming from, and what knowledge they bring into the classroom. Melissa Schulz and Barbara Honchell’s book, *Literacy for Diverse Learners* gives the reader an in-depth look at what it means to differentiate for the many diverse students that come through the doors of a school. It does more than give a few helpful hints from their years of experiences, it dives straight into the classroom alongside many experienced educators who were willing to share their vast wisdom as they navigate the ins and outs of differentiation.

 Barbara Honchell and Melissa Schulz have both had years and years of experience working in the classroom and can boast over 40 years of experience combined. Honchell has a PhD in Special Education and Literacy in 2001 from the University of North Carolina and worked as a primary-grade classroom teacher and reading specialist in North Carolina, Indiana and Michigan for many years. She is currently working with first graders at the Reading Recovery Center and also works as an assistant professor at UNC Wilmington. She has a passion for at-risk readers, early literacy, and designing comprehensive literacy programs. Schulz has worked for 10 years as a teacher in Ohio, and in various other grades from second to 6th grade. Hey PhD is in Language, Literacy, and Culture from the Ohio State University. She does a great deal of research on diverse literacy learners, home-school relationships, and family literacy. Now her focus is on preparing teachers and doing professional development for teachers so that they are better suited to help literacy learners develop their reading and writing skills. Obviously both of these ladies have immense experience and passion for their field and wish to share the knowledge they have accumulated. In writing this book they knew that even their great amount of knowledge was not enough to cover the vast different situations that new teachers will be confronted with so they sought out the help of twelve other education professionals. All of these contributors bring with them impressive resumes and experiences that inform all that they write about. The book that results gives not only different ideas for differentiation, but actual ways of applying them as well.

 The book is broken up into three sections, the first being “Issues of Diversity”. These first three chapters deal with the actual issues that pop up as a result of working in diverse classrooms. Before they can explain all these complex strategies, they have to define what a diverse learner actually is. Diverse learners tend to be students who are not from the majority. They are students who are coming from a culture or background that differs from the majority of the students around them. They are culturally and linguistically different from the other students. The authors emphasize that defining diversity is not as important as figuring out how to respond once you have discovered students in your class who fit the general description. One particular pit fall they mention that teachers can get caught in is looking at their students as “at risk”. Teachers see them struggle and assume that the student needs to adjust to fit into the school better, when really the school needs to adjust to fit the needs of the student better. The reality is that they may not be on the same reading level as all the other students, and they may not be able to articulate as well as some of the other students, but this is not a reflection of their intelligence or their ability to learn. It means that as a teacher, it is their job to discern how best help the student access the funds of knowledge the student brings with them and apply it in the classroom. All this will require the teacher to implement effective curriculum, collaborate with colleagues around them, scaffold the students, access the student’s fund of knowledge, and give them a choice in what and how they learn.

Now that this is established, they can dive deeper into how one can actually open up specific learning opportunities for diverse students. The second chapter gives the example of a specific student in an actual classroom who struggled with learning and needed a little extra push. In this situation the teacher tries to build interest with the student in reading by giving him an opportunity to read something that is connected to his life outside of school. It was linked with his own personal interests and showed him that reading is not simply a torture that teachers come up with, but a way to open up the world around you. It is not merely an assignment a student has to do begrudgingly, but an activity that enables him to feel more equipped for life outside of school as well as inside. It shows that once children are encouraged to view themselves as active learners and actual participants in the class, not simply “struggling learners”, they will find more motivation to put in time and effort to improve. Labels restrict students and keep them from realizing that they have just as much right as anyone else to develop their interests, abilities, and identity. Chapter three also gives the example of a specific student, this time a sixth grade student who is behind in reading. It gives specific scores and data that show exactly why she needed help and how the different techniques utilized in her case actually helped her. She was a sweet, smart girl who applied herself, but still found herself unable to meet the standards of the class. Instead of placing her in a “special program” that would inevitably result in a skewed perception of her own abilities and the responsibility of the teacher, the student was taught different strategies to monitor herself while reading. She was taught to look at herself as a capable reader, and recognize whether or not she understood what she was reading or not. She learned to check her own skills, cross-check the information she was gaining from the reading, search for visual cues in the reading, and self-correct without her teacher. All of these techniques allowed her to gain confidence when reading on her own. A great deal of the time that is all the student needs; confidence that they have the ability to learn and improve their skills.

