Foreword

It is fitting that the publication of *Handbook of Research on Cross-Cultural Approaches to Language and Literacy Development* coincides with the 50th anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March for civil rights and social justice in the United States. For the past half-century, inequitable access to and achievement in school literacy by children of cultural and linguistic minorities has been the single greatest challenge for language and literacy educators. In the last fifty years, we have found that legislation can desegregate schools, that governments and societies can move towards the recognition of principles of racial, cultural and linguistic equity and equality – but this is a long, ongoing struggle. Rarely is this journey a publicly celebrated march or cinematic event – the hard, difficult and at times vexing and at times joyous work of teachers, parents and students in schools and classrooms goes on, everyday, in every state and community.

Of course, prior to the Civil Rights movement of the early 1960s, differential educational achievement by children of African-American, Indigenous, Hispanic/Latino and migrant communities, and by children of economically marginal communities was part of the social fabric of American education. But prevailing scientific accounts of such matters, and the everyday commonsense in many staff rooms amongst principals and teachers was that these were the results, variously, of genetic differences in intelligence, of linguistic and cognitive deficits, of ‘abnormal’ developmental patterns, dysfunctional cultural traditions, and so forth.

Almost universally, mainstream educational systems based on the cultural and linguistic hegemony of a dominant, unmarked group (in this case, White Anglo-American culture) have generated deficit models for explaining the historic underperformance of students from cultural and linguistic minority communities. Deficit models have a simple logic and appeal: the assumption that the cultural practices and identities, rules of exchange, languages, texts and discourses of a dominant culture are an unmarked norm, with given value by nature or destiny, which cultural and linguistic ‘others’ ‘lack’.

As the histories of eugenics, mental measurement and psychology show us – a singular legacy of 18th and 19th century science and colonialism was a belief in monolingualism and monoculturalism: the assumption that one nation = one race = one language. The cracks and fissures in this logic emerged with post World War II migration and later translated into major social change in the Civil Rights Movement, a first culmination of centuries of African-American resistance and struggle. Yet the unprecedented population movement and migration of economic and cultural globalization have upped the educational ante again. State monoculturalism and monolingualism, whether North or South, East or West, in Europe, North America and Asia, remain focal issues of political debate and cultural conflict.

The Civil Rights Movement initially yielded a series of what we now retrospectively term “compensatory” interventions, programs and approaches – which were geared to remediating or ‘fixing’ the
perceived lacks or deficits of minority communities. Supported by government funding, these ranged from *Sesame Street* to *Project Headstart*, from direct instruction in ‘Standard English’ and phonemic awareness to community-based parenting programs. However laudable their intents and defensible their science, these models tended to produce and reproduce deficit premises.

The historical response of the educational research community was determined and focused, setting the terms for the emergence of the “ethnography of communication”, as a scientific and interpretive means for studying linguistic and cultural variation and exchange. Beginning with works like *Functions of Language in the Classroom* (Cazden, Johns & Hymes, 1971), the use of qualitative, ethnographic research to explain the complex relationships between home and community cultures and histories and children’s experience in school was framed by Shirley Heath’s remarkable *Ways with Words*, published in 1982. Heath and contemporaries used interpretive ethnography to document the diversity of everyday cultural and linguistic practices in homes and communities. These practices in turn set the grounds for children’s encounters with the taken for granted norms of schooling. She showed how schools and classrooms frequently misrecognized the capacities and language of African-American children, taking ‘difference’ as a sign of ‘deficit’ and lack. And she further documented how some teachers used their knowledge of children’s lives, communities and linguistic capacities to build and alter the teaching and learning that occurred in schools.

*Ways with Words* – and the many comparable studies of cultural and linguistic minorities that followed – set the grounds for anti-racist, culturally engaged approaches to language and literacy. Yet, not to put too fine a point on it, much of the critique of deficit and the shift towards pluralistic models of ‘cultural difference’ still was undertaken by researchers from ‘Mainstream’, White cultural backgrounds, histories and communities. This is not to diminish in any way the significance and power of this first wave of critical work. These were our teachers – and they set the grounds for our subsequent work. But much of this work remained a representation of a cultural ‘Other’ by an academy that reflected a White, unmarked cultural standpoint, its sympathies and intents notwithstanding.

There was a collateral shift in the 1990s that followed on from the Civil Rights and Feminist movements. The very cultural demographics of the educational research community began to change with the increasing representation and engagement of women, researchers from racially minoritised communities, and gay and lesbian communities. Questions about ‘speaking position’ – the epistemological and cultural history, background and stance of researchers – were placed front and centre. While positivist Western science had been premised on the ‘unbiased’ epistemological and methodological neutrality of the outside observer – researchers, community activists and leaders from many communities raised questions about who had the right to speak and write, about whom, on the basis of which ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ knowledge. In her major treatise on the imperative for Indigenous research, Linda Tuwai Smith (1999) argued for “decolonizing methodologies” that draw upon Indigenous knowledge as a counter to an awful history of the selective use of Western science as a rationalization for colonialism, exploitation and ultimately, genocide.

‘Insider’ knowledge matters. Patriann Smith and Alex Kumi-Yeboah have brought together an outstanding group of researchers and a remarkably coherent set of studies. For once, the research represented here is not ‘about’ cultural and linguistic ‘minorities’ – but is designed by, implemented and written by researchers, teacher educators and educators from and with material ties to those communities.

But there are major challenges that open out from this work. First, the challenge for all of us who write on the basis of histories and biographies that were not part of an unmarked White ‘mainstream’ norm is significant. How do we work across generations with our own communities, and those that our
own academic training and social class mobility has displaced us from, to describe, interpret and engage with the complexity and difficulty of educational issues and institutional conficts they face? The dilemma here is that we often are confronted with the substantive material and historical problems and issues in our communities – and must engage with these without either romanticizing them or further producing a new deficit model.

Second, there is a practical, political and social imperative to move past critique – and through inter-generational anger - to build new affirmative directions, models and programs for schools and teachers. As part multi-racial, multidisciplinary research team, my Queensland colleagues and I recently completed a four-year large-scale empirical study of Australian Indigenous school reform for the Australian Federal Government (Luke, Cazden et al. 2013). One of the key findings of that study was that there had been a generational change in attitude and discourse among Australian non-Indigenous teachers. The vast majority reported a strong commitment to social justice and equity for Indigenous students and their families, to reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Yet their everyday intercultural contact was often negligible. Lacking specialized training and strong pedagogical models, their approaches to curriculum and instruction defaulted back into deficit models of chalk-and-talk, basic skills, and vocational education.

In the “Discourse on Language”, philosopher Michel Foucault (1982) explored the differences between savoir and connoissance, between knowledge and understanding, between knowing ‘that’ and knowing ‘how’, between general, theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. My point is that a shift in educator ‘discourse’ about cultural and linguistic minorities towards models of social justice and equity may have little practical effect sans powerful new and innovative approaches to everyday practice.

The Handbook of Research on Cross Cultural Approaches to Language and Literacy Development marks out yet another overdue way station on the road to civil rights and educational justice. We have moved from ‘deficit models’ to models of toleration and ‘difference’ to much stronger fidelity to ‘insider’ accounts of family, community and school-based language and literacy practices. Particularly in an educational context where a compulsive and narrow focus on accountability and ‘countability’ everyday push schools, principals and teachers for quick fixes and standardized approaches – the focus here on everyday work bringing together classrooms and communities is essential. After all, we live an educational context where all teaching and learning of language and literacy is by definition cross-cultural.

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REFERENCES


