Book Review

Dyson, A. H. (1993). *The social worlds of children learning to write in an urban primary school*. New York: Teacher College Press.

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Dyson, the author of the book, was born in a small farming village in America. Her worldview at that time limited her to think that the social world was divided into the Catholics and the Publics. There was the Catholics' school and the Publics' school. She reported that she usually tried to find out how social world worked and how she would fit into the world. Thus, when she met someone new, she wanted to know, "Are you Catholic or Public?"

To her, she was interested in the research that focused on how young children living in a different time developed their worldview through social activities. The research in childhood, language, and social belonging were rooted in her own experiences with family, friends, colleagues, and students, who had broadened and made more complex her own worldview. Through the window of the children's composing, she hoped to understand not only how the children were learning to write, but also how they were learning to compose social places for themselves at school. Composing such places involved negotiating complex identities as students, peers, and members of their home communities.

Dyson aimed to counteract visions of literacy learning and teaching with the purpose to document how children build literacy tools from social and language resources that include those rooted in children's experiences with popular and folk traditions. A second goal was to illustrate the sociocultural intelligence of young child composers because the child's composing processes were a distinctly sociocultural process that involved making decisions about how one figured into the social world at any one point in time. The final objective was to allow insight into the successes and the challenges confronted by teachers and children as they worked to construct a shared universe in school.

In achieving the research objectives, Dyson basically used the children's talk-filled worlds, the complex landscape of discourse described by Bakhtin (1981), and the "imaginative universe" (Geertz, 1973) to help her conceptualize children's learning processes in making sense of the social world in her research. To illustrate, In Bakhtin's view, when people speak or write, they position themselves within these relationships, responding to and anticipating a response from others; each text is "dialogic", meaning that there are no integrated cultural or language worlds. Children participated in different imaginative universes, different social dialogues. The "imaginative universe" as described by Geertz is that symbolic worlds can do their social work if the speaker or writer share, which can be achieved only through public means, through shared ways of interpreting symbol.

In her research, Dyson did a nice job in exploring how young used varied kinds of language art forms and traditions, oral and written, as they constructed and participated in the complicated world of school. To be specific, there were six children taking part in the study: Lamar and Anthony (kindergartners); Eugine and Jameel (first graders); William and Ayesha (third graders). All participants were in Louise's classroom in a school in the San Francisco East Bay, serving both a low-income and working-class African-American community. The students in this study came from African-American community.

Dyson tried to capture something of the intensity of the learning, the joy of language, and the sense of social commitment evident in Louise's classroom because classrooms are the place where young children learn to participate in various activities with their peers. Through negotiation, children draw on

diverse cultural resources such as oral folk traditions learned at home, the popular or common traditions that pervaded all of their lives, and the written traditions they experienced at school or at home. In other words, Dyson looked into these children's social places to see how they were engaged in social work, using story and other verbal art forms to manage their social relationships with others.

The book is divided into 9 chapters. Chapters 1-3 basically deal with a general framework to explore children's social world, cultural traditions, literacy development, and these children's official community and unofficial social worlds. More details of these chapters are discussed in detail below in the section titled "Important Themes"/

Chapters 4-8 focus on literacy histories of individual students. This book ends with the implications for literacy teaching and learning in socioculturally diverse classrooms in Chapter 9.

Important Themes

Framing Child Texts With Child Worlds

The story was excellent in developing the themes. For instance, the chapter starts with the general concept of Framing Child Texts With Child Worlds in Chapter 1. It provided a theoretical framework for the exploration of children's social worlds, cultural traditions, and literacy development This section described ways of studying language, literacy, and diversity such as learning to write as social work, cultural traditions in school worlds, children discovering and crossing cultural boundaries, and studying children's social and text worlds. Dyson was very coherent in presenting the theme embedded in each chapter. She basically presented an overview of each chapter pertaining to the significant concepts. She appropriately used examples from her observation of the children to clarify her point. She would relate the illustrated examples to the theories she used for this research to back up her points. For example, Dyson used an example of a dramatic performance by first grader Jameel as he stood in front of his K/1 class and read his text to present the concept of children's learning to write as social work as follows:

Sat on Cat. Sat on Hat.

Hat Sat on CAT.

CAt GoN. 911 for CAt.

After Jameel read the story, there were some cooments from his friends. For example, one of his friends commented that it sounded like a poem while the other said the story did not make any sense. The purpose of Jameel's story was that, he wanted to talk about his wounded cat. But to some of his friends, they viewed it differently. They constructed the meanings of the story and interpreted it in a different way.

From this example, Dyson appropriately used Bakhtin's vision of texts as embedded in social dialogue to explain Jameel's anecdote. That is each time speakers or writers compose a fictional story or any kind of text, they temporarily crystallize a network of relations between themselves and other people. Dyson used this notion to explain that Jameel had certain notions of his power and status as a composer and certain notions of appropriate conversational responses.

