Though this themed issue of *Language Arts* focuses on teacher performance assessment, our reviews vary in perspective. Two of our reviews address this issue head on: Dana Goldstein’s *The Teacher Wars* traces the problematic roots and the poor outcomes of many educational reforms; Linda Darling-Hammond’s groundbreaking *The Flat World and Education* also situates issues like teacher performance within a global context. While these two books echo many of the findings from articles you will read in this issue, our other reviews take a look at a range of books like Alice McIntrye’s 1997 book, *Making Meaning of Whiteness*. Though it may seem odd to review a book that is nearly 20 years old, our reviewer reminds us that turning to books, even those published long ago, helps us understand our present as much as our past. Our other two reviews are new works that we felt compelled to share. In *The Story of My Thinking*, Gretchen Bernabei and Dottie Hall help us meet new demands in writing instruction in ways that are true to what we know about meaningful composition. Then Kathy Collins and Matt Glover remind us of the significance of early childhood and early reading behaviors in *I Am Reading*, highlighting the need to put our instructional focus into thoughtful reading, thinking, and teaching.

*I Am Reading*, Gretchen Bernabei and Dottie Hall

The lively history of public school teaching uses what sociologists term “a moral panic” to describe the most dominant conflagrations that have plagued the teaching profession over the past two centuries. In a moral panic, the media and policy makers focus on a single group of people (such as poorly trained public school educators) as emblems of a large, complex social problem (the failure of universities to train highly qualified teachers). The media repeats examples of mediocre teaching again and again, such as the 1980 *Texas Monthly* piece “Why Teachers Can’t Teach” in which Gene Lyons reported that students enrolled in teacher education classes at a Texas university were functionally illiterate. This led him to
conclude that teacher credentialing was “a hoax and an educational disgrace” (p. 169).

Goldstein documents recurring attacks on educators as well as a number of failed ideas in the name of educational reforms that reoccur across different time periods, much like a bad penny. She cites, for example, the case of teacher bonuses paid to teachers whose students get higher test scores. She found that this type of merit pay was attempted in the 1920s, early 1960s, and the 1980s, as well as within the last 10 years. “It never worked to broadly motivate teachers or advance outcomes for kids” (p. 6). And across the last century, teacher-rating systems and performance assessments have been used to identify more teachers as unfit and to have them fired. These evaluation schemes have proven too difficult to implement or the tools too ineffective in practice.

Of course, the goal here is to bring more highly qualified candidates into the teaching profession. This has lead to another bad penny idea—fast-track teacher training programs or alternative certification programs (to circumvent traditional teacher education institutions). These schemes have historically been implemented on a scale so small that they do not improve instruction for kids. While within each of these examples there are real problems that need to be addressed, the “moral panic” ideas that are set forth as “simple solutions” consistently fail to address the underlying problems.

As a way to document the different historical eras, Goldstein tells the story of each educational reform era through the stories of teachers and reformers enacting their dreams for change. These stories paint rich pictures and lay out the tensions as teachers have been asked to close troubling social gaps and reach for high ideals set by laws, politicians, philanthropists, intellectuals, business leaders, activists, the media, school administrators, and parents. The debates address questions of who should teach, what should be taught, and how teachers should be educated, trained, hired, paid, evaluated, and fired (p. 5).

The portrayals of life and battles fought in each era are covered in 10 chapters that explore, for example, the common schools movement that feminized our teacher corps, teaching during and after the Civil War, and the birth (and potential death) of teachers’ unions. Goldstein describes the wars teachers have bravely fought and the impacts that resulted. A final chapter outlines the lessons from this history that have a chance of improving teaching in our future. I’m a history nerd, but I strongly recommend this book for your enjoyment! (DED)


Linda Darling-Hammond’s book, The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future, reveals the serious and potentially calamitous consequences of “our continuing comfort with profound inequality” (p. 8) in the American education system. She asserts that the funding structure of our education system perpetuates institutionalized racism and classism and creates disparities that have caused education in the United States to decline “while more focused nations move rapidly ahead” (p. 9). In light of the “flat and changing” world in which we live, America cannot afford to fail our students, in part because they will eventually become our workforce—a workforce that will have to compete with other workforces around the globe.

