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Book review

Book Smart, A.E. Cunningham, J. Zibulsky. Oxford University Press, NY (2014)

It is long understood that children begin their journey to becoming readers and writers as soon as they are born, and that this literacy development involves many types of skills and knowledge that accrue over time (Roberts, Jergens, & Burchinal, 2005; Ervin & Miller, 1963; Sulzby, 1985; Teale, 1982; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2002). Knowing about the developmental process of literacy practices is a far easier achievement compared with facilitating the development of life-long literacy practices, which is arguably one of the most challenging goals for both parents and educators. *Book Smart* is a much-needed addition to early literacy instructional texts that aim to develop and foster a sustainable love for reading.

The authors of *Book Smart*, Anne E. Cunningham and Jamie Zibulsky, directly address the parents of young children and frame their research-based suggestions as enjoyable literacy practices that provide parents “an opportunity to use cuddle time together as a way to also help your child understand a book more deeply” (p. 1). Throughout this book, the authors outline various activities that will help engage young children in fun print-related activities appropriate for first and second language (L1 and L2) learners of English, particularly shared reading experiences that elicit and support children’s contributions to making meaning from text. Although the intended reader is a new parent, or a parent of young children, the clarity and cohesion of the content (particularly the detailed and illustrated overview of the linguistic components and development of English in the beginning chapters as well as the accessible glossary of terms located in the final pages) would be both appropriate and helpful for any teacher, and especially pre-service teachers of young children. As a teacher educator, I believe that the reviews of seminal studies coupled with sound instructional advice provide a solid foundation for anyone who aims to be a successful agent for fostering successful, life-long engagement in literacy practices for the early grades.

Each chapter presents clear, concrete steps with illustrative examples for engaging children during various stages of the literacy developmental spectrum. The graphic key for indicating intended stage of development (e.g., an icon representing alphabet blocks indicates an activity intended for 4- to 7-year-olds) serves as a cue for the reader as she considers various activities and strategies that may be useful to try with her child, depending on the age and relative stage of development. A section within each chapter is devoted to English language learners (ELLs) and ways to foster and encourage multilingual, multiliterate practices. The authors emphasize the importance of cross-language transfer and offer suggestions for fostering the development of multiple languages. Parent-child discussions about the value in knowing and using different languages (e.g., having explicit conversations about similar words in English and Spanish) help to foster a sense of pride in and motivation for developing the ability to read in more than one language.

The suggested activities for ELLs reflect an approach that allows for children to use a mixture of different languages during literacy activities that include step-by-step instructions for modeling and guiding interactions with children. These activities are intended to build on one another as children gradually develop linguistic expertise through extensive, multiple exposures to models of language practices and texts. Languages that contain many English cognates, like Spanish, are emphasized over other languages, like Mandarin Chinese, which share few similarities. According to U.S. Census Bureau (2011), nearly 21% of American households claim a language other than English as their primary language and nearly 40% of these households claim a primary language other than Spanish or Creole. Future editions of *Book Smart* would benefit from additional considerations of languages that vary in their linguistic proximity to English.

Digital literacy considerations and practices are addressed in sections throughout the book and the authors limit their showcase of websites, applications, and social media to only those that are deemed most likely to remain accessible to readers like the interactive opportunities offered in e-books to look up definitions or to hear highlighted words read aloud. For example, the few applications featured for supporting writing practices in Chapter 3, like *Popplet* and *StoryBuilder*, provide visually engaging structural supports for constructing stories. The authors mention the ease of researching topics online in lieu of trips to the library, with the qualifier that children will need help vetting online sources. Specific guidelines for vetting an abundant supply of candidate texts are somewhat vague; direct navigational guidance though the countless options would be a helpful addition to these technology tips. How should we foster a child’s ability to navigate through multiple, multimodal texts on the Internet? Are there specific questions that would help a young reader begin to consider and make judgments about the quality of various online sources? Facilitating online researching skills may be better suited for older students, but perhaps specific guidelines for helping young children navigate through multiple sources would serve as an effective first step to developing the independent researching skills required for older grades.

