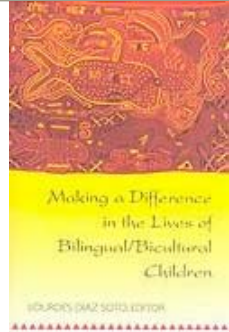


Making a Difference in the Lives of Bilingual/Bicultural Children

Author:	Lourdes Díaz Soto, Ed. (2007)		
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Pp. xxvii + 239	978-0-8204-4892-3 (paper)	\$31.95 U.S.	

Making a Difference in the Lives of Bilingual/Bicultural Children is a collection of essays by various bilingual education researchers and educators who focus on the teaching and learning of linguistic and cultural minority students. The editor, bilingual educator and advocate Lourdes Díaz Soto, has organized the sixteen chapters of this book into three sections: (1) examines the need for a critical understanding of underlying issues of power and racism, (2) provides examples of daily realities faced by bilingual and bicultural students, and (3) outlines progressive educational practices for supporting student success. Each chapter in this book is limited to about ten or twelve pages in length. At times, this brevity has the effect of seeming to compress complex issues into sound bites. It is helpful that several authors have included recommendations for further reading and professional development.

Peter McLaren's foreword sets an unabashedly polemic tone for the rest of the book. Addressing the "marketization, privatization, and neoliberalization of schooling" in the twenty-first century, McLaren challenges the reader to critically reexamine facts about minority student failure and rethink the complacency that so often surrounds issues of societal inequity in "a developed capitalist democracy" like the U.S. (pp. xv-xiv). This book does not view the academic performance of bilingual and minority students as isolated from political forces. Rather, the contributors make clear that such phenomena as the English-only movement and politicians' efforts to eliminate bilingual education programs are inextricably linked to larger social forces of xenophobia and racism. Indeed, throughout the book the reader is reminded of Freire's assertion that "all educational endeavours are inherently political" (cited by Smrekar, p. 181).

Within its openly ideological focus, this book includes several examples of cutting-edge research and practice with teaching bilingual students. Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel's contribution to the book's first section is outstanding. These authors provide a concise overview of approaches to literacy education and apply Gee's (1996) concept of literacy-related discourses to the case of a lone ESL student in a mainstream Australian classroom. Analyzing both the student's writing assignment and his teacher's failure to recognize either the high levels of literacy or specialized knowledge of computer games displayed in his text, Lankshear and Knobel arrive at some provocative conclusions. "Often," the writers argue, "differences in linguistic experience. . . are not the key factor to be taken into account in learning situations" (p. 48). Instead, with the widespread presence of linguistic and cultural minority students in mainstream classrooms and the rapid expansion of technological literacies among students, "it is increasingly likely that the 'alien' in the classroom may be the teacher" (p. 47). Accordingly, what is sorely needed are new approaches to teacher education and "ways of school-based teaching and learning that contract closer links to mature versions of social practices that have genuine currency in the contemporary world" (p. 48).

Other enjoyable articles in the first section are Ladislaus Semali's commentary about repressed indigenous languages in an African context and Richard De Gourville's discussion of African-American Vernacular English and its efficacious use in several public school programs despite a mass public outcry against black American children using their home language in schools. However, Ryan Moser's chapter comparing U.S. opponents of bilingual education to the doctrine and the policies of Nazi Germany seems needlessly inflammatory.

The book's second part features accounts of students, parents, and researchers confronting institutional assumptions, policies, and practices targeting members of language and cultural minorities. Cathy Gutierrez-Gomez's story of her five year-old son's expulsion from kindergarten due to his long hair—worn in keeping with his Apache Indian heritage—and the longstanding effects of school policies and practices on her family is heartrending. The chapters by Miryam Espinosa-Dulanto and Rebecca Blum-Martínez feature researchers engaging in dialogue with Latino and Pueblo parents and dispelling myths about these parents' lack of involvement in their children's education. While Espinosa-Dulanto's essay examines the particular situation of Latino migrant worker parents and how their children are marginalized by various school intervention programs, Blum-Martínez discusses parents' active role in supporting first-language literacy for their children. The interviews with parents in the latter chapter highlight a stark disparity between the education system's narrow objectives for academic success and the parents' holistic vision of what is needed to adequately support bilingual and bicultural student identities.

Part three of the book focuses on promising practices in the education of bilingual and bicultural students. The majority of these chapters deal with educating young children. María De La Luz Reyes and Lisa Constanzo's contribution challenges common assumptions about children's bilingual and biliteracy development—namely, that "children must be solidly grounded in their primary language before embarking on a second language" and that for educators of young children, it is "reckless to introduce literacy in two

languages" (p. 145). Their case study of a bilingual and biliterate Spanish-English first grade student reveals that "language learning is not a linear progression for a bilingual child" and "[l]earning literacy not only transfers from the first to the second language, but the second language can also advance learning in the first" (p. 154). Such positive transfer can be facilitated by teachers "who have structured culturally relevant, receptive bilingual learning environments" (p. 155).

More instances of promising educational practices are featured in the chapter by Jofen Wu Han and Gisela Ernst-Slavit, in which a mainstream American school district with no Mandarin language instruction and insufficient ESL support is shown to still manage to provide "carefully designed rich social contexts" (p. 168) for its Mandarin-speaking kindergarten students. The authors describe several types of language learning contexts included in the kindergarten classroom: in various structured activities students are able to confer with each other in Mandarin and practice using English with support from their teachers and peers. These practices, and the positive affective and educational outcomes described, can guide other mainstream educators struggling to accommodate ESL learners in their classrooms.

As Jim Cummins observes in the last chapter of this book, for educators of bilingual and bicultural students "[r]eversing the legacy of school failure has much more to do with challenging coercive power structures than with technical aspects of instruction (e. g., specific ways of teaching reading)" (p. 207). Yet our public education systems often regard the notion of supporting minority students' first language and culture as a frill. This book offers a solid grounding in critical reflection and practical suggestions for positive educator action—both necessary elements in Freire's (1970) concept of praxis. Highly recommended for teacher preparation programs, bilingual and second language educators, and students and practitioners of critical pedagogy.

References

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Kristin Snoddon
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
<ksnoddon@oise.utoronto.ca>

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