Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times
By: Celia Genish & Anne Haas Dyson

A Book Review by:
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Summary of Children, Language, and Literacy

- “There is a very puzzling contrast — really an awesome disconnect — between the breathtaking diversity of schoolchildren and the uniformity, homogenization, and regimentation of classroom practices, from pre-kindergarten onward” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 4).
- We tend to take for granted that almost all children easily learn and use language — what a huge accomplishment!
- Children learn language by interacting with people and their environment.
- Children learn language at different rates and follow their own unique paths.
- English Language Learners (more appropriately referred to as Emergent Bilinguals) also have individual approaches and rates of learning and follow their own distinctive paths.
- Language and literacy are embedded in all aspects of the curriculum.
- Diverse students need diverse curriculum and time to learn and show what they know. A “one size fits all” curriculum will not meet the needs of every child as each individual comes from different families, backgrounds, and experiences.
- Classrooms seem to have a sense of urgency — no time to waste — so children are hurried and pushed, leaving little or no room for play.
Summary Continued...

- Play is a powerful tool for language learning. While playing, children can practice their language skills, vary their voices, rename objects ("let's pretend this pencil is a magic wand"), learn new words, and develop confidence as a language learner.
- Play provides the opportunity for speaking, reading, and writing in an unscripted environment.
- Writing — When children first begin to write, they tend to write about things related to their everyday worlds.
- Children need to have relevant reasons to write.
- Just like language, writing develops at different rates among children.
- Assessment of language and literacy should be, "An ongoing, complex process in which we aim to discover and document what children are learning over time in many situations and across multiple symbol systems, so that we can help them learn more" (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 116).
- Observation is key to assessing — watch to see how each child develops as an individual. Take notes, videotape, use audio recorders, etc. to document what you notice over time.
- Collaborate with other teachers, professionals, parents, etc. to support each child’s development.
- Be willing to observe, respond to, and grow with your children!
Genishi & Dyson’s Intended Audience

- The intended audience for *Children, Language, and Literacy* is anyone who works with young children, particularly in classrooms with young children (early childhood centers, preschools, elementary classrooms) (Genishi & Dyson, 2008, p. 2).

- English Language Learning Teachers or Teachers of Emergent Bilinguals would also be considered an audience for this book, because chapter three is devoted to Emergent Bilinguals (Diverse Learners in Diverse Times: When English is Not the Norm) (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 37).
Was Children, Language, and Literacy Well Written?

- *Children, Language, and Literacy* is a well written and well organized book.
- It begins with a discussion on diversity in the classroom and a curriculum that does not meet the needs of diverse students. It then discusses multilingual learners, the role of play in literacy, written language, and assessment. The book addresses all of these facets of early childhood classrooms and how they affect the teachers and their diverse learners.
- The book takes a look into real classrooms and introduces the reader to teachers and their diverse learners.
- Throughout the book, the authors include specific examples of classroom interactions.
- The use of dialogues between teachers and students and students and their peers allows the reader to feel like a part of the classroom and see specific examples of the authors’ arguments. The authors also provide explanations of the context of the dialogue to help the reader better understand the interactions.
- Examples of student work are included in the book to support the authors’ discussion.
- The book includes different lists as support for the authors’ points and to give the reader specific examples of how these points can be used in the classroom. Some of these lists include: universal characteristics of learning languages (pp. 40-41), ways teachers document classroom observations (p. 118), and different forms of assessment (pp. 132-133).
Did Genishi & Dyson Make a Convincing Argument?

- Genishi and Dyson make convincing arguments for their ideas throughout the book.
- The main argument in the book is that “diversity is the new norm” in classrooms today. The authors argue that a “one size fits all” curriculum does not meet the needs of diverse students. Genishi and Dyson state, “…the shifts in policy, which have led to constraining curricula need revision and reenvisioning that take into account child learners’ individual histories and what they are able to do in and out of the classroom” (2009, p. 10).
- Genishi and Dyson discuss “panoptical time” or “NCLB time” (2009, p. 56). They suggest that when schools focus on NCLB time, “…schedules are not adjusted for children’s individual tempos, and school time is marked by end-of-year events like promotion or retention” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 56). They discuss the need for children to be able to work at their own pace. Given the diverse backgrounds and abilities of children, they need time to work at an appropriate tempo for their unique needs. Genishi and Dyson state, “…we know that children need that time to show what they are able to do” (2009, p. 56).
Genishi and Dyson also make a convincing argument for the importance of play in early education classrooms. They strongly believe in the merits of making time for play in classrooms with young children. The authors also argue that play is being removed from many classrooms because of the curricular demands that are now placed on teachers and young children. The authors state, “Their play and stories belong not only in the unofficial world governed by children but also in the official world of language-rich and child-focused classrooms” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p.80).

