



Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy

Victoria Purcell-Gates

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If asked to identify which children rank lowest in relation to national educational norms, have higher school dropout and absence rates, and more commonly experience learning problems, few of us would know the answer: white, urban Appalachian children. These are the children and grandchildren of Appalachian families who migrated to northern cities in the 1950s to look for work. They make up this largely "invisible" urban group, a minority that represents a significant portion of the urban poor. Literacy researchers have rarely studied urban Appalachians, yet, as Victoria Purcell-Gates demonstrates in *Other People's Words*, their often severe literacy problems provide a unique perspective on literacy and the relationship between print and culture.

A compelling case study details the author's work with one such family. The parents, who attended school off and on through the seventh grade, are unable to use public transportation, shop easily, or understand the homework their elementary-school-age son brings home because neither of them can read. But the family is not so much illiterate as low literate--the world they inhabit is an oral one, their heritage one where print had no inherent use and no inherent meaning. They have as much to learn about the culture of literacy as about written language itself.

Purcell-Gates shows how access to literacy has been blocked by a confluence of factors: negative cultural stereotypes, cultural and linguistic elitism, and pedagogical obtuseness. She calls for the recruitment and training of "proactive" teachers who can assess and encourage children's progress and outlines specific intervention strategies.

Other People's Words: The Cycle of Low Literacy Details

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Sarah says

This is an old book, especially for those of us working in ever advancing education field, but it's absolutely worth the time to read. This is a case study of generational illiteracy, and the efforts of Purcell-Gates Victoria to teach a mother and son how to read in the late 1980's. For me this book changed how I understand illiteracy - both the functionality of it in the home, but also how the literate mind operates differently to navigate our high language load society. Purcell-Gates does a wonderful job of illustrating not only the academic challenges for this mother and son, but also the social, economic, and societal affects of this state. She also outlines the theory and practice she put in place to help them learn to read. In all, the only thing missing here is an overdue follow up to the story.

Sarah says

mind blowing. also an easy, quick read, but still powerful.

Jen Freymond says

I just read this for a class I was taking. It was required reading, but an interesting story about illiteracy and its implications in terms of family and social class.

Carol says

This book is a case study of two urban Appalachians, Jenny and her son Donny, neither of whom could read. It documents their initial failure to learn how to read due to their inability to access mainstream culture and their eventual success through learning how print could be meaningful to their lives. This was a very good book. I learned a lot about how my attitudes toward another culture may prevent that student from succeeding in my classroom.

Cassie says

Not wonderfully written or spellbinding by any means, but very interesting. Years after reading it in a college class, I find myself still referencing it.

Taylor says

"At the beginning of his second-grade year, Donny could read only his first name and, with prodding and time to reflect, the word the...Like any other seven-year-old with at least normal intelligence, he had conceptualized his world as he had experienced it."

Other People's Words gives us an invaluable window into the life of a nonliterate family in the United States—an essential narrative to tell—as there are still many people capably navigating life without literacy. By investing two years in Jenny and Donny, Victoria Purcell-Gates shows us the benefits of realizing the abilities that these families **are** endowed with in order to include them in the life of print.

Meghan says

Wow. This book was fantastic. I read it for an Education, Schooling, and Society course, and it really forced me to reevaluate many of the things that I had assumed to be true about education. Growing up, I was read to every day and I saw my parents reading and writing. I had always known that reading to children helps them to succeed in school later, but I had never even considered the effect that it would have to be raised in an illiterate household in a literate society. My greatest issue with this book is that I got emotionally invested in Donny and Jenny, and there is no way for me to know how they turned out. This book was written over a decade ago, so Donny would be older than I am. I want to know if he stayed in school, if he got caught up in school, and how all of this changed the dynamics of his family. All in all, this was one of the best nonfiction books that I have read in a very long time.

shawn mcmichael says

Victoria Purcell-Gates did a masterful job of bringing the reader into the lives of Jenny and Donny a mother and son that are struggling to bring literacy in to their urban Appalachian home and culture. Jenny wants to desperately want to learn to read so can read to her children, help her sons with their school education and navigate the world around. After learning that Donny, her oldest boy was, not going to be held back to repeat 1st grade because he could not read she sought out help at the literacy center at her local University. The story covers a two-year journey in which both Jenny and Donny struggle to become literate.

Evangeline says

I felt like this book gave a great example of the unknown minority and their often time struggles to achieve in a literate world. It was also nice to see that it is possible to teach a completely non-literate person to read!

Wendy Gardiner says

Reread this a part of course preparation. It has been around for a while. Yet, sadly, it's still as relevant as when it came out.

Kat High says

This book gave me SO much to think about. It looks at the impact of growing up in a non-literate or low-literate family has on a child's development of literacy. It speaks of the author's experiences teaching literacy to a mother and son in an entirely non-literate family. It was intriguing and insightful.

Adam Gutschenritter says

I really enjoyed reading this book and learning about this one example of teaching illiterate family how to read, (well two of the four). The writing was simple and the methodology readily apparent. I am looking forward to trying some of the ideas with my own children to encourage stronger reading.

Ann Yanchura says

Powerful record of Purcell-Gates relationship with a non-literate Appalachian family. Although the work is over 15 years old, the problems with education of vulnerable students outside the mainstream persist today.

Melissa says

Very important read for all educators and those who work with youth. The cycle of low literacy in a "hidden" culture is an untalked about but real phenomenon.

Mary Ellen says

This ruled. Purcell-Gates used the same method of recording/transcription that we use in some of our zine-making classes, and it's nice to be reaffirmed that it works well in getting kids excited about expressing themselves.
