

## REVIEW ESSAY

Harste, Jerome C., Virginia A. Woodward, and Carolyn L. Burke, *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984, 252 pp. \$19.95 (paperback).

The past decade has witnessed an absolute burgeoning of language development literature. So much, in fact, has been written about language development and instruction that it seems almost unreasonable to expect anything new or startling as one discovers yet another volume on the subject. It was with this mind set that I scanned *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons*. I had not read far before my skepticism subsided. In retrospect, my attention was captured by some fairly specific features, stylistic and substantive, features which clearly marked this new addition to the literature as different. Clearly it was different in the sense that it seriously challenged a number of beliefs sacred to the current mainstream. I passed the book on to a former graduate student whose comment corroborated my initial impressions, "This one gave my brain a number of arresting bends... pretty radical."

As I compare this book with most of the literature, I have to conclude that it is radical. In the first instance, who would ever have thought of posing children's language stories for purposes other than documentation of a point or as a source to highlight interesting aspects of children's language? In Harste, Woodward and Burke, language stories create the core of the message, but not only that, they are used as very significant "demonstrations" of how language stories can be used to inform the teacher-researcher about literacy learning and instruction. A language story is a real life vignette which accents an important aspect of language and language learning. The use of language stories in this way acknowledges that children have much to teach us about language use and learning, and that is a significant part of the message the authors wish to convey. Children, viewed in this light, become theoretical and curricular informants. The educator's task is to actively search for literacy lessons in the "language story."

It is the "mental trip" the authors have experienced in their "search" which causes them to call into question many widely-held assumptions about literacy learning and instruction. Perhaps the most arresting of these assumptions has to do with the role of instruction in early literacy learning. Based on their findings from a program of research to study the cognitive processes involved in learning to read and write among 3-, 4-, 5-, and 6-year olds, the authors dare to raise questions about the role of teacher intervention in the child's literacy development. They demonstrate through language story teacher contrived activities which debilitate rather than facilitate the learning process. It is difficult to argue with the authors when they protest that many instructional activities are based "as much on folklore as developmental givens." (p. 5) Certainly, there is a message for those whose ready defense of a challenged instructional practice is "at least it won't hurt the children," and such a defense is all too common. This may not be radical. However, Harste, Woodward and Burke go one step further. They question assumptions underlying the notion of intervention itself. That is radical. In fact, I would be surprised, even disappointed, to find this statement go unchallenged. This may be one of a number of instances of overstatement deemed necessary for thought and reaction. However, the question about the nature of intervention had to be raised, and it could be raised only by authors who are free of the constraints imposed by vested interests in commercial programs and materials. To state that "Latrice will have to unlearn in school some of the things she knows now" (p. 35) is bold; the implications are sobering.

The nature of intervention cannot be expected to undergo change unless teacher beliefs change, and that is a pervasive reminder in the text: behavior will change only as beliefs change. I believe that this book more than any other I have seen has the potential to change teacher beliefs. Certainly not because the authors say beliefs must change — that would be double talk. They "demonstrate" the means by which their own beliefs have undergone change. Further, they provide the basis by which readers — professors, teachers, student teachers and administrators — can become "kid watchers," and similarly, modify their belief systems.

What, then, are some of these beliefs about literacy learning the authors promulgate? Certainly their observations lead them to demythologize any notions about language learning through imitation. Their data clearly show that language learning — oral and written — grows from an intent to make meaning. They point clearly to situational constraints on the interpretation of language. Indeed, an understanding of these constraints is developed through social interaction long before children enter school. This observation leads the authors to a critical re-examination of the role of adults in children's language and literacy development.

Rather than viewing adults as the control agents who simplify, manipulate and structure the learning environment, Harste, Woodward and Burke demonstrate how children are actively involved in negotiating the structure of communicative events. Even 3-year-olds are seen to differentiate between writing and drawing both through their use of space and distance on the page and the kinds of marks they make.

These differentiations, according to the authors, are inventions that develop "from the inside out" (p. 18) and they develop only from active involvement in real literacy environments where adults support, but never control. The authors, in fact, emphasize the role of experience and involvement rather than age as predictors of the evolution of literacy. This involvement consists of bringing to bear all that the language user knows about language as yet another hypothesis is tested. It should come as no surprise that Harste, Woodward and Burke view adult preoccupation with the control of conventions anathema to the development of creative communication. They caution that preoccupation with surface level features of conventional form draws attention away from the universals of written language. The danger, of course, lies in the limitations placed by such "step by step progression of control" on language as a vehicle for exploring and expanding the world. The authors do not, of course, deny the need for control of conventions, but such control is seen to emerge as a function of context and involvement in the language process. *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* is replete with "one-liners" which add not only to the impact of the text but also the interest. Two such statements relate to control of conventions — "to observe that a child does not control the conventions of language is to focus on one act, but miss the event." (p. 28) "Conventions are quite simply fringe benefits, artifacts of written language use in a community of written language users, not prerequisites, nor criteria for, language use." (p. 30). Many will argue that these insights are not necessarily new, and they are not. However, the "theoretical prism" created from the search of language stories is new—and very powerful.

The reader is invited to examine the set of beliefs pertinent to the role of oral language in the development of literacy. The language stories inform us that oral language does not map directly on to written language. Both reading and writing have their own semiotic potential and must be experienced directly. That is, learning to read and write involves discovery of the ways in which the complex of cues (graphophonic, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic) operate differently from the perspectives of reader and writer. Indeed, we are led to see that literacy strategies which result in scribbling and "reading-like-behavior" occur concurrently with the development of oral language. Further, reading and writing afford opportunities for the enhancement of oral language.

