

Book Review

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Reyes, M. de la Luz, & Halcón, J. J. (Eds). (2001). *Best for our children: Critical perspectives on literacy for Latino students*. New York: Teachers College Press, 258.

High stakes testing initiatives such as Proposition 227 in California and Arizona's Proposition 203, known as "English Language Education For Children in Public Schools," have pushed the issues of literacy and language education into the political and public spotlight. Media sound bites echo the claims of Ron Unz, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and English Only movement financier, of the failure of bilingual education in schools. The Bush administration's support of bilingual education is threatened as proposed "performance based grants" turn over money and decision making to state governments and state political figures. While politicians claim that their intentions are to implement education programs that "take into account the best interests of children" (Keegan, n.d.), their policy mandates for managing schools narrowly define and measure school success as well as further sanction standard English as the code of power (Delpit, 1995).

Simultaneously, as politicians create and implement these limiting policies, research reports current changes and projections in demographics across the United States and within America's schools. Reports from the U. S. Department of Education (1999a, 1999b) note dramatic changes and projected shifts in school populations. Currently, Latinos comprise 4% of school enrollments; however, a study by the Anne E. Casey Foundation (as cited in the U.S. Department of Education, 1999a, 1999b) projects that the Latino population will increase to 21% by the year 2005. At the same time, the teacher population reflects opposite distributions, where 86% of all elementary and secondary teachers are European Americans and a mere 5% are Latino.

Within this intense political climate, war of words, and the changing cultural landscape, whose voices are being heard? Which voices and positions are unheard and underrepresented? Who has the power and right to define the world and others in it? Who decides what is educationally best for children? And, can there ever be a singular solution that represents what is best for all children?

Challenging popular media's accounts of bilingual education, Sonia Nieto's foreword to edited by Maria de la Luz Reyes and John Halcón, *Best for Our Children: Critical Perspectives on Literacy for Latino Students*, abandons the notion of simple, singular answers to the complex issues of language, identity, and literacy facing Latino students in America's schools.

Nieto's words applaud the editors' and authors' contributions toward examining literacy perspectives, teacher beliefs, and ideologies, as well as political policies and agendas.

In initially defining their intentions for *Best for Our Children*, the editors distinguish this work from others in the field by emphasizing that the contributions to the language and literacy discourse (specifically relating to Latino culture and Latino children) offered in this volume have been written by Latino educators themselves. In recounting their own experiences in America's schools, the editors, now university educators, stress the importance of including insiders' voices in order to create culturally responsive learning environments in schools today.

In beginning to address issues of language, literacy, and identity for Latino students, contributing authors begin by abandoning narrow definitions of literacy. They consider "theories of possibilities" (Moll, Chapter 1) using sociocultural and sociohistorical perspectives that build on Vygotskian notions of social learning, which grow from prior experiences in a certain context through the use of semiotic tools in activity with others (Wertsch, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978). Under these theories, learning grows between individuals in social contexts, drawing upon cultural artifacts to mediate learning experiences. Literacy in this context moves beyond limiting definitions of reading that result in learning to "crack the code," "bark at print," or comply with right/wrong notions of comprehension and schooling. Literacy is about reading both the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), which implies the need to understand positioning within the world as well as possibilities for action. Literacy is about identity and how sanctioned literate practices invite or stifle multiple ways of being. Literacy, the authors argue, can be a means for writing a different narrative, reappropriating history, and recovering lost voices (Giroux, 1987).

The authors collectively challenge the deficit notions of Latino children, the positioning of Spanish language skills as a detriment to academic achievement, the current state of instructional practices and ideologies, as well as the principles that guide public policy. Contributors honor the complexity of the issues at hand and strive for research and conversation that depart from the notions of finding the one correct pedagogy. Collectively, these educators theorize possibilities and reimagine education particularly for Latino students.

Drawing from sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical perspectives, the opening chapters examine literacy learning contexts for Latino students. As educators construct spaces that honor students as literate beings with cultural histories situated in cultural and political contexts, the authors look to the home, school, teachers, and larger political scene to describe the current landscape and possibilities to recreate the current constructions. Beginning with students' home lives, Moll's bilingual research values literacy

