

Book Review

***Inclusive Literacy Teaching: Differentiating Approaches in Multilingual Elementary Classrooms*, by Lori Helman, Carrie Rogers, Amy Frederick, and Maggie Struck. New York, NY: Teacher College Press, 2016, 144 pages.**

“Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students” is not an unfamiliar term in current educational discourse. Given their notable relevance to both academic outcomes and socio-emotional well-being of students from diverse and minority family backgrounds (Li, 2011), the contemporary pedagogical practices in K-12 context need “to ensure that demographic transition does not destabilize schools and that student performance among all subgroups, [] reaches increasingly demanding benchmarks” (Frankenberg & Siegel-Hawley, 2008, p. 9). In *Inclusive literacy teaching: Differentiating approaches in multilingual elementary classrooms*, the authors respond to this urgent need for culturally and linguistically relevant pedagogy by supporting elementary school teachers with researched, data-driven approaches toward constructing an inclusive school ecology for learners of CLD family backgrounds.

The fundamental rule to developing inclusive pedagogical repertoires, as the authors mainly argue, lies in educators recognizing “multilingual students’ paths to literacy learning as no singular experience” (p. 113). This standpoint is exhaustively instantiated in their six-year longitudinal project, which traced the diverse trajectories of English literacy development in six English language learners. The students all came from socioeconomically less privileged immigrant families and received low-level initial English assessment scores. The authors derive vividly illustrative examples from rich empirical data to elaborate on the multilayered, intertwining factors that interact with linguistic minority students’ literacy performances and learning outcomes. Among this data set the authors also identify essential dilemmas where mainstream teachers get caught between the pressing need to improve young learners’ academic performance and the unconscious influence of demographic divide between teachers and their students.

In the opening chapter, the authors establish the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings of the book in three layers, arguing that there is “no simple path to acquire ‘school’ literacy” (p. 10). They reject the commonly held idea that English language learners’ path to literacy development is “a conglomerate or as a generic experience” (p. 10). Rather, they propose that educators must engage in “learning about and reflecting upon students’ specific literacy experiences” in order to become ready to “thoughtfully tackle the many teaching opportunities that arise in their daily practices” (p. 17). Secondly, the authors construct the notion of “literacy development” within a multi-dimensional conceptual framework that includes not only cognitive elements, but also psychological, sociocultural, and instructional factors as the intertwining fabric of the environment where literacy learning takes place. Finally, they reiterate what good literacy and language instruction entails for English language learners by problematizing some of the commonly held misconceptions regarding reading and writing development. The three strands lay the ground for conceptual and theoretical discussions of the entire book, where

complex dilemmas in language and literacy instruction for CLD students in elementary classrooms are unpacked and tackled with, and relevant strategies and practices are proposed accordingly.

The second chapter is guided by the core question “How can teachers bridge newcomers’ background knowledge and academic standards when what they bring do not match school expectations?” According to the authors, the key to resolving this dilemma for classroom teachers lies in embracing an asset-based perspective. Starting with identifying students’ language, sociocultural, and academic resources, the authors recommend that teachers can leverage these assets into productive literacy learning by deciding what may be unknown for the students, connecting students’ funds of knowledge to the curricula, and then moving to new and challenging academic expectations.

In Chapter 3, the authors position classroom teachers in the significant role for fostering emergent bilingual learners’ academic English competence. They further specify instructional guidelines for effective academic language teaching, in addition to content knowledge instruction. The authors argue that classroom teachers need to prepare for content knowledge materials and instruction through an extra lens of language acquisition. Given the “linked nature” (p. 48) among students’ language, literacy, and overall academic performance, academic language instruction should be incorporated as part and parcel of their subject lessons throughout the day. This requires teachers to systematically track individual learner’s use of academic language and plan for language objectives and instructional practices accordingly. In order to efficiently engage linguistically diverse learners in academic language development, classroom teachers need to improve their instructional repertoires by modifying their language use. Instructional language modification includes employing more comprehensive and less dense instructional language, connecting their language use to students’ home language knowledge and practices, and prioritizing interactions in classroom practices.

In Chapter 4, the authors establish that teachers’ effective classroom teaching begins with “getting to know students, their families, and their home communities, and the sociopolitical factors that influence their lives” (p. 74). They further elaborate on exemplary classroom practices that have emerged from the data and will inform teachers of creating relationships with their learners who come from different linguistic, cultural, and discursive family and community backgrounds. Based on successful stories of the participating teachers in their research project, the authors map out three “ways of knowing” (p. 61) as an action plan for teachers of CLD students. The teachers are advised to go beyond “just teach” (i.e., to allow class time for emergent bilingual students to talk about their ideas and to invest time for personal interaction with these students after class), offer instrumental support (e.g., creating an engaging physical classroom environment, establishing classroom routines, incorporating home language into literacy lessons), and implement “benefit-of-the-doubt” treatment toward learners’ deviated behaviors. Most importantly, these pedagogical strategies need to be carefully deployed while taking the macro sociopolitical climate into consideration. Making these practices an integral part of classroom instruction will contribute significantly to an instructionally and instrumentally supportive classroom environment.

