

Book Review

Culturally Contested Literacies

America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools

Rita Miller

Claremont Graduate University

## Book Review Culturally Contested Literacies

## America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools

In *Culturally Contested Literacies America's "Rainbow Underclass" and Urban Schools*, Guofang Li intertwines literacy, culture, race, gender, and social class against the backdrop of an elementary school in a gang infested, drug and crime ridden section of Buffalo, New York (Li, 2008). The stigma of attending public school in an urban area is not limited to Buffalo. Middle class flight to the suburbs and student enrollment in private schools is the perceived better choice across the nation. Li's research is comprised of six families: two Vietnamese, two Sudanese refugees, and two poor Caucasian families. There are many similarities in the situations of the families. All are living in a terrible part of Buffalo, all are poor, some more so than others, all have multiple children living in the house, all have children who attended Rainbow Elementary and all of the parents want more for their children. How the parents work with the schools and how the parents work to make their children's lives better are where the differences begin. In researching and analyzing the six families, Li attempts to shed insight into what factor or factors lead to improved literacy, language and learning.

Chapter three is the study of the two Vietnamese families, the Phan family and the Ton family. Li highlights the Vietnamese cultural values of education, hard work, perseverance, family, academic achievement, strict discipline, and specific gender roles. Although the culture was shared by both families, involvement of the parents in the children's homework and the parents' attempts to learn English differed dramatically. The author notes the Ton parents attended classes to learn English both before and after arriving in America. The Phan parents did

not. The Ton parents also worked so that one parent was home to check and help with the children's homework. The Phan family left the homework help for the young son, Chinh, to the teenage daughter. No one helped the teenager with her homework or checked her progress. The author reveals Chinh Phan was not fluent in either English or Vietnamese. However, Li failed to zero in on the facts that English was not spoken in the home, the parents made no effort to learn English, the entire family was severely isolated and the parents had no interaction with the young boy in regard to his education. These facts were ignored with regard to an explanation as to the son's failure to succeed academically.

In Chapter four, two families from Sudan were analyzed. Li's research revealed many similarities between the families. Both families have six children, were refugees from Sudan, were educated in Sudan, lived a middle class life in their home country, made efforts to learn English, continued their own education in America and knew the importance of education for their children. The parents of both Sudanese families were extremely involved in their children's school and homework. Li's research revealed homework was checked daily and the parents were hands on in their help.

In discussing the Sudanese families, the author points out The ESL program became a huge obstacle for the Sudanese children. Li explains that in New York, the schools utilize a pullout program. The kids who need ESL classes are pulled out of regular classes for small group English instruction. Li explained both the children and the parents were not satisfied with the ESL program because the students missed too much content in other classes when pulled out for ESL. One of the Sudanese moms and many other parents complained to the school about the ESL program all to no avail. Li fails to acknowledge that the school's failure to change the ESL

schedule may not have had anything to do with the parents perceived inability to effectively advocate for their children. Information as to why the school did not make the change when requested would have helped the reader better understand the complexities of the situation.

Chapter five provides research concerning two poor white families. The poor and working-class whites are a distinct social class detached from the other ethnic families on the west side of Buffalo. The two white families were more dissimilar to each other than any of the other families compared in the prior chapters. The author researched the Sassano family, a poor family who tried to get food stamps, but nevertheless were able to go on family vacations to Florida every year and enjoyed many costly activities with their children. The Claytons, on the other hand, really struggled financially. They did not own a computer and had no money to enrich their children's lives with activities. The Clayton children spent most of their time in front of the TV, missed a lot of school and had no help with homework. Neither a stable home nor attendance at school were priorities for the Claytons.

The last two chapters contain Li's analysis and conclusions based on the research of the six families. Li finds there is a disconnect between what the parents think they should do and what is actually done at home. Li also determines the families try to accumulate middle class cultural capital for the children's schooling. Li explained the families often look at race as an excuse for negative results. They also seem to endorse racial stereotypes.

