Supporting literacies for children of color: A strength-based approach to pre-school literacy by (Daniel R Meier, 2019)

Rachel Rosenberg
University of Alberta, Canada

Abstract
Supporting Literacies for Children of Color is half theoretic examination, half guidebook; the text revolves around the research that pre-school students of Color, historically underestimated, have cultural and linguistic strengths that should be recognized and supported in learning spaces. Meier establishes a strengths-based approach to literacy—stressing the importance of creating a developmentally engaging curriculum that includes books, oral storytelling, personal journals, drawings, and writings. A strong benefit of Meier’s text is that by using his own experiences, those of colleagues, and of families of Color, he connects theories to real life in a way that makes them accessible enough that educators and librarians of all levels will find value in adding it to their collection of professional development books.

Keywords
Family literacy practices, African American, bilingual children, cultural diversity, cultural identity, culturally responsive pedagogy, curriculum, diversity, early childhood, early childhood literacy

Routledge, 2019; 188 pp: ISBN 97,80,36,71,11,854 £36.99 (pbk)

Corresponding author:
Rachel Rosenberg, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2R3, Canada.
Email: rachelr08@gmail.com
Supporting Literacies for Children of Color is half theoretic examination, half guidebook; the text revolves around the research that pre-school students of Color, historically underestimated, have cultural and linguistic strengths that should be recognized and supported in learning spaces (Emdin, 2016; Freire, 1996; Genishi and Dyson, 2015). Meier establishes a strengths-based approach to literacy—stressing the importance of creating a developmentally engaging curriculum that includes books, oral storytelling, personal journals, drawings, and writings. A strong benefit of Meier’s text is that by using his own experiences, those of colleagues, and of families of Color, he connects theories to real life in a way that makes them accessible enough that educators and librarians of all levels will find value in adding it to their collection of professional development books.

Meier has been an educator in the field of early childhood and elementary education for decades and is a critical researcher who has worked with many teachers in “creating, implementing, and reflecting on strength-based literacy education for children of Color and their families” (p.xxv). Along with reflecting on his own practices, the book is Meier’s opportunity to support other educators with suggestions of strategies, activities, and book recommendations. He emphasizes three key themes: deepening educators’ awareness of the literary aptitudes of children of Color; achieving excellence in the educators’ teaching and the students’ learning; and increasing depictions of children of Color as strong, confident learners.

Because the accepted curriculum approaches and assessment measures of the field of early childhood are continuously shifting, Meier’s text aims to offer hands-on tools that emphasize the importance of oral language and multilingualism. The text’s stated goal is to “provide a well-rounded and sophisticated set of views on the literacy talents and abilities of young children of Color. I hope that I have accurately rendered their literacy experiences and perspectives, and that I have portrayed their hopes and dreams for their children and students with sensitivity and accuracy” (p.xxii). To accomplish this reframing, he uses critical inquiry, dialogue, and reflection from the literacy experiences and perspectives of families and educators. He also provides examples from his own classroom experiences, including excerpts from his reflective teaching journals, transcriptions of children’s conversations, and audiotaped recordings of their reading.

Deepening our awareness—Theories and family and educator perspectives

Early life experiences—like those that take place in libraries and schools—and neighbourhood variations can have significant effects on children’s
development (Lloyd et al., 2010), especially when there are continuous disparities in societies and educational institutions (Freire, 1996). Meier dives into historical and current pedagogical practices and theories such as the Emergent Literacy and Language Experience approaches, while also clarifying concepts like Delpit’s codes of power and Moll’s funds of knowledge. Along with his in-depth examinations of the various theories and approaches, Meier also provides lengthy lists of resources for further reading.

