



**Teaching Other People's Children: Literacy and Learning in a Bilingual Classroom.** Cynthia Ballenger. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999. 108 pp.

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In *Teaching Other People's Children*, Cynthia Ballenger offers readers a glimpse into her experience as a white, middle-class teacher-researcher in a preschool center for Haitian American children in Massachusetts. Throughout the slim volume, Ballenger attends simultaneously to the thorny problems that arose in her preschool classroom and to her process of investigating those problems with the help of the teacher-research group in which she participated. Utilizing the "practices and insights of sociolinguistics" (p. 13), the members of the group examined the assumptions and processes underlying teacher-student and student-student interactions in their own classrooms. In order to understand these interactions, the teachers audio-recorded classroom discourse, created and discussed transcripts of salient exchanges, and wrote and shared memos intended to elicit their own unexamined presuppositions. Ballenger describes her use of this method of inquiry in her own classroom in situations involving discipline, alphabet learning, and storybook reading. She focuses on her evolving understanding of her own and her students' cultural assumptions with regard to these practices and the ways that this understanding enhanced her instruction.

Ballenger's accessible and honest narration makes *Teaching Other People's Children* easy to read and to appreciate. As a keen observer of children's behavior, Ballenger picks up on and lingers over the particulars of her students' actions and words, discovering for herself and revealing to her readers the serious purposes and unique learning resources that young children bring to school. More significantly, the personal nature of the account allows the reader to enter into the processes of reflection and discussion that prompted Ballenger to recognize and question the tacit assumptions underlying her own actions in the classroom. For instance, in examining her difficulties in managing the children's behavior, Ballenger shares how she came to locate her methods of discipline within a particular set of cultural values that focus on children as individuals and that take "the child's 'enlightened self interest' [as] the ultimate moral guidepost" (p. 40). She then describes how this recognition of the culturally-specific nature of her own practices enabled her to understand the typical Haitian style of disciplining children, and to appreciate the value of community responsibility that underlies it.

In this case and in a similar reflection on her and her students' assumptions about storybook reading, Ballenger illustrates the kind of self-questioning by which teachers can become aware of their own cultural beliefs and behaviors--beliefs and behaviors



that often function as unquestioned norms within classrooms. However, by revealing the difficulty involved in discovering such implicit beliefs, Ballenger also problematizes the notion that teachers should or can simply teach nonwhite, non-middle-class children the tacit rules of school-based discourse. Importantly, Ballenger credits her self-discoveries to her participation in a community of teacher-researchers and not to solitary soul-searching. As a result, as Courtney Cazden states in the foreword, the book does not represent a "story of one individual working in wondrous ways" (viii). Instead, Ballenger's story testifies to the value of communities of practice that bring together teachers and researchers in the shared enterprise of analyzing classroom discourse.

Although there is much to recommend in Ballenger's teacher research, it is also instructive to consider its limitations. First, due to the lack of a clear theoretical framework, Ballenger's analyses result in interesting but impressionistic observations that fail to account for much of the complex social activity that fills classrooms at every level. For instance, while her field notes and transcripts occasionally evidence practices of peer domination and exclusion, Ballenger does not discuss the existence of such practices or their potential consequences for children's acquisition of knowledge and identities. Second, Ballenger's focus on specific classroom exchanges leaves the broader sociopolitical context and power relations that shape the experience of immigrant families and children largely unexamined. In my state of California, and in other states across the country, teachers are prohibited from providing instruction in languages other than English, and schools are rapidly embracing highly scripted forms of instruction that leave little room for recognizing diverse children's sociocultural experiences. Thus, while I laud Ballenger's tale of her own increasing sensitivity to, and respect for, her students' cultural differences, I wonder what this tale might mean to teachers working under more prescriptive conditions. More generally, I have begun to question whether research like Ballenger's, which focuses exclusively on the particulars of classroom interaction while neglecting broader issues of power and inequity, is a luxury that those concerned with the schooling of diverse children can afford in the current historical moment.

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