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Professional Materials

Jeanne M. Jacobson
Western Michigan University

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Professional Materials

Literature Instruction: Practice and Policy. Edited by James Flood and Judith A. Langer. Scholastic, 2891 East McCarty St., Jefferson City MO 65102. 1994. ISBN: 0-590-49756-1. 184 pp.

Written with logic, elegance and passion, the nine essays in this eminently readable and quotable collection inspire as they inform. Judith Langer's opening essay sets a positive tone, based on her own experience in classrooms where students' interactions about literature take the form of "reaching toward a horizon of possibilities," and learner-centered instruction enables all to develop rich understandings and find joy in reading. But her essay is not wholly optimistic. In most classrooms, she notes, the study of literature still has a right-answer focus. Two of the most joyous chapters are those by Victoria Purcell-Gates and Nancy L. Roser, whose descriptions of young children's responses to literature demonstrate how enriching it would be if literature instruction were guided by best existing practice in preschools and kindergartens. In contrast, James Marshall's powerful essay on "Ability Grouping and the Teaching of Literature," is the most somber. Tracking practices at the high school drive earlier teaching, and are driven by forces outside the school, so that even teachers of advanced placement students feel constrained to prepare their students for narrowly envisioned higher learning and careers, while teachers of students referred to by classmates as bottom-of-the barrel must cope with student rage. The concluding essay, by James Flood and Diane Lapp, discusses "winds of change," urging attention to the success stories that already exist, and noting that for widespread change in literature instruction to occur, "ample time has to elapse for success stories to amass." (JM)