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## Review of *Children of Promise: Literate Activity in Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Classrooms*

*Robert G. Wood*

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Shirley Brice Heath and Leslie Mangiola, *Children of Promise: Literate Activity in Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Classrooms*, (Washington D.C.: National Education Association, 1991), 64 pages.

*Children of Promise* is a monograph which recounts the successes of three cross-age tutoring programs involving culturally diverse students who had been marginalized by their potential for failure in our traditional school systems. Ethnographer Shirley Brice Heath (*Ways with Words*) and teacher-researcher Leslie Mangiola seek to remind teachers and tutors that “the students we are becoming accustomed to labeling at risk are actually—like all our students—children of promise” (11). At a time when the ever-increasing cultural diversity of our schools and universities is talked about as a crisis, or at least as problematic, Heath and Mangiola show us that cultural diversity is an opportunity for researchers, teachers and students to learn from each other. Behind *Children of Promise*, then, is a theory firmly grounded on the radical properties of collaboration. “Teachers, students, and researchers,” say Heath and Mangiola, “must be jointly active in the learning process. All must have chances to learn and to construct and revise theories about what and how they know” (13). Although collaborative learning has been a part of both writing center and classroom practice for some time now, the cross-age tutoring research in *Children of Promise* lends us a fascinating new way of approaching the challenges brought forth by cultural diversity.

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In their first chapter “Cultural and Linguistic Differences,” Heath and Mangiola talk about the challenges of working with culturally diverse students. Fundamental to their research is their recognition that working effectively with culturally diverse students means that teachers must first learn the literacies they use at home and in their surrounding communities. They affirm that “By knowing more about the varieties of ways that language is used outside school—in community life, commercial exchanges, and service encounters—teachers and students can expand their ways of describing, clarifying, and assessing experience” (14). Many of those who work in writing centers have long been aware that effective tutoring involves a reciprocal relationship, for writing tutors often mediate between students’ home literacies and the literacies of school. Knowledge of students’ literacies used outside the academic institution, then, is not merely something that should be considered when working with culturally diverse students—it is a *necessity*.

In their second chapter “Inside Classrooms,” Heath and Mangiola get to the heart of their research. They begin with their study of an interactive tutoring program implemented at Fair Oaks Elementary School in Redwood City, California, where more than 90 percent of the students are non-native speakers of English and come mostly from Hispanic backgrounds. Involved in the study were ten fifth-grade Mexican American girls identified as “at risk” because of their difficulties with English.

Each of these ten girls tutored first graders in reading for an hour and a half twice a week. After the tutoring sessions, the girls met with the program directors and discussed video tapes of their sessions. The goal of these discussions was to “help tutors see themselves as becoming ‘experts’ about the process of reading, writing, and talking about what can be learned from personal experience, books and the oral retellings of others” (21). Heath and Mangiola demonstrate here that empowerment takes place when students are given a chance to become experts, whether or not they have fully developed literacy skills in English. That is, they believe that “the ability to talk and think ‘literally’ is a fundamental skill that is transferable to all areas of academic performance” (22).

Although empowering students by making them experts is not a new concept in literacy education, the notion of having “at-risk” students tutor younger ones is an innovative way to help them see themselves as knowledge makers and to help them see that their “knowledge matters to someone other than a distant adult” (23). Heath and Mangiola suggest that as a result of their participation in this program, the tutors began to act like and consider themselves researchers. They also demonstrated an overall increase in

English reading abilities and a growing willingness to speak out and ask questions in class. Furthermore, teachers and researchers also benefited from their interaction. The research shows that the “teachers in the cross-age tutoring project [spent] less time disciplining children and more time in individual consultation,” and that “tutoring [gave] researchers a chance to step out of their usual roles as ‘dictators’ to fulfill roles as ‘facilitators’ . . .” (25).

In another interactive tutoring program at an elementary school in Texas where fifth and sixth graders tutored kindergartners, Heath and Mangiola observed that the program yielded results similar to those of the California project. With a few of his students James King, a professor at Texas Woman’s University and initiator of this program, observed and videotaped student tutoring sessions. Even though the tutors might have initially viewed the role of King and his students as authoritative, gradually the researchers “moved into the background” (26). With the researchers in the background, the tutors, then, decided to make a booklet to present to the parents of incoming first graders. This booklet characterizes some of the difficulties that first graders might encounter learning to read. Included in the booklet are a number of insightful observations that the students gained through their cross-age tutoring experiences. Heath and Mangiola conclude from this study that “through repetitive voluntary engagement with producing, editing, revising, and publishing expository and narrative texts in Standard English, learners developed an appreciation for the power of the written word and the motivation to use it as a tool of empowerment” (29).

The third, and final, tutoring program in some ways differs significantly from the previous two. Instead of cross-age tutoring in an elementary school setting, the study involves a group of adults studying English-as-a-second-language (ESL) at a community college. Their instructor Kathy Riley and researcher Shirley Brice Heath worked collaboratively with the students to make them researchers of the literacies of their surrounding communities. Although the subjects of the program are adults this time, rather than elementary school children, the conclusions remain consistent. The students significantly improved their literacy skills through their collaborative work with Heath and Riley.

Cross-age tutoring has a number of implications for writing centers. Most radical pedagogues would agree that one way to help marginalized students improve their literacy skills is to give them authority over their learning. By placing younger students in the care of the older, formerly marginalized students, a relationship develops which ultimately empowers the tutors. And, the younger students benefit from the bond formed between two people who are essentially “outside” the power structure of the institution.

Cross-age tutoring provides a space where both tutor and tutee can voice praises, concerns, and objections both to each other's work and to the institution without the fear of reprisal that one may find in a traditional classroom or traditional tutoring session. Heath and Mangiola, therefore, offer us a way of approaching what has for a long time been a concern of writing center tutors and directors—a way of helping students believe that what they have to say and write really matters.

In their final chapter “Building Theory and Practice Together,” Heath and Mangiola reveal exactly what they mean by “promise.” For them, “promise is potential entry into the job market and the functional performance of daily transactions in a heavily bureaucratized society. Individuals need to be able to support their families economically and socially, and the better their psychological well-being, the better they can accomplish these goals” (48). Heath and Mangiola offer some very pragmatic reasons why students need to improve their literacy skills. I must admit, however, that I was somewhat let down by this statement. The explicit message of their definition of “promise”—that our goals for teaching should focus on providing functionally literate workers—would probably be challenged by a number of modern pedagogues. But it is what's below the surface that makes me a bit uneasy. One can see how these students of promise might themselves become mere commodities—the potential labor that drives our economy. Also implicit in this argument is that cultural diversity is fine as long as it doesn't interfere with our economic growth.

I am not saying that *Children of Promise* should be faulted for suggesting that learning literacy skills is a good way to prepare students to obtain jobs in a competitive culture. I do think that when the goals of our pedagogy are predicated primarily on economics, rather than on the need for our students to obtain what Freire would call “critical consciousness,” it is very likely that the students themselves might slip into the background and become marginalized even further. Fortunately, *Children of Promise* goes well beyond this by not only suggesting ways that we can produce better laborers but by suggesting ways that we can help students find a voice that is taken seriously in a system that all too often ignores their very existence.

One of the limitations of *Children of Promise*, though, is its form. The spatial constraints of a monograph make it difficult at times to actually hear the voices of the teachers and students. Thus, *Children of Promise* lacks some of the depth of a more complete ethnography like *Ways with Words*. Although the constraints of a monograph prove to be problematic at times, Heath and Mangiola provide ample insight and detail into three programs where “promise is being realized, where teachers and students are taking care to listen, observe, and learn together” (11).