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Review of

**B. Burnett, D. Meadmore & G. Tait (Eds) (2004) 'Contemporary Questions'.
Pearson Education, Australia: Sydney.**

Submitted to 'Literacy Learning: The Middle Years'

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As the discussion provided in *Contemporary Questions* reminds us, it can be difficult to remember or imagine a time when 'literacy' was not as central as it now is to educational debate, policy and practice in Australia (Dooley, 2004, p. XX). Thus, as contemporary literacy teachers we should be continually engaged with the notion that the content we teach, the way we teach it, and the pedagogical relations we negotiate with our students are **not 'normal' or 'natural'**. Rather, content and pedagogical strategies and relations are **socially and culturally constructed**, making it necessary for us to problematise the way that we do our work and assess the way that we advantage or disadvantage various groups of students. Yet when I peruse the teacher resource shelf of a school library or the professional development collection of individual teachers, it seems as though so much of it is orientated to 'improving' their content knowledge or pedagogical repertoires. There seems to be less orientation to discussions of the bigger picture of our work as literacy teachers. In what follows, I review a text, published this year by Pearson Education Australia, which encourages teachers to **consider the effects of their work from a socio-cultural perspective**. While the discussion contained within *Contemporary Questions* does not provide teachers with a blue print for a way forward, it does help middle school teachers and administrators to consider the bigger picture as it relates to their localised context.

The text is divided into three overarching sections, the first of which is entitled '**How do we govern?**'. **Gordon Tait** leads off with a chapter that argues that 'good' teachers are also implicit in producing '**docile normalised citizens**'. He explores the disciplinary outcomes of the examination, school uniforms, codes of behaviour, timetabling and record keeping. He argues that schooling is an institution that is based on white Western middle class values and desires that is consumed with producing compliant self-governing **literate** and employable citizens. In the next chapter, **Daphne Meadmore** focuses on the 'rise and rise' of '**testing cultures**', such as centralised examinations, and state and national testing program. She discusses how they can become a disciplinary practice, not only for students and their families, but also for teachers, schools and education systems. While Meadmore concedes that it is possible for some positive outcomes to be generated, such as providing remediation and sources of funding, she states that teachers need to explore ways to reduce the negative effects, such as the way

that tests drive the curriculum and determine who is a 'good' student or teacher. Moreover, she implores teachers to have a healthy skepticism of assessment technologies that might be inappropriate, unfair, used for the wrong reasons or reproduce social and cultural bias in favour of already dominant groups. In the final chapter of section one, **Jillian Brannock** continues to employ a sociological framework to support her argument that some problems teachers face, such as student homeless, poverty, resistance to school, or school-aged mothers **may be social in orientation rather than located in the individual**. She draws on a case study of one successful program that shifts away from an individual 'deficit' focus to a more holistic community based emphasis on prevention.

In Section Two, 'title', **Karen Dooley** explores the arguments and counter arguments of the **'truth about literacy'**. Dooley suggests that new forms of literate practices must be created in the context of new conditions of communication, work, consumption and community. These new literate capabilities require students to be technologically savvy, inter-culturally competent and critically capable. Yet, she concludes that the negative panoptic effect occurs when benchmark testing takes no account of bilingualism, health problems or emotional problems of cultural incompatibility between students' home-life and the standardized testing regime. In the chapter that follows, **Daphne Meadmore** explores how changes in government policy for education have emphasised the divide between the 'haves' and have-nots' by continuing to demand the **cultural participation and linguistic competence that favour middle class students**. She examines how social class categorisation works in and through education to produce advantage and disadvantage and suggests that teachers can help bring about change, and hence, different outcomes, through curricula reform. While Meadmore cautions that such a reform will not be easy, she reminds us that it is part and parcel of our professional responsibility. **Sandra Taylor** authors a discussion that focuses on how **gender shapes schooling experiences**. Taylor provides a framework for understanding the construction of gender relations in society, and the role of education in re-producing and changing gender inequalities for girls and boys who are the most disadvantaged through society. She discusses the often cited 'What about the boys?' debate and concludes that there needs to be a focus on the differences within gender groups and the disaggregation of whole group data for an adequate understanding of the issue so that schooling can become a site where change can occur. In his chapter, **Bruce Burnett** analyses the recasting of socially constructed forms of identity for groups of people. He provides some topical discussion on the positioning of the 'Other', in particular Indigenous people as Other and notes the way that the Other is marked in ways that exclude. Burnett notes that racism, or more aptly, **culturalism**, is not so much located in the individual, but within the institution and systems which regulate our society. He encourages teachers to begin to think about how new forms of discriminatory practices are often packaged and labelled within a discourse of 'mainstream'. **Jean Phillips, Jo Lampert** and **Annah Healy** focus their discussion on on **differences in literacy practices across cultural groups**. They critique the way that Indigenous students who want to be successful in mainstream Australian education have little choice but to abandon their own **highly complex literacy systems** and take up a white Western literacy system. Phillips, Lampert and Healy examine the conceptual difficulty and colonising effects of this process. They implore teachers to find ways to

challenge current culturally biased practices in literacy education that do not position Indigenous students and their culture and language as exotic.

The third section of this text, 'title', re-introduces the work of **Bruce Burnett** who examines the broader social issues brought about by a burgeoning range of **multi-literacies**. He argues that new multi-literacy practices are tied to new cultural and social practices that differ significantly from traditional print based practices, in particular, in terms of new rules and a separate logic that is not fixed to established chirographic, print traditions, or linear-based narrative constructions. He provides an example of the way that web based texts, via the combination of sound, movement, image, and hyper-links, introduce elements of fluidity that enables texts to be reconstituted in innumerable ways that are devoid of any predetermined linear line of reasoning or argument. In the next chapter, **Peter Meadmore**, critiques the notion of **devolution**, that is the process whereby schools in centralised education systems are supposedly given authority and responsibility to make decisions about their own operation. However, he unmasks the repositioning of control and power and concludes that devolution still effectively keeps authority and control out of schools. In the final chapter, **Anne Hickling-Hudson** and **Jo-Anne Ferrara** review Hedley Beare's predictions that the generation being born now will live and work in a multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-faith setting in which white people are likely to be an ethnic minority and the important world languages will be Chinese, Spanish, French, Japanese and Korean. These predictions have the potential to **change the form, delivery and content of education** in a fundamental way. Moreover, Hickling-Hudson and Ferrara suggest that teachers should be considering the role of education in the lives of students who may not have work as its central feature. They suggest that a teacher's job should be focused on teaching students to critique and think beyond the old modernist categories of culture, race and nation that have divided the world since colonial times. They also suggest that students need to understand the arguments focused on environmental sustainability so they can make sense of the scientific interpretations and proposed solutions. Finally, they implore teachers to help students to deconstruct advertising and consumerism, so that they are able to resist the temptation of acquiring more and more goods that are not needed.

In summary, this edited collection encourages teachers to **reflect on their own viewpoint** as literacy educators and to make visible the sometimes invisible, and often negative, outcomes of their pedagogic practice. The core purpose is to have teachers better understand the complex and multi-layered issues that beset the curriculum areas, the students and our work as literacy teachers. Such reflection has enormous currency for middle years teachers and administrators who are grappling with the organisation of middle years content, pedagogy and evaluation.