This compelling and easy-to-follow text explores the nature and causes of the opportunity gap—“the accumulated differences in access to key educational resources” (p. 28). Darling-Hammond uncovers the history of the opportunity gap in the
United States, tracing it back to segregation and a factory-based model of education designed to sort students into professions deemed appropriate for their given race or class. After a compelling and detailed analysis of the problem, she offers examples of districts, states, and nations that have successfully created “a teaching and learning system that provides excellent education to all students” (p. 26). She draws on these examples to develop a comprehensive strategy to reform the American education system. As she develops this strategy, she examines how “policy that enables high-quality teaching,” “strong school organizations,” and a “supportive policy system pointed at the goals that matter most” (p. 26) can be combined to create an effective and equitable education system.

Darling-Hammond’s unique blend of progressive and neo-liberal logic is persuasive, and her argument is thoroughly researched and well documented. She makes it clear that “it is not only possible but imperative” that we “address the yawning opportunity gap,” because “as a society, we all profit from the full development of one another’s abilities” (p. 328). (JS)

Making Meaning of Whiteness: Exploring Racial Identity with White Teachers

The adage “the more we change, the more we remain the same” is appropriate to describe the current state of affairs regarding racism in the United States. As Sleeter (1977) stated almost four decades ago, the era of the post-civil rights movement witnessed “the turning back of the clock as white people increasingly believe that not only was racism remedied during the 1960s and 1970s, but also that people of color now have systematic advantages over whites” (p. ix). McIntyre’s book Making Meaning of Whiteness becomes a classic worth reading or re-reading to refresh our memory and acknowledge how much we have moved forward as well as how much we have remained the same.

Deconstructing privileges and critiquing roles as oppressors is not a common practice in American society. The normalization of Whiteness, its ways of being, as well as the perpetuation of what McIntyre calls “white-as-victim-syndrome” (p. 52)—which continues to be absorbed by Whites, thus reproducing a culture of racism—are central themes in the book. McIntyre offers food for thought as we explore the different ways in which our societies construct, reconstruct, and perpetuate Whiteness as the norm. She also brings attention to the use of White talk—the kind of talk White people use to insulate them from examining the ways in which we, individually as well as collectively, contribute to the perpetuation of racism. A detailed analysis of dialogues held with White, middle class, preservice teachers who participated in her study offered McIntyre material with which to develop some theoretical and practical strategies that could shed light into the routes available “to disrupt the sanctification of Whiteness” (p. 149).

McIntyre’s book is an important resource for educators. Considering that the landscape of the American classroom keeps changing and becoming more diverse, it is imperative that educators examine the way they fit into the large scheme of the educational system and take an active role in the debunking of stereotypical assumptions about students of color. As McIntyre demonstrated in her book, difficult discussions are worth pursuing. They might not yield immediate change, but somehow they leave a mark. After all, it is necessary to remember that being cognizant of who we are and how we affect others is a continuous process of becoming, not a single event in our lives. (PA)
Writing has a new position of prominence in the classroom, and with this new position, there are increased expectations for the teaching of writing. Students are now expected to master the art of argument writing as well as other forms of expository writing. This focus on expository writing is creating new challenges for teachers. A big part of the challenge is that teachers see exposition as separate from narration, which for Thomas Newkirk (2014) is erroneous. Newkirk reminds us that narration is the framework for all good writing, and it is impossible to understand both our experiences and the world around us without the structure of stories to hold information together. Thus, exposition and narration are inextricably linked. Bernabei and Hall embrace this thinking in their book *The Story of My Thinking: Expository Writing Activities for 13 Teaching Situations*, in which they help teachers approach the teaching of expository writing by linking it with creative writing and blurring the barriers that separate the writing genres.

The book is organized in a reader-friendly way. There are 13 chapters based on teaching situations. As Bernabei and Hall write, “This book is for teachers who need a lesson but don’t have time to read a book before applying it” (p. xx). Each chapter begins with a description of the teaching situation followed by a short summary of the lesson. Also included are details of how the authors would teach the lesson, complete with a sort of step-by-step transcript of the lesson sequence. The authors, however, are quick to point out that the transcripts are guides rather than edicts, and teachers are encouraged to make each lesson their own. Teachers have the freedom to navigate the book based on their immediate needs and to adapt each lesson to fit their teaching styles. Also included in some of the chapters are such things as basic steps, ideas for lesson adaptations or extensions, and ways to debrief students.

A theme throughout the book is the idea that teachers begin bridging the gap between narration and exposition by using students’ memories and ideas as the raw material for academic writing. In chapter two, “Personal Narrative with Reflection,” the authors show teachers how to move students from creating a list of important moments in their lives to writing an essay. From the list of important moments, students choose one moment. They then answer a series of questions about the moment and form what Bernabei and Hall call a “kernel essay.” Students engage in writing a variety of these kernel essays over time. From the kernel essays, students choose one kernel essay to develop into a full essay by adding details, which are outlined in a series of “text icons.” There are 14 text icons students can choose from that provide guidance for adding details to their writing and drawing from such things as talking, thinking, sounds, and physical reactions. Bernabei and Hall encourage teachers to add to the list of text icons.

