

Succeeding in Diversity: culture, language and learning in primary classrooms. Jean Conteh (2003) Trentham Books

'Succeeding in Diversity' sets the experience of a small group of successful bilingual pupils of Pakistani Muslim heritage in the wider context of practices and policies which support bilingual pupils' school learning. Conteh adopts a socio-cultural perspective. This is outlined in the opening chapter which discusses the links between language and culture, the relationship between what counts as knowledge and its social, economic and political determinants, and the importance of talk which develops thinking and underpins literacy. The constructed nature of learning contexts is highlighted, in part by reflecting on the experience of taking a group of student teachers to Pakistan. The classroom culture in a school visited in Islamabad is contrasted with English classrooms and leads Conteh to emphasise the importance of a 'shared culture between teachers and learners.'

An account of Bradford's response over thirty years to the arrival of a rapidly expanding Pakistani community is provided in Chapter 2. For those old enough to remember the Ray Honeyford affair in the 1980s, recalling 'the right wing political discourse on multiculturalism' of those days is disturbing. Conteh links the British cultural values espoused by Honeyford with the formation of the National Curriculum and reminds us that discussions about diversity were closed down at the end of the 1980s 'when they should have been central to debates about education and the embryonic National Curriculum'. This 'failure on a national level' becomes a central theme of the book: 'It has contributed much to the continuing underachievement of children whose distinctive knowledge and experiences need to be made central to their education in order for them to succeed.'

The three central chapters draw on transcripts from the research study which forms the basis of 'Succeeding in Diversity'. Rehana's account of her visit to Pakistan, Yasmin's description of a wedding and an extract from a collaborative reading by three of the children of an Urdu text serve both to introduce the children as individuals and also as the focus of a discussion of their cultural experience and linguistic abilities. Conteh points to the centrality of talk as a support for thinking and learning, the positive effects of bilingualism and the importance of the role of culture in providing equality of opportunity. A section about the family context offers an account of one mother's experience of her children's education. The use of extracts from a recorded interview with the mother help to bring home the difficulties she faced and the author's sensitive commentary avoids the danger of generalising from this personal experience.

Chapter 4 opens with a discussion of an important theme in the book, the value of collaborative talk as a key means of mediating learning. It is not only that focused talk develops thinking skills, but that collaborative talk promotes the shared culture between teachers and learners that Conteh values. However, she points out that children need to be shown how to construct a discussion. 'They need opportunities to learn about the vocabulary, grammar and text organisation of discussions' just as they learn about skills for writing. Drawing on transcripts of classroom recordings, Conteh shows how two teachers model collaborative talk for their class. Interactions in science investigations between the bilingual children and the researcher are used to show the children 'jointly constructing knowledge' and 'taking ownership' of the language that they need to mediate that knowledge. However Conteh notes that the children's understanding of the purpose of the science investigation 'seems to be dominated by the need to find the right answer'. She turns this observation round and relates it to the way 'investigation' is constructed to lead to results required by the curriculum. The note struck here is picked up later in the chapter when the approach taken by the two Year 4 teachers is contrasted with the same bilingual children's experience of learning in their Year 6 class in a middle school. Here, the teacher is concerned to cover topics that will be needed for the SATs test. In this context, there is a reliance on the text book, there is no opportunity for collaborative talk and the teacher carefully steers the learning. Indeed he is partially engaged in coaching the children for their forthcoming test. Conteh's concern is not so much with judging the pedagogy but rather with the nature of the talk and with the opportunities for 'the social construction of knowledge'. And beyond that is a concern with the external pressures on the teacher from a prescriptive curriculum and the requirement to meet targets.

The position of the children's teachers is explored in Chapter 5, again through commentary on transcripts of interviews. Contradictions in what they say are discussed, leading, in one case, to the conclusion that 'the children who give her great pleasure are now also the cause of her greatest professional concerns and anxieties.' Some of the assumptions made by teachers are seen to be inappropriate and influenced by the presentation of Islam in the national media. Their implied view of what is required to be 'successful' in school fails to incorporate the home experience of Pakistani Muslim children. The model of what it means to be 'successful', it is suggested, needs to be widened so that it includes the diversity of knowledge and experience of all pupils. Conteh is explicit in not blaming the teachers for the limitations of their response to the children in the study. She recognises the complexity of the issues that the teachers are dealing with and is critical of a system which offers little training or guidance, and places pressures on

teachers to ensure their pupils reach levels of attainment which may not always be appropriate.

The final two chapters of the book suggest 'ways forward' and offers suggestions for resources. The ideas relate to themes already established in the book, including talk for learning and literacy. Some relatively well rehearsed arguments are offered for supporting bilingualism, home language use in the classroom and family involvement in learning. Conteh points out the dangers of a prescriptive curriculum and 'top-down policy-makers'. Following Cummins (1996) and Corsen (1998) respectively, she argues for teachers to allow children the space to 'negotiate their own identities' and a style of 'emancipatory' leadership which places diversity at the centre of education. The last chapter includes some useful notes on suggested literature for classroom use and also on books offering theoretical and practical guidance for teachers.

'Succeeding in Diversity' is a very accessible book. Conteh uses anecdotes from her personal and professional experience to illustrate or reinforce the ideas. The structure of the book is clear and easy to follow. Areas to be discussed are signposted at the beginning of each chapter so that the reader knows what to expect and the key ideas are summarised at the end of chapter. EAL specialists are unlikely to find themselves disagreeing with the views advocated and they are unlikely to find themselves unduly challenged by the content. But there is value in new evidence which reinforces existing knowledge. For class teachers who are interested in extending their understanding of the relationship between language, culture and learning based on classroom evidence, this will be a valuable book.

Hugh South

References

- Corsen, D. (1998) *Changing Education for Diversity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
Cummins, J. (1996) *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*. Ontario, CA: California Association of Bilingual Education.
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