



Building on Community Bilingualism. Rebecca Freeman. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing, 2004. 367 pp. ISBN 0-9727507-0-3, \$39.95

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How can schools effectively educate students of diverse linguistic backgrounds? In her recent book, *Building on Community Bilingualism*, Rebecca Freeman demonstrates that at least part of the answer lies in the ability of educators to recognize and effectively tap into the funds of knowledge that students bring with them to the classroom. Freeman's book, based on more than six years of action-oriented research in north Philadelphia, demonstrates how schools that serve bilingual communities can make choices to simultaneously promote bilingualism and support academic success for all students. Recognizing that most public schools in the U.S. are organized by a "language as problem" orientation, Freeman staunchly rejects this deficit view of language minority students and cites Ruiz's "language as resource" position to structure her book (Ruiz 1984). She argues that states, school districts, and schools have choices about how they structure their practices and programs, and must exercise their ability to adopt such a "resource" view toward language as well. Freeman's work is driven by the question of how schools can provide equal educational opportunities to low-income speakers of languages other than English. *Building on Community Bilingualism* speaks directly to that question, though from a different angle than her first book, *Bilingual Education and Social Change*, where she documented a successful two-way immersion program at the Oyster Bilingual School. This time, Freeman looks at—and works with—poorly performing schools in a low-income community to explore how they might transform their programs and practices to help students maintain and/or develop their Spanish skills as a means of improving their academic performance in both languages. She highlights the crucial role that multilingual educators can play in building bridges between home and school, and promoting broader societal change, when they choose to view language as a resource.

Throughout the text, Freeman shifts between macro and micro perspectives to weave together a convincing portrait for why and how schools might effectively build on students' language expertise. The text is divided into four different sections. Part I looks at current language policy and focuses on promoting multilingualism in the U.S. Part II explores language ideologies in north Philadelphia, investigating how written and spoken Spanish and English are used and evaluated by students at home and school. Part III describes the translation of policy into practice, focusing on several teachers who build on the linguistic and cultural expertise of their students. Part IV discusses language planning in Philadelphia, and concludes with considerations for language planners in



other contexts.

Perhaps the richest portions of the book are Freeman's descriptions of students and teachers. Chapter 5 provides a vivid picture of language use in the lives of two bilingual students, Claudia and Sylvia. We gain a glimpse into when, where, why, and how these students use each of their languages, and also what their strengths are in each. Freeman describes the "Spanish-rich" activities she observed in the girls' daily activities, like translating, letter writing, and helping siblings with homework. Through these descriptions, she accomplishes her goal of pushing educators to think critically about how their students' experiences "lead to the development of a range of linguistic and cultural expertise" (p. 96). As a framework for building on this expertise in the classroom, Freeman cites Hornberger's continua of biliteracy as a tool for educators to focus and direct their efforts (Hornberger 2003). She suggests that the continua can help teachers to better understand students' biliterate development, and also facilitate teacher recognition of the power issues inherent in bilingual education.

In Chapters 8, 9, and 10, Freeman documents the work of three teachers who have adopted a "language as resource" orientation in their classrooms. One of the teachers, Andrea Rodríguez, collaborated with Freeman to draw on students' knowledge about family history to promote development of academic literacies in English. Another, Maria Santiago, used students' oral expertise in Spanish to support literacy development in both languages. Finally, Carmen Muñoz, a teacher in a struggling two-way immersion program, worked to link technology to bilingualism as a way of challenging the status of Spanish in her school. These classrooms, which Freeman takes us into through her vivid, thick descriptions, remind us of the transformative possibilities inherent when teachers collaborate with students to make classrooms more equitable spaces. We learn through the pages that perhaps instead of seeking the "solution" for how to best educate linguistically diverse students, we should encourage teachers to employ the type of critical reflectiveness shown in the work of Rodríguez, Santiago, and Muñoz.

Building on *Community Bilingualism* is well grounded in the literature around bilingual education and language planning, and the extensive data Freeman analyzed via ethnographic and discourse analytic methods were generated over a period of more than six years in north Philadelphia schools, giving the book a solid foundation. Furthermore, from student teacher to policy adviser, Freeman's diverse experiences in the Philadelphia school system during this time allowed her to obtain and analyze data from a variety of different perspectives. As in her prior book, Freeman's refusal to oversimplify the complexities of bilingual education, and her insistence that her work is not a model to be uncritically reproduced, serve to further vouch for the thorough, thoughtful nature of her work.

Without ignoring the inherent ideological challenges that we as policymakers and educators who seek to promote multilingualism through schooling face, Freeman hopefully points to the possibilities of multilingualism in both schools today and society



in the future. As Jim Cummins states in his forward, the power of Freeman's book is that it "...initiates a dialogue on how to reclaim the interpersonal spaces where power and agency are generated. It asks where we stand and it illuminates landscapes where we might choose to travel" (p. vi). As we continue forward in the search for a transformative solution to how we might best serve linguistically diverse students, *Building on Community Bilingualism* serves as an invaluable road map for the journey.

References

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