The book is filled with valuable resources for teachers to aid in the teaching of the lessons. One of the resources is a list titled “Text Structures: A Growing Collection.” Here, teachers will find a list of structures for all types of writing, both narrative and expository, that show, via graphic organizers, what each structure entails with easy to follow statements and/or questions. In addition, there is an assortment of planning sheets for many of the structures and a host of student writing samples throughout the book that show the development of student writing across the genres. The student samples are proof that expository writing can be both informative and engaging.

For teachers struggling to teach expository writing and meet the demands of a new writing curriculum, this book is a must-have. The easy to follow lessons, the practical classroom engagements, and the vast collection of resources make this a necessity for every teacher’s professional library. (VAO)
If you are a parent, an aunt, a teacher, a grandparent, you have seen young children long before they enter school sit with books, narrating stories from memory and describing the action in pictures. We watch videos on Facebook where people post toddlers reading with intonation, all the while holding a book upside down. In *I Am Reading: Nurturing Young Children’s Meaning Making and Joyful Engagement with Any Book*, Kathy Collins and Matt Glover call out the educational malpractice that has swept across early childhood contexts in the United States wherein younger and younger children are not spending quality time with books but instead completing worksheets and sitting, sitting, sitting all the day long. Collins and Glover ring the alarm bells about how grade-level reading expectations have increased since 2000, often calling for preschoolers to read conventionally by the end of the year. Word lists for many kindergartners grew from 25 words in 2000 to over 75 in many districts today.

Collins and Glover warn us, “When we teach reading as if the only objective is to climb levels, we’re inadvertently creating reading identity issues among those children who aren’t yet reading the hardest books” (p. xiv). In this book, the authors refocus our attention on what young children do with books as they develop meaning making dispositions and strong reading identities before decoding ever enters the reading picture. Standing on the shoulders of reading giants like Ken and Yetta Goodman, Elizabeth Sulzby, Jerome Harste, and many others, the authors brilliantly describe young children’s reading behaviors as they turn pages of a book, verbally telling the story of Mo Willems’s *Knuffle Bunny* (2004), and guide readers to see the same event through three different lenses—the cute lens, the no big deal lens, and the reading lens.

I imagine many readers will see themselves as teachers, parents, and family members with each of these lenses. Collins and Glover ask us to see children’s reading behaviors through the reading lens, and to not see their early reading as “cute,” even though we are often charmed by children’s independent storytelling, or to ignore children’s work as “no big deal,” because we too easily miss the significance of the important developmental work at hand in the moment and over time. We must recognize how our teaching and understanding of reading shifts when we view children’s talk about books through the “reading lens.” Ultimately, Collins and Glover foreground meaning making as the foundation of all reading and reading behaviors: “Reading is an interaction with a text during which the reader uses a variety of resources within the text (i.e., words, pictures, graphic elements, etc.) and within themselves (schema, skills, strategies) to make meaning” (p. 11).

The authors do not leave us without hope for growing readers in early childhood; instead, they cautiously share with us language levels and characteristics of children’s early interactions with texts. I appreciate the hesitancy they share because they know all too well how often levels are used to define children’s reading identities. They are careful to remind readers how children may use limited language to describe a book about an unfamiliar topic but share books about their favorite topics with ease. After sharing several kinds of language levels with familiar and unfamiliar texts, the authors then offer examples of how teachers may support students in growing their meaning making through talk about illustrations, and how children’s language can grow to include literary transitions over time. These examples and chapters are not scripts, but instead they are possibilities for those of us who may not have thought much about young children’s time with text as crucial to reading for meaning and to identity work.

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I Am Reading also comes to life through the many videos of classrooms and conferences where we watch teachers like Matt Glover talk about books with young children, affirm that they are reading just as they should be, and gently invite them to try new strategies. We peek into classrooms and see mini-lessons where teachers are teaching children all about reading like the 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds that they are. In addition, the book gives teachers a vision for reading workshop in preschool through first grade that honors where children are and extends their learning over time. Collins and Glover implore readers to recognize the need for “free range reading” (p. 133) and offer strategic ways to think about “just right reading” in our literacy curriculum. I have no doubt that, after reading this book, your reading lens will be highly focused on young readers as makers of meaning. (TTL)

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