

A Teacher's Own Multilingualism and Literacy Connections: "A Journey of Journals"

As we move toward greater inclusion of multiple languages in many early childhood settings in the United States, we are playing catch-up to the long-standing inclusion of multilingualism at the global level. Teacher research in early childhood education, as so carefully and sensitively carried out here by Ying Liang in her "A Journey of Journals: Promoting Child-Centered Second-Language Acquisition in Preschool," has the potential to increase our awareness of multilingualism at the policy, curricular, instructional, and research levels. Furthermore, we are well placed in the United States to take advantage of the varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds of early childhood practitioners so as to promote multilingualism for young children and their families.

As Mandarin (and other languages) expand globally, Ying's teacher research project is particularly valuable for us as teachers, researchers, teacher educators, and policy makers. Teachers like her—who grew up speaking Cantonese in Guangzhou, China, and later learned Mandarin in preschool and finally English in third grade—are in the vanguard of promoting multilingualism in early childhood education. In her article, Ying masterfully connects her multilingual background, her American graduate school training in teacher research and early literacy, and her current work as a teacher at a Mandarin immersion independent preschool in the San Francisco Bay area.

Melding the personal and the professional

Ying's project reveals the personal and professional value of looking at one's own schooling as a springboard for teacher reflection within the teacher

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inquiry cycle. A teacher's upbringing and schooling can be a valuable touchstone for observing, documenting, reflecting, and sharing observations and findings (Stremmel 2002). This kind of reflection can also be valuable for examining one's conceptualization of what counts as knowledge and effective teaching (Sun 2015). Ying writes,

I understood how Adam was feeling because I had received teacher-directed education when I was his age. At that time, I felt no passion toward classroom activities because all I was doing was following teachers' instructions.

The process of comparing her childhood memories of school with the data in this project yields valuable insights for Ying:

I find that they [my classroom practices] are far more similar to what I experienced as a child than I would have imagined. This study has led me to realize that my teaching methods, despite my best intentions, were still limiting children's power in their learning process.

This is a critical realization for Ying and for all teachers interested in reflecting on their teaching: seeing oneself as a lifelong learner, and finding new ways to empower young children in the learning process.

From stories to dictation and early writing

Ying's project also links important elements of dictation, stories, early writing, and Mandarin use, which is just the kind of multidimensionality necessary to see the transformative possibilities of linking literacy and multilingualism. Her use of personal journals connects powerful elements of drawing (Baghban 2007), story dictation (Paley 1981, 1990; Gadzikowski 2007), early use of symbols and composing strategies (Clay 1975), and multilingualism and literacy (Gregory 2008). The children in Ying's class draw on a range of resources and talents in creating their journal entries. For example, Kathy drew several figures of children and wrote numerals above their heads, an idea that Ying believes came from Kathy's interactions with storybooks. Elements of the children's journal writing and drawing also came up in the children's dramatic play, such as their interest in playing the role of teacher and repeating Mandarin phrases Ying used in the classroom.

The power of free choice

Ying's project shows the value of using motivating and engaging activities, like keeping journals, for multilingual learning. The children's interest in drawing and creating stories and their freedom to select topics of their choice were important motivators for their Mandarin dictation and writing. The journals provided a developmentally accessible and engaging forum for using Mandarin vocabulary and writing Mandarin characters. The

journals as conceptualized and tinkered with by Ying provided a low-anxiety environment (Krashen 1982) that gave her children access to both basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency skills (CALPS) (Cummins 1979). Ying's research helped her discover that the children's Mandarin oral and written language use deepened from some unexpected sources. For example, several children found inspiration from popular media and other sources outside the classroom. Ying discovered that "most of the words the boys used to tell these stories—for example, 龍捲風 [tornado], 爆炸 [explosion], and 忍者 [ninja]—were words that they might have heard only once from me," which showed her "that children learn words faster and better when they have an interest in them" and inspired her to reflect on "improving my teaching by incorporating children's interests into language learning." Vocabulary development is a powerful influence on early literacy (Neuman & Wright 2014) and multilingualism (Genesee 2010; Gregory 2005), and Ying has managed to connect both in her use of journals.

Tools for reflection

Ying's project showcases an effective integration of the essential tools of teacher research—documenting teaching strategies and materials, audiotaping and writing down children's conversations, collecting children's work samples, and taking photographs of children at work and play. Ying depicts the children's journal entries as lively and engaging, full of drawings, numerals, English words, and Mandarin characters and vocabulary. All the content is meaningful and attractive to her preschoolers. The documentation of their journal engagement serves both as a record of the children's language and literacy growth and of Ying's language and literacy strategies as they result from using her tools for documentation, reflection, and sharing. As Ying notes,

Furthermore, when teachers take dictation from children to document children's storytelling, both teachers and parents have a visual tool that allows us to enter into and reflect on children's worlds.

This kind of documentation is a visual gift for children, teachers, and families (Edwards & Rinaldi 2009).

In closing, "A Journey of Journals: Promoting Child-Centered Second-Language Acquisition in Preschool" shows us a particularly fruitful avenue for using teacher research to understand how multilingualism and literacy can reconnect teachers to their own language roots, empower young children to become engaged and creative learners, and inspire others to use the mix of documentation and reflection tools that Ying has used so well here.

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