

Editorial: Recognising diversity and difference: Challenges for English/literacy

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Long-time advocate of multicultural education, Sonia Nieto reminds us of the importance of affirming diversity through recognising the various cultural, social, political and economic contexts from which students come. These are, without doubt, factors that play an integral part in the successes and failures of students in all learning settings. Specifically, Nieto addresses racism and other forms of institutional discrimination as well as the role of diversity in the classroom. In her work *Language, culture, and teaching*, Nieto argues that it is crucial to consider “how students are treated because of the way their differences are perceived rather than because of these differences per se” (Nieto, 2002, p. 185).

It is to specific examples of difference in the lives of children and youth, and the ways they are perceived by their teachers and by those responsible for developing education policy, to which we turn in this issue of *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*. All the authors highlight their own experiences of diversity from their work in particular contexts, in Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The perspectives they offer vary in scope, level and populations served, and each provides its own powerful case study, either of the importance of valuing diversity in teaching and learning or the negative effects of ignoring it. Together, the articles contribute to the ongoing story of the ways in which diversity and difference present significant challenges, and offer rich rewards, for English teaching and learning today. Such themes are always pertinent, but the timing of this special edition is particularly relevant as we are now less than two months from a presidential election in the USA in which issues of difference, particularly related to “race” and gender, are at the fore. At the heart of the political campaigns, key buzz words are “change” or “more of the same” – words that also reverberate in many classrooms around the world to mark the challenges of teaching and learning in the 21st Century.

The two articles which begin the edition show different sides of the same coin; the first illustrating in no uncertain terms the problems that ensue when diversity is constrained and ignored, and the second – equally powerfully – showing what can happen when diversity is valued and nurtured. Kynard discusses the institutionalization of writing instruction at the college level and argues for more nuanced ways of assessing the writing of students whose cultural rhetorics draw from the intellectual traditions of Black discourses. From the perspective of an instructor, Kynard illustrates through five student essays how “writing while Black” can limit the literacy development and academic potential of African Diaspora students in the classroom. What the author brings to light are these students’ strengths, that allow them to negotiate and rupture institutionalized forms of writing and assessment, and which otherwise as a normative practice would be discarded or ignored. Kynard challenges college writing and literacy instructors across English studies to consider what is at stake when students feel that they are forced to respond to writing instruction in this way.

In the second article, teacher/researcher Camangian examines the use of performance poetry as one means of engaging students of colour in an urban classroom in South Los Angeles, California. He provides insights into the power of writing and the facilitation of a socially just curriculum in high school English. In particular, Camangian illuminates the rigorous study of the African American literary tradition, including a discussion of the Black Arts Movement and an analysis of Marc Levin's film *Slam*, to make connections with students' lives and to further contextualize their understanding of modern-day poetry movements. At the heart of the unit is the development of student voice and self-expression as revealed in each of the represented poems. Camangian calls on other educators to "channel our students' energy with their own" and "new pedagogical and assessment tools" in order to reach the "level of investment and engagement that we seek".

The following two articles echo in their own ways Camangian's call for changes to pedagogy and assessment, and illustrate the positive benefits we are already beginning to witness from recognising diversity in primary contexts in the UK. Ludhra and Jones report on a successful national project that ran in England from 2004-2006 and brought together for the first time local authority CPD consultants working in Literacy and those working with pupils defined as learning "EAL" (English as an Additional Language). One strong theme of this project was the recognition of the ways in which learning English is enhanced for primary pupils by valuing the languages they bring to the classroom and encouraging them to make links between all the languages they know – a radical idea for many working in the English system. Ludhra and Jones provide vignettes of classroom practice which show how this can work, and indicate the potential of this innovative approach to developing pupils' skills in English.

Following this, in her careful and insightful study of individual primary-aged children in London mediating literacy in all the languages they know and with a wide range of texts, Sneddon brings another factor into the list of those which contribute to young learners' success – the role of families and communities. She shows us some fascinating, detailed examples of children reading dual-language texts at home, with family members or on their own. In different ways, these illustrate not only the level of their literacy skills and the synergies which arise when these children access *all* the literacies to which they have access, but also the importance of such texts to them for their identities as readers and language learners. In some cases, Sneddon is able to go on to show the many positive outcomes that arise when such experiences of literacy learning are recognised and valued by the mainstream schools that the children attend.

The importance of home, family and community and the ways in which the local always intersects with the global is a common theme in the final three articles in this edition. Henderson and Honan investigate the use of digital literacies in two middle-years classrooms serving students from low socioeconomic areas in Australia. At the centre of their discussion are teachers' pedagogical approaches, students' access to digital technologies at home and at school, and teachers' recognition of students' prior knowledge of digital technologies. Findings from their research affirm the need for teachers to consider making home-school connections that build on students' literate practices out of school. Henderson and Honan recommend moving beyond an isolationist approach of using computers, for example, as a form of reward; instead,

they call our attention to the possibilities of digital literacies in preparing students to become active and engaged citizens in the 21st Century.

Relationships between home and school in the South African context are the central concern of Felix, Dornbrack and Scheckle. In their revealing study of how homework was managed in three primary schools in the Eastern Cape, they draw out ways in which teachers and school principals can, in their discourses in a range of ways, reproduce the inequalities embedded historically in society. Their research shows how teachers from a school situated in a relatively affluent area endowed parents with agency and power, whereas parents from poorer socio-economic groups were positioned as lacking both the cultural and social means and the interest to assist their children. Such constructions about parental involvement exist the world over and have been shown to have powerfully negative effects on children's attainments, but it is telling to read of them in contemporary South Africa.

Finally, Conteh and Kawashima continue the home-school theme and return to the kinds of contexts described by the two earlier articles from the UK in their discussion of the complex roles of parents and families in children's success in mainstream schools. Based mainly on in-depth interviews with women from different generations in ethnic minority communities in the north of England, the article argues and provides evidence for the importance of culture, language and identity in understanding parents' views and constructing positive home-school relationships. They argue strongly for the need for a change in policy constructions in England to recognise the many diverse ways in which parents and families do support their children's learning at home and the potential of this for their success in school.

These are snapshots of diversity and difference in today's many classrooms and the communities in which they are situated. The insights from each of the studies provide beginnings for renewed conversations about the constant challenges in teaching and learning. Indeed, what remains constant is change and if we as educators are serious about serving our constituents, then it is "change" that we must work towards and not "more of the same".

REFERENCES

Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.