



Freeman, Rebecca. *Building on Community Bilingualism: Promoting Multilingualism Through Schooling Series.* Philadelphia, PA: Caslon Publishing, 2004. 352pp. ISBN 0972750703, \$39.95

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As a teacher educator working in California, I am confronted on a weekly basis with the enormity of the challenges facing our public schools as they struggle to provide a decent education for poor, especially, linguistic minority students. Ill-conceived initiatives such as Proposition 227 that restricts bilingual education and the under-funded No Child Left Behind Act are rolling through the system like seismic shock waves. Even those who make it their business to keep up with these issues are confronted with the complex question of how to bridge the enormous and widening gaps between theory and practice and between competing ideologies in an over-heated political climate.

This book is indeed, “radical” as the preface by Jim Cummins declares, in that it unabashedly and unapologetically advocates a major shift in thinking. It represents an attempt to reframe community bilingualism as a precious *resource* that should be cultivated rather than a *problem* to be suppressed as a matter of official policy and actual classroom practice. Moreover, the book delivers in its promise to show those of us who are already signed up for the revolution how to more effectively advance these commitments in response to the intricacies of the particular settings in which we are working. Each of the four parts of the book contributes to the toolkit of the educational change agent in a logical sequence that dialectically intersects concern for individual (micro-level) schools and students and (macro-level) community, social and structural issues.

The book begins with a concise and accessible review of literature on the benefits of multilingualism and why U.S. schools should promote it. It continues with an overview of how language planning initiatives at the local level can be aligned with national initiatives such as the Heritage Language Initiative that seeks to cultivate language study by heritage speakers. The chapter on language education programs is dense but does a nice job of sorting out the complexities in this area. Confusion about things like the difference between “dual language immersion” and “transitional bilingual education” too often prevent key interlocutors from even getting on the same page; this chapter can help. The author also helps illustrate how poor implementations in particular settings and their disappointing results have been used in the political debate to denigrate particular models and the field of bilingual education in general. A final chapter in Part I outlines a



program for policy and practice that goes against the grain of the status quo. It is based on planning from “the bottom up” and a conscious strategy by which locally-based planners can counter ideologies that do not promote bilingualism, for example, the belief that children can only learn one language at a time.

Part II recounts the author’s extensive ethnographic and discourse analytic research in the bilingual Spanish-English communities of North Philadelphia. Using a language ideology lens, she richly portrays the layered social contexts and belief systems in which learning to read and write occurs for two school-age children at home and at school. She augments the data on the particular children with a macro-level look at language and identity within this Puerto-Rican community. The third and final chapter explores how the contradictions that are inherent in student’s lives, for example, pride in being a Spanish-speaker and shame about being seen as Puerto Rican, can be used as a basis for action in educational settings.

Part III draws from the author’s extensive experience as a consultant in the School District of Philadelphia where she inaugurated a district-wide effort to promote bilingualism through a rich mix of dual-language immersion, world language, ESL, and heritage language study. Chapter 10 on elevating the status of Spanish and Spanish-speakers was particularly relevant to concerns in California and elsewhere allowed the author to show her competence as both researcher and policy-maker. For example, her discussion of the importance of participant role and negotiation indicated that she was attentive to how such commitments needed to be enacted at the micro-level, the level of individuals in actual conversation, if they are to have any reality at all.

A final section, entitled “Dual Language Planning for Social Change on the Local Level,” addresses the practical and policy dimensions of building on community bilingualism. I found the final chapter particularly helpful in exemplifying how to manage the complexity of implementation. Table 1 provided a model for how policy-makers can map the various program-types, student-populations and outcomes in their school or district in a single sheet reference. It also provided concrete guidelines for identifying the best possible options for maximizing community bilingualism with available resources and under the prevailing social and political conditions.

This is a must-have book for teachers and site-based planners who are interested in exploiting the opportunities presented by the current policy-climate to enact change, to improve the lives of bilingual students and to contribute to society-at-large through the principled advocacy of bilingualism and biliteracy. I can imagine many other audiences, including teachers, who are interested in the special challenges of teaching Spanish to heritage-speakers or school-board members who are trying to make sense of competing policy initiatives. School-based ethnographers and discourse analysts will find an explicit, well documented methodology and research design. The book exemplifies “best practices” without losing sight of the “big picture.” It invites a collective recovery in the face of recent seismic shifts in the area of K-12 language education. It asks those of us



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who work in this domain to dust ourselves off and get back to work, this time with a plan in our pockets.

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