

Book review

Title: *Seeing All Kids as Readers: A New Vision for Literacy in the Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom*

Author: Christopher Kliewer

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Reviewer: Julie Smith

Christopher Kliewer takes us on a timely and scenic ethnographic journey in his book, *Seeing All Kids as Readers: A New Vision for Literacy in the Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom*. Kliewer encourages educators and society to reflect on our educational system, including what we perceive as literacy, how we facilitate meaningful literacy skills, and how those perceptions affect all students in our schools.

Perceptions of who we consider competent students have enormous effects on individual student lives. They can make the difference between students becoming more active and fulfilled members of society, or being left out of full literate citizenship. Kliewer's observations and recommendations may resonate with anyone who has spent considerable time in classrooms from pre-school through high school over the past several years.

Over the last decade many early childhood classrooms have transformed. Some of the greatest changes have occurred in Kindergarten, which used to be a place of great activity and unbridled learning. Young children took great joy in making sense of their worlds through countless discoveries. Classes were focused more on the overall cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of children. Test scores and developmentally inappropriate standards and practices have overshadowed many early childhood classrooms. Unfortunately, the pressures of accountability have made some good schools and many great teachers vulnerable to poor practice. As Kliewer points out, some of that poor practice has led to fewer opportunities for students with disabilities to develop their literate citizenship to the fullest potential.

Kliewer introduces the concept of local understanding early in his book. He defines local understanding as "the capacity to recognize the intelligence, imagination, and drive to make sense of the world within all children, *and* it is the structuring of thoughtful, inclusive educational contexts that foster, deepen, and expand children's intelligence, imagination, and sense-making" (p. 4). This concept is woven throughout the book, challenging the current medical model of disability that drives most segregated educational placements. In a broad sense, children's discoveries and attempts to understand and navigate the world are what Kliewer calls "local understanding." Local understanding in a classroom acknowledges that all children

construct knowledge, utilizing intelligence, imagination, and drive as they strive to make sense of their worlds, not just children without identified disabilities.

Although Kliever rightly points out common literacy assumptions that guide current policy are based in phonetic, linear skills that allegedly build to reading, followed by comprehension, he also recognizes there is no one universally accepted definition of literacy. Kliever acknowledges an important role for print-based literacy, but invites us to think more broadly about how we define literacy and how we encourage it in our students. In addition to (and facilitating) what we commonly assume as literacy, Kliever expands literacy to what he calls literate citizenship, which includes: children's "symbolic presence . . . extraordinary motivation to imagine, make sense of the surrounding world, and develop a connectedness with others; children's crafted stories and narratives during interactions, used to construct meaning and relationships, and children's multiple systems of symbols and signs created and enacted for the development of stories and narratives" (p. 17).

Kliever does not limit literacy to sound-symbol relationships commonly found in "pre-reading" or "reading." Frank Smith (2003) took a similar position, challenging what he saw as the fallacy of "scientific" approaches to reading instruction. Like Kliever, Smith states we "read" all manner of things in our world to make sense of it, and effectively interact with the world: "Trying to make sense of any facet of the environment, including print, is a natural activity (p. 9)" and part of literate citizenship. After laying the foundations for local understanding, literate citizenship, and the many ways in which children construct meaning using visual, orthographic, and tactile sign systems, Chapter 5 lays out practical activities for teachers to use in their classrooms to enhance the literacy experiences and opportunities for all students.

The literacy action of developing vocabulary through word and word knowledge can be designed so children with disabilities will expand vocabulary through exposure to, and experience with, complex descriptive language. An example below is summarized from one sample of his ten-page Table of skills and possible activities, which is designed as a useful reference for teachers.

Kliever suggests discussing, writing, creating poetry, acting out, playing, dancing, and reading about every topic available. As children question, they should be encouraged to research through books and the internet, then share with others the question and discoveries. His specific example is around making French toast, and a teacher questioning where syrup comes from. With adult support, children with disabilities, along with peers, explore the question using the internet. They may print, then cut and paste the information on a poster that explains the answers they found, and present it to the class. As children express interest in particular topics, the teacher can develop themes around which classroom lessons and highly engaging student activities are designed to expose children to as much vocabulary as possible.

Kliever ends his book with a compelling argument for literacy as a civil right. He challenges educators to look past labels and low expectations for students, especially those with significant disabilities, and use dynamic and imaginative approaches to help all students become the literate citizens they deserve to be in our world.

Kliewer's book is not a beachy read. You will have to think, and perhaps challenge some taken-for-granted assumptions, but it is an important book for educators. His message of achieving literate citizenship for all students within inclusive classrooms is important to teachers and teacher educators beyond early childhood or special education. Many of us have seen the devastating effects of students' lack of literacy opportunities, struggling within a system that rarely acknowledges more unique forms of literacy. We have seen adults give up on them. Expanding our perceptions of what constitutes literacy, and how to achieve it to become more inclusive in the broadest sense of the word, can only broaden opportunities for students.

References

Smith, F. (2003). *Unspeakable acts, unnatural practices: Flaws and fallacies in "scientific" reading instruction*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

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