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## Book Review of Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum

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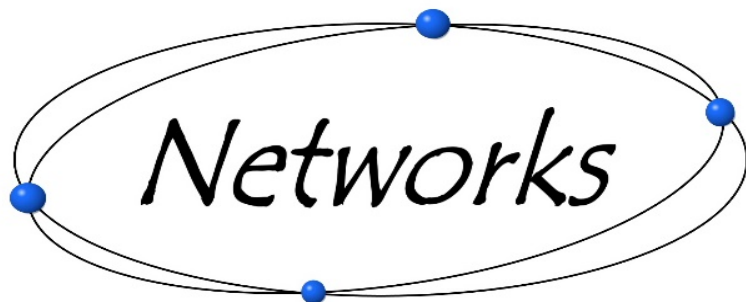
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**An On-line Journal for  
Teacher Research**

**Book Review of *Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum: On Literacy, Diversity, and the Interplay of Children's and Teachers' Worlds***

**Ted Kesler - Queens College, CUNY**

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Dyson, A. H. (2016). *Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum: On Literacy, Diversity, and the Interplay of Children's and Teachers' Worlds* (B. Kabuto, Ed.). New York, NY: Garn Press.

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*Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum* was first published in 1993 in the National Council of Teachers of English Concept Paper Series. Now it is reprinted in book form as part of the Garn Press Women Scholars Series. In the book, the extended essay is framed by an introduction by senior editor, Bobbie Kabuto, and an interview by Kabuto with Anne Haas Dyson. The final section of the book is a bibliography of Dyson's most recent publications.

Why reprint an essay from nearly 25 years ago? Kabuto provides significance in her insightful introduction. In our era of mounting standardization and high-stakes testing, dominated by private, corporate companies, Kabuto argues that schools have become less responsive to each student's developmental journey as a writer, reader, and learner. Through a case study of her son, Kabuto shows how the school community constructed him as a struggling learner, neglecting all the linguistic, cultural, and social resources he brought to his writing and other literacy practices outside the official school curriculum. This outcome makes her wonder if the construct, *learning disabilities*, is more indicative of school curriculum than it is of students. Students like Kabuto's son need a humanizing pedagogy that Anne Haas Dyson explicates in her essay.

Undergirding Dyson's essay is a paradigm shift regarding young children's development as writers, from a psycholinguistic to a *sociolinguistic* perspective. Dyson worries that writing process pedagogy currently dominating schools takes a Piagetian view of young children's play as egocentric. This pedagogy maintains "[b]y engaging in the

processes of composing and response, children move beyond egocentric play with writing to true communication” (p. 26). Instead, Dyson sees young children as players, peers, and learners “learning writing as a means of engaging with, and playing in, the world” (p. 80). Writing is a mediating tool for social affiliation. As such, “the heart of the story is not on the page but in the world being mediated by the page” (p. 91). Each writing sample is only a partial expression of “the larger social happening in which the child is (or is not) participating by means of that writing” (p. 91). From this perspective, “composing is always a situated response, an addressing of another in a particular time and place, a motivated making of words for some end” (p. 58), and “‘audience,’ ‘editor,’ and ‘response’ are situated, not generic” (p. 59).

A sociolinguistic writing pedagogy requires a permeable curriculum, an *intersubjectivity*, or “‘mutually created meanings’ about experiences” (p. 27). A teacher’s role in a permeable curriculum is to listen, respect, and build on young children’s linguistic, cultural, and social resources, to strive to understand how their written expressions fit with their attempts at affiliation, and connect their expressions with genres and forms in the world outside the classroom community. The teacher establishes *dialogic interplay* for a negotiated curriculum. Dyson asserts, “both child worlds and school worlds would be considerably enriched by the interplay made possible in a permeable curriculum” (p. 57). Competency “is not mastery of any one genre or style – it is the capacity to negotiate among contexts, to be socially and politically astute in discourse use” (p. 62). Rather than share sessions in writing workshop, Dyson advocates *cultural forums*, “within which we as educators connect their efforts with the world beyond. And, at the same time, it is a forum in which our own world view is enriched by those of the children” (p. 64).

The interview between Kabuto and Dyson expresses more reasons why this essay is so relevant to education today. Dyson discusses how some of the young children she studied were later defeated by school, “not so much by academics, but by the experience of schooling amid life and its troubles” (p. 82). Dyson considers ridiculous the claims of the Common Core State Standards “that if children somehow learn their letters and sounds at younger and younger ages, oh they’ll progress through school with no troubles at all” (p. 82). Young children must talk during composing because writing employs skills for communicating in specific social events. “If we do not let the children talk when they write, we may get no writing; the intentional context may be destroyed, along with the help and feedback children offer each other” (p. 84). Their talk also provides a powerful means for teachers to get to know children’s linguistic, cultural, and social resources and interests to create a permeable writing pedagogy. Instead, teachers currently face a “checklist of competencies” (p. 85) and a “mandated ‘pedagogy of poverty’” (p. 89) that prevents dialogic, negotiated, and powerful learning from the get go. Dyson’s critique harkens back to Kabuto’s case study of her son in the introduction.

*Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum* is unable to tell the whole story of writing pedagogy for young children. The format of an interview, for example, only allowed a cursory discussion of new developments in research on young children’s writing, such as the infusion of popular culture, digital media resources, and the changing role of drawing and, more broadly, multimodality.

Perhaps beyond the purview of this book is HOW. HOW do teachers and school communities recognize and resist the corporate forces in education that invalidate these practices? HOW do they enact these practices in our era of high-stakes mandates? HOW do they develop counterintuitive understandings that through dialogic interplay in a negotiated curriculum, trusting young children's developmental trajectories, they will meet and exceed these mandates?

Overall, *Negotiating a Permeable Curriculum* achieves the intentions that Kabuto has for the series. In our personal communications, Kabuto stated that, through the juxtaposition of the interview and an extended essay of the scholar's choice, "it is my hope that reading their written works in the context of their personal histories and childhoods and in historical and contemporary views of education will give readers renewed insights into the work that they do," including the significance of this work to our times.