practices that are already alive in students' homes. Looking to the information, strategies, and social relationships that inform household activity, termed "funds of knowledge," Moll's work repositions students' funds of knowledge as viable mediating tools in the classroom. His work further describes bridging home and school through visits during which bilingual researchers entered homes with questions and the intention to learn from the lives of families. Students' funds of knowledge, however, are not the only mediating tools in the classroom; teachers themselves act as mediators of learning. Following the contributions of Díaz and Flores, taking this perspective calls teachers not only to explore the lives of their students, but also to examine their own "habitudes"—the unexamined attitudes and beliefs that inform decisions about literate practices. Examining the lives of students as well as teachers' "habitudes" positions literacy success and failure as the social construction of school interaction. Concurring with other scholars in the field (Reyes, Scribner & Scribner, 1999), the authors contend that we can no longer view Latino school experiences as a result of pedagogy alone; rather, pedagogy is inextricably linked with ideology. In this text the works of Moll, Díaz, Flores, Bartolomé, Balderrama, and Halcón all challenge educators to examine both personal and public ideologies that are informing classroom pedagogy, shaping the relationships between home and schools, and influencing the political decisions that affect the lives of children in America's schools.

In continuing to work toward writing a different narrative, authors reposition school success through classroom stories that build on students' cultural and linguistic resources rather than focus on the more common subtractive school practices (Valenzuela, 1999) that often position Latino youth as school failures. Narratives written by educators, both university and teachers in the field, offer accounts that position children learning to use their literacy skills in ways that compliment the development of multiple languages as examples who redefine school success. For example, bilingual primary teachers María Echiburu Berzins and Alice López teach their children the art of questioning so that children are empowered to inquire into what they do not understand, to ask for language clarification, and make their voices heard in their future educational experiences. They learn to question so that in the future teachers who are called to accommodate learners rather than the reverse scenario. Another story documents children writing personal narratives in classrooms that honor cultural identity. Gutiérrez, Baquedano-López, and Alvarez write about students learning in the "Third Space"—a space that "honor[s] alternate and competing discourses that transform conflict and differences into collaborative learning" (Chapter 7, p. 127). These stories of children moving between permeable linguistic boundaries (Reyes, 1998) in culturally and linguistically responsive environments ultimately honor biliterate identities and reposition Latino children as bearers of valuable literacy tools and resources for participation in the larger changing world.

Through their examination of learning conditions, instructional practices, ideologies, attitudes, and guiding theoretical principles, the contributing authors present strong narratives that challenge readers ranging from university researchers, classroom practitioners, and/or preservice teacher education students, to question the kinds of literate beings schools are pushing to construct. Readers must then consider the hegemonic practices that currently channel students into learning English only when biliteracy could be a more powerful option. In concluding, they recognize the continuing struggle in determining what is best for “our” (Latino) children.

Reyes and Halcón, as editors, have woven together the strong insiders’ perspectives and various authors’ contributions by cross referencing authors and the organizational structure of the book. However, the quality of the pieces is inconsistent. While it seems essential to invite contributions from the field, at times it felt as though some of the stories focused on snippets of practice that could have been supported with richer accounts of how such practices were linked to teachers’ journeys toward ideological clarity. In Andrade Lalibery’s chapter, she recounts implementing a writing program in her classroom and including her own life narrative in her classroom writing community. She briefly addresses her struggles of initially offering this writing program to her English dominant students and later recounts how she modified her program to include her English language learners. Based on this book’s premise that ideological clarity is what is being called for in order to rewrite school experiences for Latino youth, a greater focus on the ideological struggle rather than the pedagogical process would have strengthened the argument of this piece.

Overall, the positions heard in *Best for Our Children* are strong and advocate inclusive conversations that represent Latino voices in educational policy and pedagogical decisions that affect Latino children. Readers are left feeling a need to go beyond just “valuing Spanish” and to be more strategic in educational efforts. The balance between theory and living classroom examples offers readers both constructs and contexts to inform their decisions regarding how to use their own voices in the greater conversations surrounding language, literacy, and identity heard within the context of America’s schools.

Returning to the larger political landscape, it seems that many of the compelling cases of biliteracy that are discussed in this book are absent from the public discourse surrounding bilingual education. In light of the recent failed political campaigns in opposition to language oppressive legislation, the authors’ timely contributions can be used to inform actions that move beyond searching for the pedagogical panacea and to begin the interrogation of practitioners’ and the public’s ideologies. Whether working with preservice teachers or practicing teachers, or conversing with educational colleagues and advocating for inclusive policies beyond the institution, this work offers counter-narratives that disrupt deficit notions of Latino students and challenge

dominant language ideologies. *Best for Our Children* reverses political perspectives that view linguistic and cultural differences as barriers to learning. Armed with strong evidence and living examples of alternative definitions of “successful literate beings,” readers are called to dispute the political policies that are framed as “the best for our children” and reimagine new identities and possibilities for successful, critically literate students.

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