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## Review of The vulnerable heart of literacy: Centering trauma as powerful pedagogy.

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Review of Dutro, E. (2019). *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Who can describe how trauma is expressed in classrooms today? Only the children, families, and educators with personal experience. While several programs exist as an attempt to address this question, Elizabeth Dutro (2019) provides a stunning and powerful perspective with her new book, *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy*. The purpose of this book is to provide classroom teachers with strategies to implement compassionate and critical approaches for trauma in schools. Dutro discusses cultivating loving and humanizing classrooms through the process of bringing difficult life experiences as essential components to school literacy. Dutro reminds educators that children are not fragile beings whom we need to save, but to honor trauma in classroom communities by inviting (never requiring) children to testify and witness life experiences through literacy contexts. This seems like a heavy lift, right? Let's explore a little more.

In the first chapter, educators begin this enriching journey learning about what trauma means for literacy classrooms. Dutro and her team work with a myriad of children who experience trauma – examples include death of loved ones through illness, accident, or violence; separation or threat of separation from family via parental separation or divorce, incarceration, deportation, child protective services, and/or the foster care system; and loss of stable housing or living situations. Readers learn how to craft “classrooms that enfold children experiencing sudden or ongoing challenges in affirmation and support that are built into both the curriculum and the familiar instructional routines of literacy classrooms” (p.21).

Next, Dutro illustrates pedagogies of testimony and critical witness concepts and what they may look like in the literacy classroom. *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* highlights three key tenets relating to pedagogies of testimony and critical witness. The first tenet—reciprocity—is outlined in chapter two. Dutro portrays the importance of educators being vulnerable and

bringing their own difficult experiences into the public space of classrooms. These spaces are opportunities to determine ways for “demonstrating solidarity for students, families, and colleagues who were living intersecting and/or different identities from our own; challenging colleagues' deficit language about students and families; or sharing with students and other educators stories of personal experience of racial and other marginalization in school” (p.44). Educators providing testimony position students as witnesses first, which serves as an invitation and sanctions students to draw on their own deeply felt life experiences as sources and resources for school literacies. The second tenet describes how educators are critical witnesses for children. Critical witnesses take a stand against deficit conversations targeting our children in public education systems and take steps to advocate for social justice. The final tenet reiterates the need for testimony and critical witness for trauma being integrated in school literacy practices through, “purposeful use of familiar instructional practices, such as many lessons, and the modeled writing, topic choices, multimodal projects, literature choices, and text discussion that occur within them” (p.42).

After Dutro eloquently explains the relevance and urgency of centering trauma as pedagogy, she uses the next three chapters to provide concrete, engaging instructional scenarios across genres, including student work and dialogue samples. She and a team of colleagues spend three years in several elementary classrooms, from second grade through fifth grade designing and documenting literacy practices that engage with trauma in ways that are productive, connective, and critical. These studies of pedagogies and practices addressing trauma find that we can trace children's testimonies to trauma across genres and across the school year. Dutro describes one of her studies, showing how after the first 6 weeks of school, one teacher began building opportunities for reciprocal testimony and witness into her literacy

curriculum. At the end of the study, children were comfortably sharing all types of personal stories. The teacher's "intentional move toward reciprocal testimony and witness in her formal literacy instruction resulted in learning more about her students' lives" (p.71). Dutro depicts how it is courageous, yet intrinsically rewarding work to delve deep into one's own stories and find meaningful connections across literary genres.

The final chapter of this book concludes with a fervent call for educators to embrace difficult experiences, of whatever source and kind, as integral to classroom literacies. These experiences have and will always be present in the lives of children and families in school communities. Dutro gently reminds us that, "centering trauma includes centering joy. The joy of trauma arrives with connections to others, and risking vulnerability, and opportunities to see and absorb children's capacities for empathy and compassion and experiencing how a child's investment ignites when bringing the depths of life to school literacy" (p.134).

While *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* provides examples at the elementary level, the strategies and message can certainly be applied across PK-12 classrooms. The research Dutro describes in this book clearly connects with other studies (Paris & Winn, 2014) related to social justice through informational literacy instruction, such as youth participatory research projects. All people's knowledge is valuable. All individuals have the right to self-determination and their perspectives are important. Classroom community environments need to be cultivated in a way that fosters collaborative work so that our children are able to realize their full human capabilities.

Although a relatively quick read, educators will close this book with the ability to better connect with children and families by using trauma as a strong pedagogy for literacy. *The Vulnerable Heart of Literacy* is a magnificent resource for educators. The proposed strategies

are immediately applicable—our children are ready. Drawing from research related to critical literacy (Johnson & Vasudevan, 2012), Dutro illustrates how asserting the value of a child's and his or her family's personal and cultural experience in the context of literacy builds the foundation for the development of critical literacy. Children are developing critical literacy skills when they are able to acquire more than a mere set of skills. Children must have ways of interacting with print that represent who they are in relation to others (Dozier, Johnston, & Rogers, 2006). Educators can be powerful leaders in insisting on compassionate and critical approaches for centering trauma as powerful pedagogy. Children must have the opportunity to pull from all dimensions of their lives as origins and resources for literacy learning. By doing so, educators better understand how children draw on the richness of their lives to nurture their own and others' literacies and learning.

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Sage.