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REVIEW

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MARIAN WHITEHEAD, *Language & literacy in the early years*, 3rd ed. London: Sage Publications, 2004. Pp. 256. ISBN 0-7619-4470-2.

At a time when there is so much pressure on professional educators to teach basic reading skills, because these are the skills that boost literacy attainment scores, the re-appearance of Marian Whitehead's book is most welcome. This book concentrates on 'the language provision and curriculum from birth to 8' (p. xiii) and is aimed at educators of young children. The author's goal is to provide practitioners with information on sound principles of language development, so they can base their decisions regarding best practices and their interactions with children on them. I will briefly describe what Whitehead says, and then discuss whether her description fulfils her goal of providing an accurate view of the state of knowledge about language and language development.

Whitehead has two main messages. First, professional educators must be aware of the state of knowledge about language in order to be able to make informed choices. Second, literacy is situated within children's development, and successful reading depends on a rich background and continuing experience with literate practices. The first part of the book (Chapters 1 to 5) fleshes out the first message; the second part (Chapters 6 to 9) presents Whitehead's views on literacy and provides many concrete suggestions as to how to implement these views in school settings.

In Chapter 1, the author discusses the topics that, in her view, are especially relevant for practitioners. In particular, she advances the Saussurean distinctions between *langue* and *parole* and between diachronic and synchronic approaches to language, the notion of grammar and the notion of linguistic levels. She makes clear that linguistic studies reveal 'how language works as a system' and rely on 'ordinary knowledge of language' (p. 7). Therefore, 'prescriptive' postures are to be dismissed together with many prejudices about language, such as the idea that certain languages are more sophisticated and richer than others, or that dialectal varieties are defective versions of established languages.

In the next four chapters (Chapter 2 through 5) the author moves on to some of the topics addressed in the disciplines of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics and discusses how useful they are to early childhood educators. Chapter 2 offers an excellent overview of language variety, highlighting the fact that although distinctions in terms of 'good English' or 'talking properly' make little sense linguistically, they are highly influential from a social point of view. The author also acknowledges that there is an

increasing awareness in the English-speaking world of the fact that multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. Migration, social conflicts and professional mobility have led to a huge increase in the number of children who are raised in multilingual environments and who speak home languages different from the one spoken at school.

The social value attributed to the standard variety (albeit unjustifiable from a linguistic point of view) and the fact that teachers must deal with multilingual pupils call for innovative approaches in education. Teachers should start by recognizing the local languages of the children in the class; they should encourage children to be proud of knowing more than one language and not to regard this knowledge as a guilty secret. They may also need to accept code-switching and code-mixing as phenomena of interaction between languages, rather than as learning problems. The suggestion is to look for ways to take advantage of linguistic and cultural diversity, rather than to treat this diversity as a problem.

Chapter 3 is concerned with early language acquisition. The author begins by introducing four views on early language acquisition and attempts to highlight the main differences between them: behaviourist, nativist, cognitive and social interactionist. Following Bruner's ideas very closely, she is especially keen to show how 'mutual communication between babies and caregivers' (p. 57) prepares babies for language and social exchange. Her review of language acquisition centres on the very early stages: infants' sensitivity to speech, eyes and faces; the development of babbling; and the functions of the first words up to the production of the first word combinations.

Chapter 4 outlines four major approaches to the relations between language and thought and their bearing on explanations of early language acquisition: linguistic determinism – the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis – according to which language is the source and the determinant of habitual thought and behaviour; the Piagetian view, according to which the origin of mental structures should be looked at in 'action, or doing things to the environment' (p. 71) rather than in language; the perspectives of Bruner and Vygotsky, proposing language and intrapsychological interaction as explanations of higher forms of thought; and the neuroscientific approach, which holds that physical, sensory and social experiences during the first year of life determine brain development.

In Chapter 5 the author presents reasons why educators should be acquainted with perspectives and research in the domain of linguistics, and summarizes what they should know: all children are linguists; all languages are complex grammatical systems; all natural languages are, or have been, spoken; and language and thinking are inextricably linked. In this chapter the author also sketches four aspects of the language curriculum that should be emphasized in early education: playing with language, telling stories and

sharing books, writing and using words about language. This section is very useful and shows clearly how a curriculum for the early years can be developed naturally and creatively.

In the remaining chapters (Chapters 6 to 9) the author develops the rationale and some ideas for implementing the proposed curriculum for early education. Chapter 6 focuses on narrative and story-telling in early education as a building block for language organization and use. In Chapter 7, she considers the role of books in early education. She stresses that books can be enjoyed at multiple levels, and that teachers should be sensitive to the role that adult readers may play in 'linking the language of books to the language of daily life' (p. 138). The author also touches on the reading debate (p. 148). Against current recommendations that the teaching of reading should rely exclusively on phonics (e.g. McGuinness, 2005), Whitehead holds that 'Phonics alone is never enough' (p. 149). Moreover, she warns against applying research findings to school settings, specifically in relation to the findings of strong links between phonological awareness and early success in reading. Based on numerous studies, Whitehead takes the point of view that learning to read is 'sited within infant development', i.e. it can be adversely affected by poverty and inequalities of many kinds and enhanced by a rich background of literate practices.

