

Building on Strength: Language and Literacy in Latino Families and Communities

Ana Celia Zentella, Ed. New York: Teachers College Columbia University Press. 2005. Pp. x + 213.

This collection of articles by teacher-researchers debunks the conventional myth of a monolithic U.S. Latino community by revealing the inter- and intra-group diversity of language socialization patterns, cultural and linguistic attitudes, and literacy practices among Latinos. The eleven chapters of *Building on Strength: Language and Literacy in Latino Families and Communities* present case studies of Puerto Rican, Dominican, Mexican, Cuban, and Central American families in various regions of the country. These are preceded by an insightful introduction by editor and linguist Ana Celia Zentella (University of California, San Diego) who reviews the current situation of Latinos in the U.S., argues for a language socialization focus in the study of first and second language acquisition, and explains the *anthropolitical* perspective on language and literacy which served as the intellectual impetus for the volume.

In a nutshell, Zentella's anthropolitical perspective (cf. Zentella 1997, 2002) entails utilizing socially and politically-conscious ethnographic observation and qualitative analysis to penetrate the "language smokescreen that obscures ideological, structural, and political impediments to equity" (p. 9). It is diametrically opposed to the quantitative, experimental approach to educational research favored by governmental agencies which homogenizes the multiple experiences of Latino communities and ignores the ways in which English language hegemony negatively affects minority youth. The anthropolitical perspective is strongly allied with the precepts of critical or applied anthropology, as well as with critical discourse analysis and Freirean pedagogy of liberation. One of its principal aims is to open teachers and parents up to the existence of multiple routes to literacy and education and demonstrate that Latino families of all types may contribute to this goal in manners that are different from those prescribed by the schools.

The usual analysis of the educational problems of Latino children blames parents for not caring enough about education or not serving as adequate models for linguistic and cultural success in U.S. society. In contrast, Zentella's collaborators take a family-centered orientation and reveal much that is unperceived by educators who limit themselves to a school-based view of children's language and literacy skills. Most importantly, the teacher-researchers uncover many ways in which Latino caregivers actively struggle to help their children fit in and get ahead while simultaneously retaining their native language and values.

In chapter 1, Zentella delineates how language socialization has been studied in a variety of communities and emphasizes that opinions about language and parental roles in language acquisition vary dramatically from group to group. Dominant groups exert their power to subjugate and treat minority groups and their ways of speaking and child-rearing as inferior, and teachers (as purveyors of dominant ideology) are not immune to such attitudes. They tend to feel more favorably inclined toward parents who follow a teacher model of caregiving and judge as unfit those families that do not. This leads to grossly wrong-headed positions such as accusing parents of neglect for raising their children in Spanish. Zentella concludes by stating that: "To be successful, alliances between educators and Latino families must be based on mutual respect for

our cultural differences, without exaggerating them to the point that they obscure our shared humanity and dreams” (p. 29).

Each of the other ten chapters contains valuable ethnographic information about specific groups. Bayley and Schechter (chapter 2) compare Mexican families in San Francisco and San Antonio and find that the key factors in determining their distinct language behaviors are: population concentration, ethnic composition and mix, length of residence, distance from Mexico, and local language policy. From a slightly different perspective, Farr and Domínguez Barajas (chapter 3) analyze the speech of Mexican *rancheros* in Chicago and show how communicative competence in this speech community requires the ability to be direct and jocular. In still another look at Mexican culture, Bhimji (chapter 4) scrutinizes directives in two working-class Mexican families in South Central Los Angeles and identifies syncretic linguistic practices that result from children interacting with immigrant parents and grandparents as well as with U.S.-born siblings and cousins. Expanding the cultural focus a bit to Central and South American communities, Ek (chapter 5) examines the vital role of Spanish literacy in a Pentecostal church serving Central American and Mexican immigrants in southern California, while Lavadenz (chapter 6) explores the war-torn histories and indigenous cultures of El Salvador and Guatemala to help teachers better understand the hidden identities of Central American students in the U.S. and “reverse their invisibility” (p. 106). Adding a Caribbean voice to the mix, Roca (chapter 7) describes her personal experiences raising a bilingual/biliterate toddler in Miami and reveals how difficult it is to buck the prevailing English-dominant ideology.

Continuing the Caribbean perspective, Rodríguez (chapter 8) reports on six Dominican families with learning disabled children and shows how long-term participant observation and in-depth interviewing can unearth literacy practices in the home which may be unsuspected by teachers. Furthermore, Mercado (chapter 9) investigates how attention to language within two Puerto Rican families in East Harlem, New York City, functions as part of their many funds of knowledge and concludes that literacy in both English and Spanish is essential for dealing with health and nutrition needs, legal issues, self-identity, and spiritual comfort and guidance. Returning to the American Southwest, Relaño Pastor (chapter 10) considers evaluations of language-related incidents in home, school, and church by Mexican and Central American mothers in southern California and concludes that Latina mothers “not only overcome language barriers; they also resist them and draw moral lessons from them, constructing a moral order that they transmit to their children” (p. 160). Finally, González (chapter 11) showcases the exultant voices of children in a successful dual language bilingual program in Arizona enjoying the benefits of cultural and linguistic syncretism on the eve of the ultimately successful statewide campaign to eliminate bilingual education.

Zentella closes the volume with a thought-provoking afterword which summarizes the essential points of the case studies. She also shows how “one-size-fits-all” solutions like “No Child Left Behind” are doomed to failure because they deny the diversity which is inherent in cultural groups. In addition, she reiterates the need for “a profound rethinking of the purpose and impact of schooling, with particular attention to the role of language and literacy” (p. 180).

The volume is easy to read and packed with useful information about Latino communities that should go a long way toward fulfilling the goal articulated by Relaño Pastor of building “bridges of understanding between teachers and Latino parents” (p. 161). I would recommend it highly to teachers, guidance counselors, and social workers in any educational or social programs that give service to Latino students, as well as to graduate students in education, linguistics, anthropology, or sociology who are interested in the dynamics of bilingualism. It should also serve as a stimulus for teachers to carry out more qualitative research of their own to increase the knowledge base required for much needed political and educational change.

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