Book Smart is organized into seven chapters that follow a general developmental progression. The beginning of each chapter provides an overview of well-established research related to the targeted topic or subject, including illustrative examples from the authors’ personal family and classroom experiences. Well known research studies, such as Hart and Risley’s (1995) longitudinal study that highlighted the importance of many opportunities for parent-child conversations are described in enough detail to provide a fundamental base for the suggested activities. These reviews of prior research are followed by clear illustrations or example scenarios of highlighted concepts and processes. Each chapter ends with an outline of suggested activities and resources for adults to try during their interactions with young children.

The following descriptions summarize the contents of each chapter in turn. Chapters 1 and 2 provide a solid overview of the linguistic components of the English language, describing the semantic, syntactic, phonological and pragmatic dimensions of words that children will acquire and use over time. Many of my students who are pre-service teachers have explained that they learned to identify and read whole words without unpacking the particular phonemes and morphemes contained within. These first two chapters serve as a reader-friendly introduction of linguistic structures in English that would be a valuable addition to any literacy course reading list.

The third chapter explains the development of writing, which is described as an active composition of “reflection and active learning” (p. 150). When we write, we plan and organize our thoughts, which, in turn, helps to foster reading comprehension ability. Each stage of writing (imitation, graphic presentation, progressive incorporation, etc.) is clearly described with ample examples and displays of children’s writing. Again, this chapter is an excellent overview of the key components that are the foundation for successful school literacy practices. The suggestions for encouraging, modeling, and scaffolding writing practices are framed in 15-minute bursts, thus providing parents manageable options. The normal development spectrum is the assumed metric and thus potential delays or unusual difficulties are not explicitly addressed. Additional guidelines for addressing writing difficulties (even suggestions for knowing when to consult an expert) may be a useful addition for parents who are not observing the expected progress with their child’s writing skills.

Story comprehension is one of the most important ways in which people make meaningful connections with imagination and experience (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Gambrell & Jawitz, 1993). The authors emphasize the importance of comprehension in Chapter 4 by explaining that “the process of decoding and identifying words is critical to successful reading, but the true art transcends these mechanics. Comprehension is about lifting the text from the page and incorporating it into our own world of knowledge and experience” (p. 222). While this comment is difficult to refute, it is unclear how their mention of the “simple view” of reading fits into their stance on comprehension. The simple view was initially described by Gough and Tunmer (1986) who suggest that reading comprehension is equated with the abilities of decoding and listening comprehension. Cunningham and Zibulsky state that an individual’s receptive language abilities continue to develop into adulthood, but it is less clear how this ‘simple view’ fits within their definition of comprehension as the integration of text with an young child’s knowledge and experiences. In light of suggestions that the simple view of reading may not fully capture the complexity of comprehension (Zhang & Duke, 2008), some clarification about the authors’ view or theoretical frame of reading comprehension would be helpful. Clearly, this book is not intended primarily to make a theoretical contribution, but even as a practical guide, *Book Smart* would benefit from some theoretical explanation about the foundational ideas that inform the suggested activities for developing readers.

Chapter 5 is fully devoted to the importance of reading volume (i.e., amount of exposure and time devoted to texts). Given Cunningham’s expertise and her seminal work with Keith Stanovich, *What reading does for the mind* published in *American Educator* (1998), this emphasis on multiple reading experiences is expected. Cunningham and Zibulski paint a clear picture for readers by presenting scenarios that follow different children who grow up with different levels of exposure to texts and the respective

consequences of later school literacy achievement. The extensive research in support of reading volume is followed with helpful tips for both parents and educators for fostering the development of avid readers. Particularly helpful are the guidelines for selecting books with the appropriate level of difficulty. The simple outline of the various dimensions for adults to consider (vocabulary, sentence length, length of book, etc.) is a handy flashlight for many who often find themselves in the dark when selecting texts to read with children, whether at home or in the classroom. However, this book offers little beyond trips to the local library for families that cannot afford the varied texts and technological tools that are helpful for facilitating early literacy practices in the home. Additional resources (e.g., specific guidelines for accessing technology such as an audio recorder) for low-income families would be very helpful. Further, it would be important that this book is featured in public libraries to ensure greater access.

The final two chapters emphasize the social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of reading, and reading as often as possible. Books, whether in physical or digital form, provide adults an opportunity to listen to and connect with children in such a way that will have lasting effects on their motivation and love for reading. *Book Smart* will undoubtedly help many parents who strive to support their children as they grow into independent, lifelong readers, and I hope that this book finds its way into the hands of many teachers as well.

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