Foreword

Together, we recently edited a special issue of English Teaching: Practice & Critique which featured articles theorizing multimodality through children’s and youths’ perspectives. The work we presented was intended to serve as an antidote to social semiotics research that is too often (and too far) removed from the contexts in which multimodal literacies are most excitingly enacted, in spaces populated by children and youth. In our opening editorial, we remarked that:

Each of us has our own children, and as we struggled to teach, write, and think during the pandemic, we also watched our own children and the multimodal literacies they demonstrated, and remembered that we were fundamentally interested in how children think, what they know, and what they might teach us about multimodality (instead of the other way around). (Low et al., 2021: 127)

The book you are now reading, edited by Sally Brown and Ling Hao, has transported us directly back into that feeling and those questions.

The chapters that compose the volume do much, as a linked collection of essays, to teach us about multimodality by anchoring that teaching in what and how children think and know. From authors who explore translanguaging in preschool settings to those who focus on elementary or out-of-school contexts, the book’s contributors steadfastly commit to honoring emergent bilingual children’s sophisticated ways of making and representing meaning with-and-across an astounding array of semiotic registers. The progression of the chapters focusing on educational contexts from the early childhood years through to the primary grades reminds us of the critical role educators play in ensuring that our pedagogical practices are responsive to our learners. Taken as a whole, this book reads as a love letter to the communicative creativity and agency of young multilingual learners as they envision and narrate the world anew.

One of the more unique contributions of Brown and Hao’s edited volume is that it features global perspectives on emergent multilingualism as an epistemological throughline. While principally concerned with children’s multimodal literacy enactments, the book’s editors and contributors make a strong case that age is but one of many intersecting factors that must be attended to by researchers of young people’s multimodal literacies. Children’s home languages, family backgrounds, national
origins and cultural identities all play crucial interrelated roles in their practice of multimodal literacy, whether print-based, on screens or in physical/material spaces with sociopolitical implications. The complexity of the work of an educator has never been greater.

As is the case with many studies of emergent bilinguals, linguistic hegemony serves as an imposing backdrop throughout the book. Numerous authors actively remind readers of the persistent deficit ideologies that follow multilingual children into schools in the form of curricular policies that treat monolingualism, monomodal print texts and white suburban ways of knowing as inviolable gold standards – labeling all else as inferior. No ideology can show children love or respect when it tells them that their identities are incompatible with the business of learning, and asks them to muzzle their communicative preferences out of subservience to standardization. Some of this book’s power, then, comes from speaking back to an oppressive power dynamic that willfully misconstrues linguistic diversity as a pathology to be diagnosed and remediated.

Coming from a shared asset-based approach, the authors of this volume unite to show the emancipatory possibilities of culturally sustaining pedagogical approaches that recognize children themselves – their interests, cultures, languages, legacies and communities – as the most vital ingredient of any curriculum. Only when children are allowed and encouraged to be their whole selves, to bask in the richness of their communicative traditions and multimodal inventions, can teachers design classroom spaces that truly honor the promise of diverse and equitable schooling. With Multimodal Literacies in Young Emergent Bilinguals: Beyond Print-Centric Practices, educators have been handed a compelling plan for attaining this promise. We give thanks to the editors, the chapter authors and, above all else, the children, for what they teach us about multimodality.

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