

Multilingualism in the Australian Suburbs

Ruth Fielding

Multilingualism in the Australian Suburbs

A framework for exploring bilingual identity



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Ruth Fielding
Faculty of Arts & Design
University of Canberra
Canberra, ACT, Australia

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Foreword

I would like to commend this book to researchers and educators seeking new insights and fresh approaches regarding children's bilingual development and the affordances of bilingual education. Ruth Fielding's novel concept of the Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework takes our thinking forward in several distinctive ways. Firstly, it highlights the significance of both individual and community investment in bilingual identity development, showing how the two aspects are interwoven in children's lives and learning. Secondly, the framework emphasises the need for sociocultural connection: in other words, for children to be able to build a sense of identification with different cultural groups. Thirdly, there is the key role played by interaction in fostering children's learning across languages and cultures. The framework as a whole demonstrates that becoming bilingual and constructing an intercultural identity are not processes children can perform alone. As well as their own motivation and efforts, children need the affirmation and practical support of their families, schools and communities.

Ruth Fielding's research builds a nuanced picture of children interacting at home in different languages with siblings, peers, parents and the extended family, as well as at school with classmates and teachers in a French-English bilingual programme. Through surveys, children's journals, interviews and classroom observation, she explores the attitudes and experiences of her key participants, a group of 10–12-year-olds and their teachers.

A significant feature of the book is the prominence given to children's voices. By listening to their accounts, we discover how they are moving forward as bilingual learners and in what ways they need additional support. The children reveal, for example, that they understand the benefits of becoming bilingual, they actively seek opportunities to use languages at home as well as at school and they develop their own language learning strategies. Each child's story is an individual one, underlining the variety of ways in which bilingual identities can be negotiated and the dynamic, ever-changing processes involved.

Teachers reinforce the value of bilingual identities, noting children's development of self-esteem, cognitive skills and intercultural relationships. The book pays tribute to teachers' efforts in the bilingual programme, which provides the

interactive environment required for children to progress, whether they are learning a new language or building on one they already know.

Finally, Ruth Fielding shows us how children's bilingual identities could be further supported, whether in bilingual programmes or other educational contexts. She proposes that home and school work together to explicitly challenge the traditional notion of 'balanced bilingualism', thus helping children create a stronger self-concept as emerging bilinguals developing a variety of competences in their different languages. Educators also need to recognise and value all the languages and literacies that children know, making links with home learning through activities in the classroom. In these ways, children will develop confidence and expertise across their languages, making the most of their multilingual futures. Through its emphasis on a societal as well as an individual commitment to bilingualism, and social interaction as key to learning, the Bilingual Identity Negotiation Framework underpins such approaches and offers new avenues for teaching and research.

London, UK

Charmian Kenner

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