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Elementary English Acquisition

by Beth Anne Cherry, Renee Ford, and Kathy Mueller

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Kelleen Toohey: *Learning English at School: Identity, Social Relations and Classroom Practice*. New York: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2000, 152 pages, ISBN 1-85359-482-2, \$25.95, paperback, \$79.95 hardcover.

From the beginning of chapter one in *Learning English at School*, the author, Colleen Toohey, emphasizes that social interactions have a pivotal role in young children's second language learning. She begins by analyzing the data of several theorists and researchers, such as Snow, Vygotsky, and Bakhtin, she had reviewed to develop the theory and methodology for her study. Toohey does a nice job relating her own experiences and observations to the presented theories. It is clear from the beginning that Toohey views the classroom as a community of practice and her study focuses on the social structure of this community and the positions that are available for the children to take up. The specific school community in which Toohey chooses to begin her three-year longitudinal project is a kindergarten class of nineteen students, eleven identified by their teacher as native English speakers with the eight remaining students identified as English as Second Language (ESL) learners.

In the second chapter Toohey introduces life in kindergarten and the six focal children that are involved in her research. Of the focal children, a boy and a girl are chosen to represent each of three home languages, Punjabi, Polish, and Chinese. Of the eight ESL learners the two not chosen were one boy who spoke Laotian and one girl who spoke Chinese but her English was close to that of most native language speakers. It is important for readers to get to know each child so that they can see how they develop throughout the book as a result of their home lives and classroom participation. Toohey is a unique participant in the language learning classroom during the research because she has access to the teacher's and parents' stories in addition to her own observations. In this chapter we learn who these kindergarten students are from descriptions of their classroom interactions, which contribute to their identity.

Kindergarten is a very pivotal period in the lives of children and their families. It is the year when a child moves from being a child to being a student. Most Western European institutions evaluate and rank their members and the school institution is no exception. Throughout this book Toohey uses the term 'rank' to describe the status or credibility and respect a person is given based on metrics specific to that institution or community. In this book the school classroom is

the community, and in chapter 3 Toohey uses the kindergarten school year data to illuminate the metrics used to rank children by the teacher and their peers. She finds that these rankings can either ignore or suppress certain abilities while emphasizing others. This is a practice that tends to stratify communities and requires careful examination by teachers, theorists, and researchers.

Toohey analyzed her data according to the five criteria she felt best described how the teacher and students determined rankings. While she acknowledges these distinctions are artificial and interrelated she identified those areas as being; academic competence, physical presentation/competence, behavioral competence, social competence, and language proficiency. *Learners' identities have definite and observable effects on what they can do in classrooms, what kinds of positions as legitimate peripheral participants in classrooms they can occupy, and, therefore how much they can 'learn.'* (p. 74)

Toohey observes, during the students' first grade year, a breaking up of the community that had been built in the kindergarten year. In chapter 4 she looks at the data from the perspective of how teacher practices affect the rankings of the students. She identifies the 3 main practices that tend to individualize the students and start a process of community stratification. While the three practices of sitting in your own seat, using your own things, and using your own words and ideas, are usual practices in many primary classrooms; they differed greatly from the children's kindergarten experiences. Toohey believes these practices lead to the exclusion of some students from certain activities, identities, and affiliations. Schools 'break them up/take them away.' (Pp. 92-93)

Toohey wants to know how well these teacher practices provide the focal children with access to opportunities to appropriate powerful and desirable voices in the classroom community. In chapter 5 she considers how the oral discursive practices of lessons allowed the focal children to appropriate classroom language. This is accomplished by carefully examining three specific discourse activities: whole group discussions, teacher-mandated partner and small group conversations, and student-managed conversations. For each she considered (a) the purpose of the discourse structure, (b) the positional possibilities the structure offers to interactants, and (c) the possibilities the structure offers to interactants to appropriate voices for themselves and thus to create meaning.

Toohey proposes that all discourse practices set up particular kinds of social relations between participants (p. 99). She notes that teachers have different goals or motives for each discourse sequence; then supports this belief by distinguishing and examining expected or ascribed goals of an interaction along with the latent or unintended goals. It is interesting to read how the focal children respond to different discourse styles. Specifically, the transcribed conversations of one focal child named Surgeet show her struggling during group recitation and requiring teacher scaffolding to elicit her limited and uncomfortable participation. Immediately following that group discussion, the teacher assigned Surgeet, whose native language is Punjabi, to work in a small group with three boys with whom she had minimal contact in other less formal settings. Surgeet was to join the boys at their desks, which were clustered together as a permanent assigned seating arrangement. Their close proximity, in which there was no place for her to sit, left her on the outside, requiring that she lean in just to see the worksheet. Of the three boys in the group, two spoke only English at home with their families and the other boy, previously

unidentified as ESL, spoke Tagalog. Surgeet's group placement put her in a subordinate position and appeared to leave her both physically and linguistically on the "outside looking in." As in the whole group discussion, Surgeet spoke very little, however it was apparent to Toohey that she was more engaged and her responses were more complex. It is in-depth observations like this, which gives Toohey's book depth and credibility. Readers feel as though each focal child is alive and breathing in front of them, and we experience their struggles.

In her final chapter, Toohey discusses theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical ideas and problems emerging through the course of the research. Her main point is that what is done in schools, and what is considered knowledge in schools, is socially and culturally specific to the teacher and students in each community. Some children will be disadvantaged and others advantaged by the decisions made about these matters. She ends the chapter by encouraging educators to consider classroom practices which permit children to participate in a variety of social milieux as speakers, to find voices with which to speak, and to find ways to develop different discourses.

Toohey's case study of these six children gives a new perspective on second language learning. She provides a logical link between learning and social interaction within the community that is known as the classroom. Toohey's observations and interpretations give reason for any current or future classroom teacher to really think about the practices they employ in their classroom.