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BOOK REVIEW

Children, language, and literacy: Diverse learners in diverse times, by Celia Genishi and Anne H. Dyson. Published by Teachers College Press, New York, NY, 2009 (157 pages).

Diversity is the norm. This is one of the major themes that this book, *Children, Language, and Literacy*, highlights. With this premise, the authors start off by calling the readers' attention to the huge disconnect between the school's one-size-fits-all curriculum and students' diverse upbringing and background. The mandated curriculum advocates the uniform practice of instruction despite the fact that children in the class are hugely different from each other. Teachers in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten in the US are now pressured to help their students master certain oral and written language skills in preparation for the standardized testing upon their entry to first grade. However, since each child is unique, it is almost impossible to standardize the learners or their language learning. In fact, since there is a growing number of non-English speaking children going to school with English as their second or even third language, it makes the situation difficult for teachers to assess what exactly is the "appropriate" language learning that they should acquire at their age.

Mistakes young learners make in their use of the language, as Genishi and Dyson suggest, can either be a "linguistic difference characteristics" (p. 24), as in the case of African American Language speakers, or a developmental one. Hence, it is important for teachers to be conscious that, in their dealings with the children, they should not in any way send a message that they devalue the children's use of their vernacular language. The most important goal in teaching these young learners is to help them "adapt to, participate in, and negotiate a range of communicative situations in our sociolinguistically complex world" (p. 21).

Language learning is a complex social process, and each child's experience with learning a language varies. According to the authors, the issue here is that children's linguistic variations are seen as problems instead of being viewed as "the basis of children's communicative repertoire" (p. 30). Effective language and literacy teaching should expand the lesson using what students know, and building on their prior experiences. Teachers might do well to consider setting reasonable goals for each child based on what they know about each of their

student's capabilities, bearing in mind that there is no generic child or language—there are only children and languages.

The authors show that linguistic differences are not tantamount to inability or deficiency. The fact that more and more kids who come from non-English speaking homes attend pre-K classes, learning certain grammatical features of the English language cannot be imposed upon them yet since they are, to use the authors' suggested term, "emergent bilinguals" (p. 36). This means that their "potential to learn more than one language" is becoming recognized. With this in mind, children should be given time—unhurried time—as they grapple their way in their use of language(s) for their classroom discourse.

Another element that should be included in young learners' classroom curricula is play. Children should always be given opportunities to play for it is there that they engage in meaning-making activities. The authors suggest that through play, children learn language(s), develop communicative flexibility, and build up their own conceptions of themselves and others, for play is a "socially complex communicative act" (p. 61). Momaday (1999) even takes it further in his book *In the Bear's House* in the imaginary conversation between Bear and Yahweh, with the latter affirming that "language is child's play" (as cited in Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 58). Indeed this is so, for when children play, stories begin and their imagination starts to work. Through these activities, children "move both through and across time and space" (p. 80), and they learn to become fluent users of the language as they adapt and display flexibility in their language use as the play situation requires.

The authors argue that "social relations and symbolic play are critical resources for written language learning, just as they are for speaking" (p. 81). It should be remembered, however, that because of children's diverse background, "what they learn from any encounter 'cannot be prespecified or predetermined'" (Nelson, as cited in Genishi & Dyson, p. 82). The authors, therefore, advocate that teachers must be decision-makers as they face the disconnect between the mandated curriculum and the child's *real* needs. Teachers must learn which aspect they should prioritize at certain points in time—fluency and creativity or accuracy and standard. In addition, teachers will do well to remember that textbooks and other school-related literature are not the only helpful writing resources. Varied inputs—family, peers, television, games—all help them prepare as they learn how to write. Thus, teachers must be careful in pushing young kids to learn "the basics" because this might cause the teachers to miss helping the kids learn the "most 'basic' skill of all—the capacity for social participation and effective communication" (p. 109).

In assessing children's language learning and literacy, Genishi and Dyson seem to propose that "standardized testing is negatively affecting the youngest students" (p. 112). Teachers are advised to turn to other methods in assessing

children's learning, pointing out that communicative flexibility is the goal to be achieved. Literacy learning should not just be a mastery of a list of skills to be tested. With this principle, assessment truly becomes an "ongoing, complex process" (p. 116) where ongoing observation of the children serves as the foundation for assessment.

To sum it up, in advocating for a more child-centered and child-friendly curriculum and instruction practices, Genishi and Dyson (2009) highlight the following concepts:

- Curricular and sociolinguistic flexibility
- Multitemporality and flexible classroom clocks
- Play as the essence of flexible curricula in inflexible times, and
- A future when diversity is the norm. (p. 138)

Children, Language, and Literacy is a book that calls for teachers to go beyond teaching what the standardized curriculum mandates, which is frequently a one-size-fits-all type of instruction. Genishi and Dyson point out that children in the classroom are hardly similar to each other, so there is really no reason for the instructional approaches to be uniform.

This book promotes diversity as the norm, and celebrates the plethora of differences children bring in the classroom. It features stories of several children who have starkly different experiences with oral and written language learning, which are impossible to measure against one specific standard. Whatever position the authors take, they back it up with children's stories. It is also in their featured stories that they have captured the passion and commitment of some exemplary teachers in promoting language learning and literacy among their students regardless of pressures and odds due to standardized curriculum and testing. Because of these stories, readers—teachers and parents alike—are introduced to the uniqueness of each child, and the specialness of the kind of learning each child undergoes. These stories also serve as an inspiration for teachers to go that extra mile to see each learner through—to meet their learning needs, and to assess and test the things that they can do, instead of only those skills that they are not yet capable of, but would be able to do, given enough time and guidance.

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