Chapter 5 moves beyond teacher-student relationship by putting forth effective practices that facilitate interaction and communication between school and minority families. Informed by the literature and their empirical data, the authors point out that multilingual and transnational families display a wide range of culturally specific routines to engage with children’s education.

These educational engagement practices by no means resemble the “typical” family-engagement model, a unidirectional mode of communication where families take the responsibility to initiate interaction with school. Instead, the authors propose that CLD learners’ literacy development will not reach its full swing unless an expanded, bi-directional model of family involvement is implemented. This is when school personnel can begin to recognize minority parents’ challenging and discouraging experiences interacting with mainstream school, honor their culturally ingrained beliefs and aspirations, and validate family as educational resources of equal importance to school experience in filling students’ academic and linguistic gaps.

The last two chapters guide readers to a wide-angle retrospect from the unique vantage point of this longitudinal study. In Chapter 6, authors detail an understanding of CLD students’ long-term literacy outcomes on the level of curriculum and program design. They specifically address students’ often-fragmented school experience under the year-by-year school cycle and propose strategies for sustaining consistency in implementing differentiated instructional approaches for the CLD learners. Most mainstream elementary school programs are structured in a way that individual teachers rarely have the chance to follow the same group of learners or monitor their progress from year to year. As learners proceed to a new grade level, they become an “unknown entity” again (p.106) by the new teacher. Professional schism (Hamann & Reeves, 2013), the structural compartmentalization of professional tasks between ELL/ESL teachers and mainstream content subject teachers, further exacerbates the knowledge gap between the two groups of teachers, leaving the latter oftentimes pedagogically less prepared.

In order to maintain coherent and effective English language and literacy development along with progressive academic achievement throughout elementary school, it is essential that schools establish highly accountable records of learners’ progress over time (e.g., keep systematic records of common data, assessment, consider multiple data source to assess emergent bilingual students’ academic performance, etc.). In addition, consolidating staff capacity through professional development, fostering collaborative inquiry communities among teachers, and inviting family perspectives and expectations are also recommended by the authors as promising programmatic strategies to safeguard emergent bilingual learners’ consistent progress throughout the elementary school years.

In the concluding chapter, the authors revisit the notion of “inclusive literacy instruction” and reiterate emerging themes from across chapters that underpin this central theme of the book. The illustrative cases from the book indicate that knowing the CLD learners is the priority for mainstream elementary school teachers. Only when the teachers proactively narrow the demographic knowledge gap, familiarize themselves with students’ home and community environment and resources, and raise awareness of the sociopolitical obstacles learners and their families experience, can they embark on inclusive pedagogical planning. An asset-based perspective is another key to tailoring instructional practices to individual CLD students’ needs. Informed by this viewpoint, teachers capitalize on both school- and community-based educational resources, incorporate first/home language into pedagogical tasks, and activate peer-support through classroom interactions. The authors also underscore school-wide collaboration among teachers to facilitate learners’ smooth year-to-year transition.

The publication of this book is timely as changing demographics poses a remarkable challenge to the U.S. educational system. To resonate with the multilingual and multicultural social reality in the U.S. context, the authors attempt to reshape the mindset of literacy teachers into an anti-deficit perspective by recognizing all students as “vibrant human beings who bring

complex personal, cultural, linguistic and social qualities to their classroom learning experiences” (p. 3). In this book, the authors successfully unravel the complex and intertwining factors that interact with elementary school CLD learners’ literacy development. They do this by unfolding the ups and downs of the students’ learning trajectories, illustrating the participating teachers’ wrestling with dilemmas, and weaving in their own empirical and professional insights while showing how to bridge the linguistic, cultural, and racial gaps between learners and schools. The book also fosters reflective inquiry among the readership, raising their critical awareness toward the needs and experiences of minority learners and families, while enriching their pedagogical tool kits to meet curricular expectations. In so doing, they expect readers to transform their own dilemmas into differentiated teaching opportunities and embark on individual exploration for more contextualized and effective solutions.

The book may be flawed in its insufficient address of the overall rationale, particularly regarding larger sociopolitical realities in the U.S. Sociopolitical factors (e.g., current educational reform initiatives, nationwide population shifts, and the demographic divide between student and teachers) are only sketched out in Chapter 4 as background knowledge to the discussion of developing strong teacher-student relationships. These macro-level factors, if fairly detailed earlier in this book, could lay out the urgency and criticality of the issues addressed and justify the value and significance of this publication. In addition, the authors employ multiple terms (e.g., transnational, multilingual, and emergent bilingual) to identify the focal students throughout the book. Although these terms are carefully defined in the opening chapter, the alternating use of these terms may result in a lack of coherence and raise confusion among the readership. It would be helpful to consider adding micro-contexts that specify the intention for choosing a particular term over the others.

Nonetheless, *Inclusive literacy teaching: Differentiating approaches in multilingual elementary classrooms* stands out as a valuable source for both prospective and in-service educators and educational leaders to harness their professionalism and expertise and better serve the interest of CLD students and their families.

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