A significant message from the research of Harste, Woodward and Burke addresses the role of context in the development of literacy. The mainstream view has been that learning to deal with written language involves learning "to handle decontextualized print." This view is challenged by the demonstrations from the language stories, that context is not something added onto language, but rather part and parcel of the "linguistic sign" itself. What often appears superficially to be a stripped print context is replete with meaning resulting from prior experiences with print. This aspect of the research in itself has implications for curriculum and instruction which might reasonably be considered radical, if not revolutionary.

The literature on language development is firmly grounded in the belief that circumstances of birth predispose children to success or failure in learning to read and write. Harste, Woodward and Burke challenge the view that sex, race or socio-economic status are significant correlates of literacy. "Availability and opportunity to engage in written language events" (p. 42), in other words, experience, is posed as the significant factor in successful literacy development. Some of the "worst disasters" were seen to revolve around instances in which parents set out to formally teach letter names, or "engage in other school-like reading and writing tasks" (p. 43), a reminder that quality of experience is at least as critical a factor as quantity. The research of the authors provides findings which would explain these disasters. Certainly, adult control, and preoccupation with conventions of language at the expense of encounters in which meaning making is central is strongly suggested. Further, the authors suggest that the process of risk-taking is constrained by the language user's personal social history of literacy, and risk-taking appears to be critical to the testing of language hypotheses.

*Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* makes a frontal attack on the pervasive belief that young children's engagements in literacy are "mock or 'pseudo' events. In their "search," the authors provide convincing evidence that these events, in fact, are not precursory, but real engagements in making meaning. Such a belief runs counter to theories underlying most early childhood programs and invites a total re-examination of assumptions underlying such programs. This aspect of the research alone is sufficient to "bend the brains" of those willing to risk the "bend." In the author's words, "Outgrowing oneself is not easy" (p. xix); that seems

to be the ultimate challenge presented in the text. The authors provide yet another "demonstration" — they themselves have "outgrown themselves" in their search, not for "truths" but for new "beliefs."

At times the skeptic in me is awakened by the haunting question, "Are Harste, Woodward and Burke raising yet another orthodoxy to undermine existing educational orthodoxies?" That skepticism must be a residual of experiences with literature I have read in the past, an expectation that nothing revolutionary can enter the domain of literacy literature. (Or, am I resistant to the "brain bending — outgrowing" challenge?) Indeed, the authors, consciously or unconsciously, attempt to dispel the "enemy" as they invite response, even reaction, to what they view as a "working paper." I am reminded of a key statement early in the text, "... in order to judge the quality of the literacy experience one must judge the quality of the 'trip' taken by young children. 'It would seem that the 'mental trip' taken by the authors only incidentally culminated in a book — their 'arrival point.' It would seem that their 'arrival point' is an open invitation to the readers to energize their own 'mental trips' as they read this book, but more importantly, as they observe children in the intriguing process of literacy. I'm convinced that orthodoxies will emerge from this book but, then, no author can be held responsible for a pervasive mentality which searches for panaceas. I am equally convinced that the impact of this book will be significant not only for the challenges it projects but also for the 'demonstrations' it makes about research methodology and interpretation. I believe *Language Stories and Literacy Lessons* has the potential to become a 'blueprint for a quiet revolution' (p. xx).

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Abel, Emily K. *Terminal Degrees: The Job Crisis in Higher Education*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984, 253 pages, \$24.95 (U.S.).

Terms such as "disposable dons" and "displaced academics" do not sit well with full time faculty in institutions of higher learning. Neither do "free-way flyers", "itinerants", and "migrant" labor pools. Often committed to defending underprivileged groups distanced from their own experience, they are content to overlook the existence of an underside and underclass within their own ranks. "Gypsy scholar" has a far more romantic ring to it than academic proletariat. It suggests freedom from institutional constraints and a free-floating intellectualism that are to be envied. However "gypsy scholar" cloaks the marginalization and anonymity of those academics "at the juncture when they confront the possibility they may be unable to convert academic credentials into career success" — Ph.D.s, candidates, sessional instructors, part-timers, adjuncts and those waiting to be denied tenure (p. 3).

Unable to cross the great divide into permanency, these scholars internalize a perceived failure which diffuses radical politization by transforming it instead into self-directed blame.

Lacking job security, health and pension benefits, or even, in most cases, the rudiments of participation in departmental and disciplinary life, this new academic proletariat, although essential for the maintenance of the shrinking, fund-starved public institution, is almost bereft of rights even as its responsibilities within the academy expand. (p. ix)

The results are personally catastrophic and intellectually wasteful; and worse, "Defining part time faculty as failures, full timers feel justified in resisting their demands for first class treatment."

Emily Abel incisively dissects many of the sacred cows of higher learning by examining anachronistic assumptions that, favouring the "haves" and preventing incursions by the "have-nots" keep the "system" in place. Scholarship is too often seen as property and tenure as monopoly. "Oversupply" is effectively interpreted as discrimination against women who have disproportionate representation among the "discard" group. Confidentiality protects fulltimers but is perilous for part-timers. Moreover there has taken place a "commodification of academic work — the displacement of scholarly mastery by marked competitiveness with each other militating against group identification among displaced academics. In short, there "is no consolation among competitors." (pp. 50-51).

In this perceptive analysis of the fundamental structures of higher education Abel argues that scholarly merit is assumed to be instantly recognizable by the equally meritorious. This seems a reasonable proposition if one