



Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education

Catherine Jean Prendergast

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In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Catherine Prendergast draws on a combination of insights from legal studies and literacy studies to interrogate contemporary multicultural literacy initiatives, thus providing a sound historical basis that informs current debates over affirmative action, school vouchers, reparations, and high-stakes standardized testing.

As a result of *Brown* and subsequent crucial civil rights court cases, literacy and racial justice are firmly enmeshed in the American imagination—so much so that it is difficult to discuss one without referencing the other. Breaking with the accepted wisdom that the *Brown* decision was an unambiguous victory for the betterment of race relations, *Literacy and Racial Justice: The Politics of Learning after Brown v. Board of Education* finds that the ruling reinforced traditional conceptions of literacy as primarily white property to be controlled and disseminated by an empowered majority. Prendergast examines civil rights era Supreme Court rulings and immigration cases spanning a century of racial injustice to challenge the myth of assimilation through literacy. Advancing from *Ways with Words*, Shirley Brice Heath's landmark study of desegregated communities, Prendergast argues that it is a shared understanding of literacy as white property which continues to impact problematic classroom dynamics and education practices.

To offer a positive model for reimagining literacy instruction that is truly in the service of racial justice, Prendergast presents a naturalistic study of an alternative public secondary school. Outlining new directions and priorities for inclusive literacy scholarship in America, *Literacy and Racial Justice* concludes that a literate citizen is one who can engage rather than overlook longstanding legacies of racial strife.

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