Meier examines the perspectives of parents of Color and of educators, connecting Chapter 1’s theories to real life experiences. By providing firsthand accounts, educators can enrich their understanding of the literacy expectations and goals of families of Color. The children featured “include U.S.-born children of African descent as well as first- and second- generation immigrant families from Mexico, Central America, and Asia, and who attend both English-medium classrooms as well as dual language programs” (p.xxv). Learning about these families’ outlooks helps to broaden our own understanding of how they carry “familial, historical, and cultural traditions and values” (p.30), and it helps to pinpoint dilemmas with current educational approaches. As Meier points out, families of Color struggle with several challenges in the educational milieu: helping children learn multilingually; battling racial, cultural, and gender bias and stereotypes; and finding materials that reflect relatable experiences. Using conversations and transcripts while staying clear of overly technical or scholarly terms, Meier makes his arguments accessible to all educators and scholars, regardless of how long they have been in the early literacy field. In fact, as a library professional, I was able to transfer many of his suggestions into my own experiences teaching early literacy with children. Though some, like the use of journals, are not likely to be relevant to a librarian’s experience, there is still crucial information about how children process what they read and see.

**Achieving high levels of excellence—Book selection and teaching tools**

Meier provides clear instructions for book selection, tools and strategies for educators, and suggested activities. He proposes that books should be picked with clear intentions in mind—for instance, what does the educator hope to gain from the experience of reading that book? And, by describing what aspects make certain picture books high-quality, and providing examples of how they appeal to preschool aged children, educators can clearly grasp how the books expand and strengthen children’s curiosity about words, their
meanings, and their contexts. Additionally, Meier suggests that educators should engage children in dialogue around the book’s story, elements, and meanings, and he provides transcripts of conversations between himself and children wherein he prompts them to discuss what they are reading. Another key suggestion is his recommendation that children can use drawings to express themselves if they do not yet have the language to do so in any other ways. Meier emphasises that children of Color need more than just to be accepted in the group—they need to be represented and celebrated: “their ideas, experiences, and feelings on the drawn page give voices to their lives and strengthens their individual, social, and artistic presence within the group (p.128). The examples in these chapters represent how adults can connect link materials to a child’s lived experience, which then helps children to associate printed words, speech, and their own stories—a concept also advocated by Roskos et al. (2003).

Increased visibility—Documentation and next steps

Chapter 6 will be most helpful for novice researchers, as the focus is on ways of deepening readers’ understanding of children’s literacy skills via teacher inquiry, documentation, and reflection. For this, Meier clearly and concisely explains positive ways of observing children (including providing questions that educators can ask themselves), collecting data (using tools like journals, audio clips, and surveys), and then analyzing findings in a reflective teaching journal. He also breaks down the documentation process and explains how the findings are essential to accurate professional discourse.

Conclusion

In summary, by presenting educators with a myriad of approaches, theories, and practices, Meier gives readers the tools to find what they need for their own teaching experiences. Throughout each chapter, he provides prompts to readers, encouraging them to reflect on their own memories, expectations, and biases. For those who are not early literacy scholars, this focus makes the book easier to process and its clear, accessible language gets his points across easily. Though he does delve into current pedagogical practices and theories, his overall priority is on the thoughtful examination of the educational experiences of families of Color. While it would be useful to see a similar book written by an educator who is themselves a person of Color, I believe that Meier accomplishes his book’s stated goals of uplifting and supporting the community.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Rachel Rosenberg https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1294-9008

References
Emdin C (2006) For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood . . . and the Rest of Y’all Too: Reality Pedagogy and Urban Education. Boston: Beacon Press.
Freire P (1996) Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Revised). New York, NY: Continuum.
Genishi C and Dyson AH (2015) Children, Language, and Literacy: Diverse Learners in Diverse Times. New York: Teachers College Press.
Lloyd JEV, Li L and Hertzman C (2010) Early experiences matter: Lasting effect of concentrated disadvantage on children’s language and cognitive outcomes. Health & Place 16(2): 371–380.
Meier DR (2019) Supporting Literacies for Children of Color: A Strength-Based Approach to Pre-School Literacy. London: Routledge.
Roskos KA, Christie JF and Richgels DJ (2003) The essentials of early literacy instruction. Young Children 58(2): 52–60.