Reading Students' Lives: Literacy Learning Across Time

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Review

Compton-Lilly, C. (2017). *Reading students' lives: Literacy learning across time.* New York: Routledge.

Too often, educational research is conducted in the short-term. However, the trajectories of students' success or failure in school develop over time. Longitudinal studies are not prevalent in educational research, but Catherine Compton-Lilly's concluding volume of a ten-year study of ten children highlights the unique insights revealed when children are understood across time. For the children who Compton-Lilly taught as first-grade students, the process of *becoming* as readers, students, and people unfolds over time through repeated discourses, stories, and development of dispositions. Time, according to Compton-Lilly, is a significant factor in how people make sense of themselves and their worlds. This is the fourth volume in a series that focuses on the children.

Although some events in the children's lives are heartbreaking, in *Reading Students' Lives: Literacy Learning Across Time,* Compton-Lilly's provides some hope and direction for schools that exist in communities of high-poverty and work with children of color. Among her major conclusions, she states, "Schooling should be about creating possibilities, not a longitudinal process of cutting off options" (2017, p.44). As she traces these students from first-grade to age 19, Compton-Lilly celebrates the resiliency of the students and families in difficult circumstances and advocates for student-centered schooling that recognizes the need for relationship-building across time and the acknowledgement of the achievement debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that continues to frame education for children of color and those living in high-poverty communities.

As a former classroom teacher, researcher, scholar, and ally of these children, Compton-Lilly has the unique ability to outline theoretical frameworks in a clear and concise manner and then explicitly apply the frameworks to understand the data, and more specifically, the experiences of the ten children and their families. In this volume, she draws from Lemke's (2000) timescale analysis, Bourdieu's (1980/1990) construct of habitus, and Bakhtin's (1981) notion of chronotopic motifs. As a methodology, she uses temporal discourse analysis techniques, which she has developed, to understand how "people make sense of their experiences across and within time" (pg. 28). This technique focuses on the language markers of time that people use and reoccurring stories as they are retold, revised, or ignored. To further clarify her methodology, Compton-Lilly provides a full explanation in an Appendix.

In Chapter 2, Compton-Lilly applies each framework to make sense of Marvin's experiences in and out of school and illustrates how each provides a new lens to understand the complexities of these experiences across time. The importance and impact of understanding children longitudinally is highlighted when she states, in reference to a story about using the library that Marvin's grandfather related when Marvin was in first grade, "I originally interpreted [it] as simply an account of the challenges he faced in learning to read… over the course of the ten-year project, the library recurred as a motif of possibilities" (pg. 15). This is another major conclusion of the volume; that both researchers and educators need to consider the longitudinal experiences of children in schools that transcend traditional linear advancements of grade levels, developmental levels, and progress (or lack of progress). Short-term projects, or a particular grade level, are only snap-shots. Longitudinal studies and experiences with children provide for an opportunity to "view children as complex, nuanced, and multifaceted people with rich histories and experiences" (p. 120).

Besides the exceptional clarity in framing her research, Compton-Lilly is also an accomplished storyteller and the reader is quickly drawn into each of the lives of the ten children. Like her, the reader meets the children as six-year-old children, filled with potential and possibilities, and walk with Compton-Lilly as she revisits the families across ten years. Each family is confronted with a culture of schooling that erects more barriers to the

children's learning than opportunities. Compton-Lilly's use of Bourdieu's construct of habitus shows how, even with involved and caring parents or guardians, the systemic issues of poverty and race hinder successful school trajectories for many of the children. However, Compton-Lilly provides hope in the resiliency of the families and specific recommendations to support student-centered schooling, especially for those children who have been historically underserved.

References

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