For the immigrant families, Li defines the language development as "fractured" because the children are taught English at school, but the home language is still spoken at home. Rather than consider the home language to be an asset and a fund of knowledge for the family, Li states the bilingualism as a negative. The author concludes that in some cases the children fail to learn

English in school. However, only one child, Chinh Phan, did not succeed in learning English. He is the son of the one set of parents who made no effort to learn English, provided no support for Chinh, were completely removed from his education and delegated homework help to the teenage daughter. Li, nevertheless, relies on the fracturing of the language, as opposed to the failure of the parents, to explain Chinh's language deficits. The author also describes the "fracturing" of the language when the school did not understand that the Sudanese family did not speak Arabic. Li fails to take into account the fact that the parents did speak Arabic and the school's use of an Arabic translator may have been a rational decision. The few examples Li provides in support of his argument that the language was fractured are not sustainable.

In Li's last chapters, he discusses the Sudanese families and concludes a complex set of factors including current and former class standing, cultural influences, the poor neighborhood and the school conditions explained how the families chose to educate their children. This conclusion, which Li limits to the Sudanese families, fails to address the similarities between the Vietnamese families and the Sudanese families. Both of the Vietnamese families also made sacrifices for their children, had high expectations for the children and helped and monitored homework, although one family delegated the work to a daughter. All families shared the poor neighborhood and all families experienced the school conditions. Li's reliance on a complex set of factors for two families is misplaced. A complex set of factors existed for all families.

Li found the middle-class values of the white Sassano family had a positive effect on the children's academic achievement. However, the mom failed to adequately or actually check the homework. The son was not doing well in high school and lied to his mom about completing homework. The family took the children out of school throughout the year for family vacations.

None of this behavior, while possibly considered middle-class, is positive or leads to academic success. Li, nonetheless, found the Sassanos were able to utilize their middle class capital to get out of the poor neighborhood and move to the suburbs. Li fails to acknowledge Mrs. Sassano will most likely continue to present the picture of a perfect middle class home, but her racist, lazy personality will prevail and she will continue to blame everyone else for any misfortune that comes her way. Li does not take into consideration the facts revealed in his research with respect to an analysis of the Sassano children's future.

Li also states the families, although poor, had a print rich environment. However, the research findings do not support this. Only one family had a set of encyclopedias and they were dusty. Further, print encyclopedias are so dated, it is hardly a metric of education tools. One family did not have a computer. Two of the families did have newspapers, but neither was in English. There was insufficient evidence to support Li's conclusion of a print rich environment.

In the last chapter, Li determines teachers, schools and policy makers all fall short in educating the inner city poor, immigrant, or non-native speaker. Li finds the parents worked tirelessly to educate their children, but the school system left them "on their own to 'self-help'" when navigating the school system. (Li, 2008). Neither portion of the conclusion is supported by the research. Not all of the parents worked tirelessly. The children of those who did, succeeded academically. Nor were the parents left on their own. Although the Sudanese family had difficulty due to language barriers, the difficulty did not arise from the Sudanese culture, the neighborhood or the school.

Li finishes his conclusions in this section with extremely broad, non-specific suggestions. For example, Li states the government and the schools should get involved to solve

this problem. Then Li suggests education embraces the culture of the students. This is hardly a new idea. Li additionally suggests a new cultural pedagogy that allows students to become successful cultural translators. He lists many sound positive ideas for improving education: using the students' funds of knowledge, requiring teachers to get in touch with students' living conditions, and having teachers and families mutually learn each other's cultural knowledge. Li states teachers should plan instruction based on these factors and teachers should "really *care*" for the students. (Li 2008, 186). However, there is no information in the study of six families that hinted the teachers did not care for the students. Furthermore, such an intangible and immeasurable as caring, simply has no place in a book based on research. The result is a vacuous suggestion. The one point that was new or interesting is Li's idea that teachers may need to rethink the current home reading assignment as this proved to be difficult with many of the parents.

Although Li's research and study of the six families was interesting, the study was too narrow and included unfounded conclusions. Further, the book is criticized for not including any Latino families even though the population was described as heavily Hispanic. It is unfortunate that the answer to the important query concerning the intersection of culture, race, gender, and social class within the education system was not adequately answered based on the research.

Reference

Li, G. (2008). *Culturally contested literacies America's "rainbow underclass" and urban schools*. New York: Routledge.