If learning to read is not just mapping letters to sounds, the language of primers is of fundamental importance for early reading. Whitehead provides an interesting analysis of the content and syntax in the language of primers. She finds them boring, 'producing linguistic nonsense, and many non sentences' (p. 151). It is difficult to understand how children can obtain a sense of reading as a meaningful endeavour with these uses of language.

Chapter 8 considers the importance of writing activities and children's exploration of spelling systems in the early years, and Chapter 9 shows how much is involved in literacy beyond following reading schemas to comply with the requirements for early-learning goals. This includes 'many symbolizing activities which support and enrich early literacy, such as gestures, movement and dance; role play and dramatic representations, scribbling, drawing, painting and modelling, mapping, building and the construction of miniature worlds (p. 204).

Whitehead acknowledges that neither the knowledge base nor the research findings in the domain of linguistics is easily 'transferable'. The pressures and complexities of the school context, the specific objectives of education and the dynamics of a particular class make it almost impossible to transfer carefully controlled laboratory findings. Also, professional educators may lack some of the specific subject-matter knowledge required to follow the many subtleties in linguistic discussions. Given these caveats, the strengths of Whitehead's contribution appear to be the following.

In the first place, her sociolinguistic reflections are particularly valuable – in particular her insistence on dismissing the prescriptive attitudes towards language which are conspicuous among language educators. To make it clear to practitioners that there are no linguistically based reasons – only social ones – for preferring one language variety over another has important educational implications. Another valuable insight concerns her treatment of multilingualism, and especially her consideration of code-switching and code-mixing as processes of language interaction rather than as learning problems that should be fought against. Her ideas regarding literacy are also very valuable. Against the background of today's focus on teaching the basic skills of literacy – letter–sound correspondences, letter names, explicit segmentation of words and pseudowords – because those are the best predictors of success in learning to read, the book offers a sensitive, refreshing and useful proposal: from the very beginning literacy should be framed in meaningful situations and should be considered part of language development and general education.

However, her more linguistic considerations are less persuasive. For example, her decision to end her account of the contribution of linguistic studies with Saussure is highly debatable – first, because uninformed readers may think that 'modern linguistics' equals 'current linguistics' and that Saussure is central to current linguistics, and second, because other models – e.g. current Functionalist approaches to grammar and its evolution (e.g. Bybee, 1998; Givón, 1979) – would have provided practitioners with a better knowledge base concerning how language functions.

Some of Whitehead's definitions in this domain are also surprisingly inadequate. For example, syntax is defined as 'that level of language concerned with words and the modification of their forms' (p. 12), a statement that ignores its combinatorial character. And, at an even more basic level, her definition of language as 'a system for communicating meanings using the human vocal-auditory tract and verbal grammatical symbols' (p. 15) leaves out sign languages. In Whitehead's view, 'the signing and touching used by the deaf and the blind' (p. 16) are semiotic systems but not natural languages. Her neglect of the linguistic status of signed language is reiterated in her summary of what educators should know in the domain of linguistics. Again, these assertions may be particularly misleading for non-specialists.

Moreover, her attempt to summarize a variety of perspectives on language acquisition in a few short lines leads, by necessity, to an oversimplification. But there are two other limitations as well: the way the different views are presented gives the impression that behaviourists were overtaken by nativists, who in turn were overtaken by the cognitive approach, and so forth, which obviously misrepresents the current status of the theories. Another limitation of the classification is the criterion used

for distinguishing between positions. I cannot see, for example, how nativism, which clearly relates to language as a cognitive system (e.g. Chomsky, 1986) is not considered a cognitive approach. It would have been more useful, perhaps, to show the themes that are currently debated in language acquisition and provide some examples of the different perspectives taken. Also, I think the author should have extended her account of language acquisition beyond the very early stages; otherwise, educators may have the (mistaken) impression, for example, that there is no point in mentioning grammatical development after the first combinations of words.

Finally, her inclusion of the saying 'all children are linguists' among the main things practitioners should be aware of, without any further explanation, may also mislead non-specialists. This metaphor has been used by many authors to highlight how expert children can be about their own language, how sensitive they are to linguistic phenomena and how interested they can be in words, meanings and uses. However, this metaphor overlooks a crucial difference between linguists and children: linguists are reflective experts – their work involves explicit verbalized knowledge about language – whereas children are, fundamentally, language users with implicit knowledge about their language(s). To quote Whitehead: 'They are born communicators, language learners, speakers and listeners; many are bilingual and they are somewhere on the way to becoming writers and readers' (p. 89). This profile of children's linguistic knowledge is a far cry from that of a linguist's. Practitioners should take care with the interpretation of this metaphor.

In sum, although there are quite a few valuable contributions in the book, it also contains some inaccurate definitions and an account of language development that is very limited. If one is looking for a book offering a curricular approach respectful of children's development and suggesting creative school activities for educators, then this book may be recommended without reservations. However, readers who, in accordance with the book's goals, are expecting the book to provide language educators with an accurate account of the state of knowledge about language and language acquisition may have their expectations only partially fulfilled.

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