The chapter ends with the description of the procedures and certain key analytic constructs to study children's social and text worlds in Louise's school. This technique was unique because readers felt that what they read was useful. Although it was based upon a research study, the way Dyson presented her ideas was simple to follow and did not sound like a research report. In sum, from the study, she aimed to identify the kinds of social work or goals that energized children's oral and written composing of texts in official and unofficial social spheres, to understand the interrelationships between children's social work and their ways of participating in composing activities, and to reveal changes over time in how children used the genre themes, styles, or structures of one social sphere to take action in another, that is, to understand the social and discourse processes through which children differentiate and connect their social worlds.

In the subsequent chapters, Dyson concentrated on Louise's K/1 classroom, exploring how school literacy emerged within the context of children's social world.

Other issues presented in the chapters included learning to write as social work, cultural traditions in school worlds, children discovering and crossing cultural boundaries, and studying children's social and text world.

The Official Classroom World vs. Unofficial Worlds

Official classroom world. Dyson took readers into Louise's school, describing the physical face with which it greeted the children each morning. She then introduced Louise's classroom and described her curriculum. She finally allowed readers a close-up view of Louise's language arts program. In sum, Louise began the day by leading the children in song, accompanying their voices on her guitar. After morning singing, she led the children in a variety of whole class activities on the rug. Then Louise brought out adult authors' stories and poems to share. Next, Louise led the children in a discussion of their study unit and language arts followed. During this period, a variety of reading and writing activities occurred. During composing activities, the first graders typically drew and wrote. For morning reading instruction, the first graders gathered in small groups to read storybooks from the literature reader. In addition, the children read classroom library books, did puzzles, etc.

In the afternoon, there was another hour of language arts activities. During this time, the first graders again read in small groups or with partners. While Louise had a schedule, she was also very flexible. She was open to unexpected child requests. For example, when Louise walked into her classroom one morning and discovered Easter eggs in strange places, hidden by a secret friend, she immediately planned a morning egg hunt, accompanied by much talking, drawing, and writing about who the secret friend might be. The curricular activities in Louise's room were dialogic in that there was space for child choice as well as for adult plans and a willingness to consider changing adult plans at a child's suggestion. At this point, Dyson nicely pursued a more deeply the dialogic nature of Louise's curriculum by looking at its enactment through teacher and child dialogue. It was within this dialogue that thee children were introduced to school literacy.

From the illustrations in the book, Louise created a permeable curriculum, which invited the children in as individual decision-makers and social actors, as did, in fact, the school as a whole. But when the focal children entered, they brought unanticipated genres and unexpected social goals.

Unofficial classroom worlds. In managing unofficial social worlds, Lamar and his friends used talk to organize their social worlds, that is, to articulate who they were relative to others. Dyson allowed insight into the unofficial social dynamics that undergirded the school experiences of Louise's children. She examined the interaction of Jameel, Lamar, Eugenie, Anthony, and their classmates in unofficial worlds. She emphasized the kinds of social work that children accomplished through their talk, especially through their use of popular and folk art forms. In the peer social arena, children often jointly reconstructed stories from the popular media. From the example in the book, Lamar, James, and Tyler collaboratively reconstructed a Batman movie, replaying funny or engaging moments. While the three boys were close neighborhood friends, Lamar carried on similar conversations with many children in the room. Such story making was especially common among the boys. Such affirmations and negotiated recollections of a common experience like "Remember when?", "Hugh?" meaning "Isn't that right?" were a way in which children declared and enacted their own social bonds.

Composing the Classroom Neighborhood

A sense of classroom community, of neighborhood, was not easily achieved, because the classroom itself was not a homogeneous world. Children negotiated membership in overlapping, sometimes contradictory worlds governed by imaginative universes, or shared ways of infusing objects and actions with meaning. Dyson acknowledged that it seemed to be a critical first step in respectful relationships between the teachers and students and in the building of a shared life. Dyson clearly

described what children encountered when entering school. In school, literacy had been conceptualized as something apart from social dialogue; it had become defined as decontexualized knowledge validated through text performances. The definition of literacy potentially makes problematic children's diverse ways of entering school literacy. Individual expressions of information were valued. Seeing each child's behavior as a situated response in a moment in time allows us to create classroom contexts in which we could value a diversity of language and social powers, and the diversity of the child. Jameel's performative stories and songs, Lamar's collaboratively constructed tales, and Eugenie's collegial expressions of affection all seemed valid ways of entering the ongoing literacy life of the classroom.

My Overall Impression

To conclude, Dyson had clearly developed the research themes based on what she observed from the children's literacy learning experiences to show how their worldviews were developed through their meaning-making negotiations and constructions with people around them. She was very deliberate and detailed in explaining the literacy world of children. She had done a very good job in associating children's literate behaviors with Bakhtin's concept of language as social dialogues Geertz's concept of "imaginative universe".

To clarify, Dyson provided a clear picture of the curriculum that Louise used to illustrate the dialogic curriculum that built up a solid background for children to make connections their world to the world around them. From the structure and principle of the curriculum, it truly allowed children how to learn, to interact with others and at the same time to develop their own worldviews.

References

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