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Book Review

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Meier, D. R. (2004). *The young child's memory for words: Developing first and second language and literacy*. Teachers College Press, 160 pp. ISBN 0807744298, \$18.95, (paperback).

Meier's book *The young child's memory for words: Developing first and second language and literacy* is about understanding and putting into practice artful ways for children to have long-lasting *memories* for reading and writing. Meier's central argument is that creating memories for literacy is a complicated process. Throughout the book therefore, he suggests innovative approaches and practical strategies for developing children's literature appreciation centering on four themes: (1) memories for literacy are based on literacy activities, (2) memories for words are based on environments and resources, (3) reading and writing are complementary processes, (4) current literacy standards provide teaching goals.

Literacy educators must have a thorough conceptual understanding of each child, including their chronological age, their developmental capabilities, their ways of talking and experiencing books, their particular personalities and linguistic talents, their socially and culturally influenced literacy interests, and their out-of-school experiences. Educators must then carefully match and tailor their philosophies and visions for literacy education, their instructional goals, their tools, materials, and strategies for teaching, and their methods of evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of their teaching to individual children's social, cultural, and linguistic needs and talents.

Meier discusses the connection between language and literacy learning and outlines the building blocks for first- and second-language acquisition. For example, he demonstrates how children acquire their first language: unconsciously and experientially based. Through conversation, stories, and play, children develop phonological, syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of language, and how to put it all together. He argues further that when children learn another language, they experience all over again the journey of developing an ear for the particular rhythms and intonation, and understanding of the sense or subtle uses and meanings of words. Meier then suggests that children learning another language need supportive and creative opportunities and environments for multiple-language use and strategies that parallel first-language acquisition if their memories for biliteracy and multilingualism are to coalesce and take shape.

The book posits that promoting memories for literacy is based upon how well literacy activities are embedded within the social and intellectual fabric of the classroom

and that the very foundation for literacy development is social interaction. He suggests “*literacy collaboration*” (Meier, 2004, p. 40), a strategy that emphasizes social collaboration and scaffolding from peers and adults, as imperative if children are to see themselves as powerful users and communicators in more than one language.

The design and organization of classroom environments and the instructional resources and materials have important implications for a lasting memory for words. Meier suggests that the classroom environments must speak to the literacy interests and experiences of children and entice them into the world of school literacy. Literacy educators must honor and validate linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge children bring to school. They must provide enriching and engaging literacy activities that speak to who children are at that moment - the here and now of their lives and worlds. Children’s books and other literacy resources must be culturally diverse and multilingual to validate and support students’ multiple language backgrounds and the specific linguistic and cultural goals of the classroom. The books must also serve both informal reading engagement and more formal learning-to-read activity needs.

Reading and writing are complementary processes and as such literacy educators must provide opportunities that connect talking, reading, writing drawing, visuals, books, and other literacy resources. Meier argues for instance that teaching the alphabet is necessary but not sufficient in children’s literacy learning. Alphabet-related activities must be integrated with children’s own interests, resources, high-quality literature, dictation and the language experience approach, art and music, and writing. The set of exceptions to sound-symbol patterns and regularities in English necessitates this approach, especially for English Language Learners (ELL) if they are to recognize and hear different sound-letter-syllable patterns in English. Fostering memories for words must also involve linking written language forms and knowledge with children’s powerful interest in learning about themselves and one another.

Current literacy standards and expectations impact literacy educators’ effectiveness in promoting children’s memory for words. Meier contends that the standards give educators something to aspire to and base their teaching on and provide clear, concrete teaching goals for breaking down those basic elements of literacy that many children need, as they become readers and writers. However, the standards are also problematic as educators are asked to do more in a shorter period of time to squash the experience of literacy into smaller developmental compartments. This leaves less time and room for creating memories that might stretch beyond the preschool or kindergarten yet children’s development so often defies time constraints. Literacy educators must “find room to *wiggle* within the standards” (Meier, 2004, p. 6) and “think *inside* the box, inside the classrooms” (p. 125). They must envision and implement, as best as they can in light of the standards, literacy education that is creative, artistic, and inclusive of their own talents and those of their students and the communities they serve. For example, they must adapt general literacy standards to fit their local teaching and community contexts and shift what and how they teach to better address the needs of the children they teach. They must choose to be more responsive to children than to the current push for standards and testing. Children need language and literacy to fit them, not the contrary. They must also begin to cross professional borders and re-conceptualize early literacy learning through collaboration between: preschool, kindergarten, and first grade; novice and veteran teacher; and teachers and communities.

One shortfall noted in Meier's book is the inclusion of too much content which then suffers from lack of depth. For example, the information he provides on reading assessment is insufficient to prepare anyone new to literacy education on how to assess concepts about print in children three to six years old. Looked at differently however, Meier's book merely whets a reader's appetite and creates interest in reading for further information. Fortunately, research citations he places at the close of each chapter are excellent first-stop resources to consult. Also, Meier did not clearly delineate the theoretical framework(s) informing his work but rather seemed to have embedded them within each chapter. For instance, one might infer from his mention of a child-driven meaning of memory for words and the role of significant others in literacy development that his work is rooted within a social constructivist paradigm.

Overall, Meier brings to the book an immense wealth of personal and professional knowledge and experiences. He is Associate Professor of Elementary and Early Childhood Education at San Francisco State University, has experience teaching pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade children both in private and public schools, and is also an experienced author. Although his book might not be considered groundbreaking as such, it is an invaluable contribution to the field of literacy education. For example, it is rife with original and authentic examples because much of the children's talk, interaction, and learning presented in the book come from his experiences working directly with children from a variety of cultural, racial, linguistic, and economic backgrounds and from his own daughter who turned two, three, and then four years old as he wrote the book. He also offers practical and insightful opening "Teaching and Learning Questions" and closing "Suggested Activities" which frame each chapter and create a thread for the book's emphasis on fostering a memory for literacy - without being necessarily didactic or prescriptive.

I find the book intriguing, forward thinking, and a readily available reference text. The book's simple and easy to follow structure and language use, clearly defined terminologies, concepts, and strategies on literacy education are likely to endear his book to a wide audience, both locally and internationally. The book can be used in literacy education classes as an introductory text that offers practical ideas for first- and second-language and literacy development of children ages three to six. It should, however, be used in conjunction with other literacy education materials and resources. The key is to remember Meier's emphasis on making literacy interesting and captivating if positive and longer lasting memories for words are to be impressed upon children's minds.