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Sociocultural contexts of language and literacy

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Sociocultural contexts of language and literacy, Second edition

Bertha Pérez (Ed.) (2004)

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

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This collection of articles, wisely edited by Professor Pérez, serves as a complement to another volume published in 2004 by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. Whereas she was the sole author of *Becoming bicultural*, Pérez is the sole author of two articles and co-authors one, out of the total of twelve articles in the volume.

It may sound like a cliché, but these lines, quoted from the very first page of the first article in the volume, call everyone's attention to what many classrooms over the world are like and what many students are like. In fact, Pérez (p. 3) includes a citation that reads as follows:

...we have Samoan, Tongan, Hispanic students from Central America and Latin America; we have Russian students, of course, many from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Indonesia. Did I say Vietnamese? We have a lot of students from the Philippines. And, we have people migrating from the east coast, from the south. We have students from all over the world.

& Mullen, 1990, p. 59). [2]

For many teachers and scholars these lines may be an exaggeration of the issue, but research on monolithic societies, many of them in Europe, will be promptly changed by a diversity of immigration and that will drastically change the student body in schools. This multiculturalism is the analysis of language and literacy in different sociocultural contexts.

The book is divided into three chapters that vary in the focus and extension of each one: the first, "Language and Literacy," consists of three articles, all of them by the editor, providing the foundation for Part II.

Part II presents six articles that report on language and literacy acquisition in contexts as varied as Vietnamese, Chinese, African-American, or Mexican-American communities. It is, no doubt, a reflection of the diversity of society and schools. The last chapter, Part III, closes with three final articles that deal with literacy development.

The remaining pages include a preface, a number of final pages on the professional biography of the editor, and subject indexes. In the editor's words, this second edition of the book has meant an update of the content and the inclusion of new activities and suggested readings that will help the reader discuss current topics. This version is dedicated to the memory of one of the contributors, Dien thi To, who passed away in 1990. [1-1]

In a more detailed way, chapter 1 revises the notion of literacy and defends a sociocultural view of literacy as an atomised view of literacy as the mastering of discrete skills. Diversity in the United States is reflected in different programs that have tried to offer some kind of response to the needs of that diverse population. This chapter includes a considerable review of specialized literature and research that back up the issue of multiple literacies that interacts with school literacy tasks. The *References* extend up to 8 pages as an example of the depth of the research by the author. Chapter 3 revises the questions of emergent writing and describes different types of writing (oral, alphabetic) and what the implications are in the classroom. It is obvious that the closer the student is to the written language, the better to learn how to write.

Chapters 4 through 9 deal with the question of literacy in the diverse cultural communities. Chapter 4 is particularly informative as it breaks the stereotype of what American Indians and their language and culture are. It discusses different Indian languages, some of them as different as Russian and Japanese. In these communities, literacy is paramount as well as the narrative content that draws from their culture. In any case, the focus is on the relationship of domination and exclusion.

Chapter 5 deals with a population group traditionally labelled as Hispanic, but quite different from the rest of Americans: it is the Puerto Rican minority. Puerto Ricans form a diverse group: "They are

peoples; some are lighter and others darker. There are almost as many Puerto Rican living (p. 113). Unlike other Latino minorities, they are US citizens by birth. Puerto Rican students have high drop-out levels, and low scores in test results. Examples provided in this chapter show how they have improved.

Chapter 6, on the Vietnamese communities, is an academic pleasure as many issues are addressed: the history of Vietnamese arrivals in the US, the impact of those arrivals in schools, the description of Vietnamese students, the data collected from research on the Vietnamese students' learning process in the schools, and a number of suggestions to those teachers who want to help Vietnamese students, which may be applicable to other cultural groups: (i) an attitude of openness and recognition of the many ways of learning; (ii) respect for the culture and its people; (iii) encouraging and rewarding attitude towards students' progress; (iv) conclusions, and (v) a willingness to be a lifelong learner.

Chapter 7 describes Chinese-American communities, with valuable pages on the Chinese-American report of the sociocultural context of literacy acquisition in inner-city schools. It confirms the values of Chinese students: value and respect for the teacher, good behaviour in general terms, good attitude towards homework, etc. [-2-]

Chapter 8, which discusses literacy in African-American communities, produces a strong impression of the history of African-American people in the US: the detailed recollection of the approximate 150 years of their history does not feel indifferent. One of the final ideas issued by the author sets a clear objective for literacy instruction: how literacy is a political tool and teach them to read the world. Chapter 9 closes the discussion on Mexican-American communities with an analysis of how Mexican-American students become literate, by means of a bilingual classroom in a southern Texas town.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12, either co-authored or written by Pérez herself, make up Part III of the book, which discusses the making process teachers face in literacy instruction. Even though there are official policies and guidelines, the teacher's ultimate decision that determines the type of literacy instruction carried out in the classroom is what is involved in multicultural education make decisions that make literacy a form of empowerment.

Chapter 11 analyses the interrelation and interaction between the school type of literacy instruction and the type of students already bring with them from their home and community. Culture and literacy can be seen as having any connection with the world outside school. A key concept in this issue is *culture classroom*, a classroom that allow for respect, participation, integration and common use of space, and the question of authenticity and an approach to literacy assessment. Literacy instruction has to be designed so that students are taught to read, write and think purposefully, being the ultimate goal the connection between literacy and life. They become life-long learners. For literacy assessment, the use of portfolios is recommended. This is a recommendation in Europe [3].

To put an end, I would like to make a reflection on certain miscellaneous issues: (i) the activities in the respective chapter are not simply a trendy addition to the text, but a set of attainable tasks that may be gained from the respective chapter; (ii) cultural misunderstandings, like the ones experienced in literacy development and hinder the recognition of diversity, and, in that sense, they should be avoided; (iii) I would say that *academic pleasure* is the term that best describes the reading of many

Notes

[1] This book has also been reviewed in a previous issue of TESL-EJ. Please refer to Vol. 8 Issue 12 at <http://www.tesl-ej.org/ej29/r12.html>

[2] Full citation of this book is the following:

Olsen, L. & Mullen, N. A. (1990). *Embracing diversity: teachers' voices from California's classrooms*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[3] The Council of Europe website for the Portfolio is the following: <http://culture2.coe.int/>

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