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Erik Palmer
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Jan Burkins and Kim Yaris; Foreword by Joan Moser
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Now, more than ever, a large and growing number of children have the potential to develop bilingualism and biliteracy with the support of their families, communities, and teachers. Bilingualism, as we understand it, is the experience and process of engaging a dynamic repertoire of language and literacy practices that are developed over time and are transformed regularly in interaction with others as children who are growing up with two or more languages adapt to changing linguistic landscapes. Indeed, the norm for an increasing number of school-age children whose life experiences and circumstances require that they navigate the world through multiple languages, bilingualism itself does not connote a particular set of skills or level of performance as traditionally measured by language proficiency tests, but rather the multiplicity of varied and dynamic ways in which bilingual children use language on a daily basis. Through participation in multilingual and multicultural social networks, bilinguals enact a wide variety of language practices and transact with literate worlds to create and transform meaning.

Framing children’s bilingualism as a resource that enhances and supports their interactions with text, peers, teachers, and family members, the articles in this special issue offer concrete examples and practical recommendations for how teachers and families can work together to support children’s biliteracy development in and out of the classroom. The authors explore how the complex and varied literacy practices in which bilingual children engage across various contexts, support and expand their biliteracy and provide the foundation on which children’s learning, identity formation, and socialization is based.

These articles also illustrate how teachers in English-medium instructional settings—each representing unique and varied linguistic profiles and histories—can promote their students’ biliteracy. By embracing, adopting, and enacting a bilingual perspective about language, the teachers treat children’s experiences, practices, and developing understandings as resources for further language and literacy learning within their particular contexts, modeling how bilingualism can be leveraged as a pedagogical resource even when English is the officially sanctioned language of instruction.

In the first article in this issue, Kwangok Song invites us into the home of Yoomin, a young Korean-English bilingual who regularly engages with family members in dynamic language and literacy practices that support her metalinguistic awareness and emerging biliteracy competencies. We witness how Yoomin’s language learning is mediated by her parents’ and grandparents’ linguistic intuition and cultural values, and how Yoomin and her family recontextualize and transform the social practices of school, home, and community literacies. This case reveals how children’s biliteracy practices cross and expand the classroom and home “borders” to transnational and multimodal spaces in interaction with a variety of people, media, and linguistic resources. Yoomin’s story provides rationale for strong school–family partnerships in support of children’s biliteracy development framed around families’ cultural values, practices, and bilingual aspirations for their children.

Next, Leah Durán’s article presents findings and pedagogical implications from a design-based research study of the biliteracy development of first-grade students in an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom setting, providing insight into how spontaneous biliteracy emerges and develops as students become more aware of their audience through
ThoughTS froM ThE EdiT orS | Biliteracy in Schools and Communities

Language Arts, Volume 93, Number 5, May 2016

In the special issue of Language Arts, Volume 93, Number 5, May 2016, the editors discuss the importance of biliteracy in schools and communities. Palmer and Martínez frame bilingualism as a dynamic repertoire of linguistic practices that emerge within specific social and cultural contexts in which bilinguals engage with others for specific purposes; as such, the everyday language practices of bilinguals can be seen and accepted as normal and intelligent expressions of bilingualism.

The Children’s Literature and Professional Book Reviews departments recommend books that feature characters and stories in contexts where multiple languages are spoken or where second languages intersect in texts and stories. The authors offer recommendations for choosing multilingual and multicultural books that reflect diverse cultural contexts and children’s family identities in authentic and relevant ways.

The final article, by Angie Zapata and Tasha Tropp Laman, takes us into three ESL and general education classrooms across two states wherein children with varying multilingual experiences enact translingual writing practices with the support of their families and their monolingual [English-speaking] teachers. Together, the children, their families, and their teachers created translingual contexts for literacy learning—spaces where understandings, norms, and practices of monolingual reading and writing are redefined. Teachers’ intentional engagement of family and community members, modeling of language negotiations in their own writing, and sharing of linguistically diverse mentor texts informed children’s writing topics and provided models for their own literacy explorations. Zapata’s and Laman’s study contributes to a democratic vision for teaching writing that strives to value, leverage, and teach from bilingual students’ everyday languaging practices and biliteracy resources.

In the Research and Policy section, Deborah K. Palmer and Ramón Antonio Martínez further our understanding of biliteracy practices in US classrooms. They make a case for moving away from a “methods and strategies” approach to the teaching of bilingual students and toward the adoption of a bilingual perspective on language that reflects children’s actual experiences, realities, and ingenuity. Palmer and Martínez frame bilingualism as a dynamic repertoire of linguistic practices that emerge within specific social and cultural contexts in which bilinguals engage with others for specific purposes; as such, the everyday language practices of bilinguals can be seen and accepted as normal and intelligent expressions of bilingualism.

With this special issue, we invite readers to consider more deeply the contributions of family language and literacy practices to children’s lived experiences in their day-to-day home and school contexts. These experiences go beyond language as a competence and reveal children’s everyday dynamic bilingual practices, such as translation, translanguaging, and language negotiation. Taking up these practices as normative expressions of bilingualism, teachers and parents in partnership can transform a multitude of opportunities to optimize children’s biliteracy potential so that all children’s multilingual repertoires are recognized, promoted, and sustained across the various contexts in which they learn.

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