The authors make a convincing argument for the use of various assessments in the classroom. They discuss how NCLB time and standardized tests can have a negative impact on children (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, pp. 112-113). Genishi and Dyson state, “Thus, although we wholeheartedly agree that all children should learn to read and write, we object to reducing literary learning to a list of skills to be tested” (2009, p. 113). They provide readers with a list of various ways to assess children that are “purposeful and authentic” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 132). These include: notes/anecdotes, checklists, commercially published curriculum tests, portfolios, and video/audiotapes (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, pp. 132-133).
Was the Argument Well Supported?

The arguments that Genishi and Dyson present are well supported. They provide a number of references that support their views. In addition to these many resources, the authors give the reader tangible and specific examples of classroom interactions. The classroom conversations present in the book, along with the children’s work, display firsthand support for the authors’ arguments. These accounts allow the reader to see how the authors’ ideas can be incorporated into a classroom setting. The description of possible consequences of testing (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 115), also lends credibility to the authors’ argument.
Any Considerations or Perspectives Neglected in the Book?

- One perspective that could have been more developed in *Children, Language, and Literacy* is the relation of oral language to early literacy development. How can teachers strengthen students’ language skills at their individual paces? What materials/opportunities would facilitate this?

- Another perspective that could have been expanded is how to enrich/enhance instruction for students who are more advanced. Diverse classrooms have students of all abilities with individual strengths and weaknesses. It is important to not only support struggling students, but to simultaneously challenge high performers.
Significance of the Book’s Contribution to the Field of Early Literacy

Children, Language, and Literacy encourages educators to take the time to recognize the diversity of today’s postmodern classrooms. Genishi and Dyson suggest that, “In the early 21st century we seem stuck in a time warp in which children who embody certain kinds of diversity have become the problem, and standardization has become the “fix,” though not a quick or workable one” (2009, p. 10). It is important to remember that students are not only culturally diverse, but also that children have unique learning styles. These diversities must be addressed and assessed in a variety of ways in the classroom environment.

This text reminds educators to slow down and avoid the pitfalls of “panoptical” or NCLB time. The authors encourage us to think “multitemporally” and “interpret which kind of time is appropriate for children in classrooms where [we] arrange for unhurried child-oriented activities, yet [are] required to give rigidly timed tests” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 111). As educators, Genishi and Dyson suggest that we slow down and provide children with both the time and space that they need to learn, rather than trying to force feed them information at a hurried pace.
Contributions Continued...

Genishi and Dyson have contributed to the field of early literacy by encouraging educators, and other vested individuals, to become advocates for the reformation and transformation of “educational policies and practices” (2009, p. 145). Some of the goals of *Children, Language, and Literacy* include:

1. “Unhurried time so that children in contemporary classrooms have possibilities to form vivid memories of childtimes
2. Practices that are worth taking time with, whether these are the core of a curriculum or ‘inserts’ squeezed in and around less flexible mandated curricula
3. Access in pre- and in-service professional education courses to current information about language development and language variation so that teachers can begin to understand that diversity is the norm
As educators, should we correct speaking and writing “errors” made by children that do not speak or write in traditional English? Would correcting those students send the message that their language or way of speaking is less important?

How can educators better foster and teach emergent bilinguals in the general education classroom?

How is it possible for educators to move toward “multitemporality” and slow the events in the classroom down to respect “child-time”, when we live in such a “panoptical” and hurried society?

What are some ways to meet the needs of children who are more advanced for their grade level or age?

How can teachers encourage, motivate, and challenge these “gifted and talented” students while still allowing them to be successful?

How do we convince policy makers, administrators, and school board members of the importance and value of both play and formative assessment in the classroom?

How do we convince those same decision makers to create policies and expectations that help schools to avoid “panoptical” or NCLB time?
Recommendations: To Whom & Why?

- We recommend this book as a “must read” for any individual who cares about children and learning, more specifically:
  
  - All early childhood educators, elementary teachers, ESL/ELL/EB teachers, administrators, parents of young children, policy makers, pre-service teachers, and teacher educators.

- We believe that *Children, Language, and Literacy* provides a critical amount of research to support the aforementioned intentions and goals of the authors, as it supplies a more “child-centered” argument for the readers to consider. Genishi and Dyson describe their desire and intentions, “Our hope is that through educators’ persistent, child-worthy efforts in classrooms and the larger public arena, we can look toward a future where children and teachers can work and play with less pressure and greater flexibility, where we are able to find playgrounds full of children with names as diverse as their stories” (2009, p. 145). We believe that educators, administrators, parents, and policy makers would greatly benefit from reading this book to discover, or remember that “diversity is the new norm” in today’s classroom and to foster a greater appreciation for diverse curricula, taught at “child speed” (Genishi & Dyson, 2009, p. 4).
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