The second section of the book- made up of chapters four through nine- talk about specific classroom practices teachers can implement in their classroom. Chapter four talks about balanced literacy, or knowing how to teach students the strategies they need to succeed and fitting it to how they learn as well. Teachers cannot simply offer up a few strategies and move along. They need to work with students individually and model it for them. It is going to look different for different students and teachers need to be prepared to spend a bit more time diving into how this all works so that it can be applied for the rest of their lives. Chapter five talks about promoting literacy with children coming from a minority background. They need to understand the importance of literacy just as much as all the other students and teachers need to be prepared to relate it to the student’s particular situations. Teachers need to be aware and respectful of children’s different social, cultural, and linguistic differences if they want to actually be effective. They need to set the example for all of the other students. It is the job of the teacher to show what it means to value and respect other cultures and the benefits that result. Classrooms need to be places where kid’s home language and literacy is not stifled, but encouraged and allowed to grow. The next few chapters are describing the importance of a connection between school life and home life. Parents need to be involved in the whole process and given the opportunity to impact their student’s education. It is especially important to encourage students who are bilingual to not ignore their first language. They need to develop in their development of this language as well because learning in that language is equally important as learning in English. If that is how they originally learned to read and write, a teacher will see much more success building off of this as opposed to starting all over in a new language. Another big point brought up in the last chapter of this section is the importance of writing in literacy. Writing is the application of everything learned by reading and hearing other’s writing. It gives the students an opportunity to express themselves in a very important way. Writing cannot be overlooked in a child’s education, especially one who struggles with articulating themselves in a different language.

The final section goes into what all of this means for schools as a whole. They discuss how schools need to shift in order to promote an environment in which all students are given the opportunity to learn. Most of these changes need to begin with the teachers, but then that must spread out so that they are all working together, and then spreading up into administration, and then branching out into the community. One teacher in one classroom cannot change the whole structure of how the school works. It has to be a collaborative effort with all teachers and faculty members pulling together with the support of the families and community around them. Once this is accomplished, so much can change and students will be given more opportunity to succeed than anyone could imagine.

I believe that this book is a valuable resource to any who seek to be effective in the classroom. Diversity in the classroom is a reality and it has to be addressed. It should not be a challenge to overcome, but a resource to be taken advantage of. This book addresses so many different areas that teachers need to be conscious of. I especially appreciate the value that it puts on different cultures. It ridicules the belief that students need to fit into a neat little box and opens up the possibility that being different is a good thing. It also acknowledges that being different does not mean people cannot have things in common. Students can come from all walks of life and still have things that unite them and connect them in impactful ways. This book does a great job of not simply sweeping diversity under the rug, but finding new ways to make it thrive in the classroom.

Literacy is something that is very dear to my heart because I am very passionate about the impact literature has on people. I truly believe that literature can open doors to worlds that people could never have dreamt up, and it inspires people to make their reality more meaningful and daring. Beyond this slightly romantic view however, there is the more basic reason for literacy to be promoted. Being literate opens the doors that allow one to pursue their greatest passions and dreams. *Literacy for Diverse Learners* stresses that teachers need to recognize that it is their job to encourage this belief in children. We need to show kids that school is not simply about being smart and being able to brag about your good scores, its about gaining the knowledge you need to carry you through life. Teaching is about getting to know your students, finding their passions and interests, and encouraging them in the pursuit of these things in relation to school. This book has a clear understanding of this based off the amount of real life examples it gives. It does not simply list off a great deal of meaningless statistics that no one can really understand the relevancy of. It allows the reader to step into these classrooms and learn alongside the struggling learner. It gives you a view that allows you to empathize and learn from the experience of kids who have needed a teacher who actually cares about them and how they are going to succeed. It is very practical in the strategies and applications it provides, but it is very obviously written by people who are passionate about what they are discussing about. They have had a great deal of experience and they want others to benefit from what they have discovered. This makes what they write human. It makes it relatable as well as applicable.

One aspect that I did not feel the book really covered was how to implement all these strategies and help the student when you will typically only teach them for one year. Obviously they want that shift in the schools to result with teachers all being on the same page and pulling in the same direction so that when a student moves up they move into a classroom that will support them in the same way. However this is not entirely realistic from a short-term standpoint. This could very well be the goal of the school, but how long does it take for a school to maneuver into a totally different way of doing things. Even if one teacher is very talented and differentiating in their classroom and they are able to help every single student in their class improve in one year, what happens when those students are moved to another grade where their teacher is not quite so talented? If one teacher is behind in this area, they could set the students right back to where they were before. Not all teachers will be able to switch gears to this new way of looking at literacy, and while some are trying to catch up with the rest, students can be left behind. The book talks a great deal about teaching strategies that will allow students to learn on their own even if their teacher is not supporting them in the same way. However it seems to me that this will work well for some of the older students. But first and second graders are not going to be able to remember specific strategies that will carry them through the next few grades. They need lots of support to build their foundations at this point and consistency with their teachers. I think it would help to have a little bit more information on how to really prepare students and teachers as well so even if teachers are not totally on the same level they can be consistent enough to give students a chance.

Teachers are given a lofty and high goal of ensuring that hundreds of children are prepared for the world that awaits them outside the safe doors of their schools. This job is complicated a bit when you add in the fact that they cannot simply place curriculum in front of a group of students and get the same positive results. Ensuring that students have the ability to read and write and actually comprehend what it is they are doing is no simple task, especially when students learn so very differently. However, I believe with the help of books like *Literacy for Diverse Learners*, teachers are given a better chance at success.

=