
Becoming Biliterate: Young Children Learning Different Writing Systems.
Kenner, C. (2004)
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This book describes the findings of a recent research project carried out by Charmian Kenner (author of 'Home Pages') in collaboration with Gunther Kress, Hayat Al Khatib, Gwen Kwok, Roy Kam and Kuan-Chun Tsai. The focus of the project was, as the title of the book suggests, about the processes and contexts through which young children develop their literacy skills in two languages.

Six children and their families were involved in the research study and all the children, living in London, were five years of age at the beginning of the year long study. Languages spoken by the children and their families included Latin American Spanish, Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka and English and the children were learning to write in English, Spanish, Chinese and Arabic in a variety of learning contexts.

The importance of valuing and acknowledging the full range of children's linguistic skills is clearly emphasised throughout the book not least by the carefully chosen image on the cover of the book. The cover of the book displays a child's drawing of their mother and their sister and is labelled in both English and Chinese. The Chinese icon above the depiction of her mother represents 'love' whilst the icon above the picture of her sister represents 'girl power'.

We know that many myths exist about young children becoming confused when exposed to different languages in their spoken and written form and that a great deal of misinformation is often disseminated to teachers, parents/carers and early years practitioners about the use of first/home language.

This book can be used to dispel those myths. It provides insightful evidence that learning to write in another language other than English will not disadvantage or confuse children. Rather the reverse. It provides proof that young children are more than a little capable of developing literacy skills in two languages and that by becoming biliterate such children are advantaged rather than disadvantaged. Although only a small sample of children is described within the book, the observations and recommendations are very valuable in terms of advocating the advantages of bilingualism. Throughout the book, the author regularly draws on and makes reference to a wide range of national and international research evidence to support key findings within the project.

The introduction to the book begins with the question 'Who would like to write on the board?' The question is posed in an Arabic community language class and the author comments, '*Watching Tala in her class at community language school, I realise that my research on early biliteracy has begun.*'

The role of the researcher as a watcher is referred to very early on in the book as being fundamental to building and developing an understanding of children's learning experiences. This role is reflected in the descriptive and narrative style of the text as it unfolds.

In addition to setting the context and describing the focus of the research study, the introduction outlines the structure and content of the five chapters in the book. Each of the chapters considers and provides descriptive examples of particular aspects of the children's learning. At the end of each chapter, practical recommendations are suggested and include advice about how to value bilingual learners' skills and how all children's awareness can be raised about living in a multiethnic, multilingual society. Several of the recommendations include details about links to useful websites which can be used to access information and resources.

The book is organised as follows:

Chapter 1: Learning at home, community school and primary school.

In this first chapter we are introduced to Brian, Sadhana, Yazan, Tala, Ming and Selina and their different learning contexts.

Chapter 2: Understanding different writing systems

The author begins this chapter by describing a common challenge for researchers in this field; finding out what is going on inside children's minds. She then goes on to explain how it was decided to ask each of the children to teach others what they knew in order to encourage them to articulate their thinking.

Chapter 3: Writing different scripts

The mechanics of writing in different scripts are explored in this chapter and discussed with reference to culturally specific approaches to the teaching of handwriting in English, Arabic, Chinese and Spanish.

Chapter 4: Living in simultaneous worlds

Although each child in the project was aware of the distinctiveness of each of the scripts they were learning, in the section entitled 'Boundaries and Crossings', we are told how the children made links between their different literacy experiences and made creative uses of their biliteracy skills.

Chapter 5: Literacy teaching systems in bilingual families

Here, consideration is given to the factors influencing the organisation of support in order for the children to become biliterate. For instance, family size, skills of family members, access to multimedia resources in

different languages and the family's migration history. Particular strategies adopted by family members are highlighted within the chapter such as shadowing, guiding, evaluating, prompting and demonstrating and examples of practice within individual families are provided.

Taken as a whole, the five chapters of the book provide a coherent, informative picture of six young children's variety of experience of literacy in mainstream classrooms, within the home situation and at a community language school.

An array of views and ideas are explored and discussed throughout the book. For instance, the complementary role of community language schools; that the way in which an individual writes is shaped by their learning environment; families as 'literacy eco-systems'; apprenticeship learning within the family context; that individuals draw on a range of strategies when teaching and learning which they have experienced across a wide variety of settings; and that the construction of bilingual texts can be used to express the sense of living in multiple, social and cultural worlds.

The use of direct and indirect speech throughout the book successfully captures the children's thoughts and understanding of their literacy experience. For example, in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, we hear the six children speak as they reflect upon their learning and understanding of two written languages and when they try to impart their knowledge to monolingual peers. We are also presented with the thoughts of others involved in the learning process and in Chapter 5, transcripts are used to demonstrate the way in which siblings and parents support children's learning through meaningful interactions within the family situation.

The children's skills and learning contexts are further represented through several illustrations in the book which present examples of children's writing, labelled drawings and resources used by community language teachers.

The language of the text is highly accessible for a wide range of readers with varying levels of experience of working with bilingual children. The use of descriptive and narrative language is well-judged as it helps the reader to visualise and imagine each of the children portrayed at home, in mainstream classrooms and when attending community language classes. The book also contains interesting factual information about written Arabic, Chinese and Spanish.

Highly re-readable, this book has a great deal to offer in terms of restating the facts and reinforcing the view that there are real benefits for children acquiring bilingual skills. As mentioned earlier, the author draws on her own research and the research of others to stress that bilingual children are flexible learners who make good use of all their learning experiences; they make connections and use all their available linguistic resources when

expressing their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

Although the book is very much focused on young bilingual pupils, the author does not ignore the very real need of all of our children growing up in a multiethnic, multilingual society to become aware of other languages. In the conclusion to the book, she stresses that all children will benefit from the opportunity to learn other languages at primary level as it will help to *'heighten children's visual and actional capacities as well as giving them access to new cultural worlds'*.

The final sentence in the book is addressed to early years educators:

'By working in harmony with the variety of learning experiences in young children's lives, teachers can play a vital part in each child's development as a bilingual and bicultural individual.'

Certainly this recommendation in the book is consistent with the thinking expressed in 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' where it is acknowledged that for individual children and young people to 'enjoy and achieve' and 'to make a positive contribution', an integrated, collaborative approach is required on the part of schools including working in partnership with parents, families and the wider community.

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