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SHEILA AIKMAN, *Intercultural education and literacy: An ethnographic study of indigenous knowledge and learning in the Peruvian Amazon*. (Studies in written language and literacy, 7.) Amsterdam & Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999. Pp. xix, 231. Hb \$79.00.

Reviewed by

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This is an important work which adds significantly to the exploration of Latin American education, and of attempts by indigenous peoples everywhere to assert their identity through or independently of education (schooling). It should be very widely read.

The book clarifies the different concepts of bicultural, multicultural, and intercultural education that are normally identified with primary schooling, pointing out that the terms may be used by different groups to mean different things. For example, governments often see intercultural education as a programme that adapts the national curriculum to local cultures through formally trained local teachers (p. 190); others see it as “the coming-together of two different cultures ... keeping the two cultures distinct in order to preserve the ... more vulnerable” (184). Aikman explores the assimilationist and the maintenance approaches to bicultural education before arriving at her own definition, which

recognises that indigenous peoples live within the sphere of influence of several cultural traditions ... which interrelate in complex ways. Intercultural education aims to make explicit the nature of the interface between these cultural traditions and, by exposing the relations of asymmetry between them, enhance the status of the indigenous culture” (157).

Aikman’s case study is a group of the Arakmbut people in the Peruvian Amazon basin, speaking a form of the Harakmbut language. Their “strategies for cultural maintenance and participation in the national society” (195) depend on two things: (a) the nature of the traditional approaches to learning and education in Arakmbut society, along with the way they came to view schooling, and (b) the overall socio-economic context, in which this community can be seen as fighting for their land and for their very existence against “persistent and ... increasing abuses of human rights, ... territorial invasions,

and ... forest-destruction and river-pollution by land-hungry migrants and resource-thirsty companies" (189). Aikman explores both these topics, concentrating mainly on schooling.

Literacy is a key theme. Aikman's discussion of the most recent attempts at Harakmbut literacy in this community is revealing. Instead of literacy being developed by outsiders (which was once attempted, but failed), or by insiders for instrumental or symbolic reasons, it came to be developed by some educated Arakmbut youths who, wanting to preserve and transmit the traditional cultural expressions of their community, tape-recorded and then transcribed the myths and other sayings of the elders. As she says, "The students are investigating a new interrelationship between oracy and literacy ... that dissolves the oral/literate opposition" (154); however, we "need to be aware of the qualitative change that takes place in the translation from three-dimensional creative 'performances' to the precision of the two-dimensional page" (152).

The role that (primary) school plays in this intercultural education is explored through Aikman's case study. Spanish-language primary education was brought in by different agencies. Aikman argues (as others have done) that school is not the best way to maintain language and culture (154, 178). The introduction of school-based national literacies can have harmful effects; e.g., it "implies a democratisation of access to knowledge which may undermine the status and power-base of other members of the community"; in addition, "it risks dividing society along the lines of those who can read and those who cannot" (147, 154). School-based literacies in this context, with their "authoritarian, institutionalised practices based on hegemonic epistemologies", tend to "debase Arakmbut values and practices" (153). This is why the Arakmbut young people "rejected biliterate intercultural schooling", opting instead for Spanish language in primary school, and Harakmbut outside the school (154).

Aikman shows by other examples that the linguistic decisions of the local communities about education may differ, but that they make sense in the light of local experience, local concepts of school and education, and local circumstances (6, 80, 88, 177 etc.): "Where school literacy is regarded as only one kind of literacy practice, the people themselves can decide how the school can contribute to the overall strengthening of their language" (153). However, she fails to acknowledge that the tape-recording she so values could not have been done without the formal school experience of the young people concerned.

Throughout the book, a sharp contrast is drawn between "the informal

community-based education of indigenous peoples and formal school-based education" (28). This distinction occurs in every chapter, especially Chaps. 6–7; e.g., Aikman contrasts informal vs. formal education (she does not like the contemporary term and practice of "popular education"); "oral teaching practices and learning strategies" vs. "literate schooling" (3); and the school domain vs. the community domain. She shows a clear partiality throughout for the "traditional" as distinct from the "modern", as in the following quotes:

[The closure of the school gave] "the children the opportunity to exchange the formality of the classroom for the formative company of their families and peers" (44).

"... the authoritative, highly literate and orally restricted formal education ... combining the powerless subjection of the pupils, professorial domination and control of the curriculum, and ritualised teaching techniques ..." (67)

"...the ethnocidal, individualistic pressures of formal education ..." (128).

"The [school] curriculum negates all that the Arakmbut students learn outside school as well as the sources of that learning within their society." (58).

"Unlike informal learning, school learning is devoid of any meaningful motivating reference to life outside the school." (92)

"The informal education that operates among the Arakmbut ... exemplifies ... 'knowledge-in-practice', meaning knowledge that is constituted in the setting of everyday life ... Arakmbut educational processes stand in sharp contrast ... to those of formal school ..." (124)

"The school teaches its version of Spanish-language literacy and the national curriculum, while the community applies the traditional cultural principles of contextualised, interactive communication and learning." (195)

Here Aikman perhaps under-estimates the desires of the younger members of this community to participate in this wider Spanish-based culture; and at the same time she seems to lack understanding of and sympathy for attempts at nation-building, although she shows these to be ham-fisted: "The 'national culture' described by the teachers and the textbooks bears no relation to the Peruvian society which Arakmbut children encounter outside the school walls" (59).

The book is full of riches — far too many to be outlined here. It is written in a clear style (but with a number of typographical errors). There is some repetition at the end of the book, reflecting its origin in a PhD thesis

(this does not show in the early parts of the book at all). The index is extraordinarily weak; many gems scattered throughout the book are hard to find for lack of an index entry, e.g. the very important comments on numeracy (73, 161), on local attitudes to formal meetings (62), on the potential divisiveness of PTAs (61), on the continuing use of thumbprints by literate persons (143), on the alienation of indigenous teachers from their own communities (168), and on indigenous organisations being regarded as outsiders by other indigenous groups (6). As you read, you will need to make your own index, as I did.

But the volume must be read to be appreciated. It is one of the fullest and deepest studies available regarding the attitudes of many indigenous peoples (who are in the process of losing their lands to rapacious outsiders) towards education, schooling, language, and literacy. It draws on a very wide range of literature regarding other indigenous peoples' attempts to take control of education and schools, in defence of their culture and way of living; and it puts all of this into a clear conceptual framework. Highly recommended.

(c) John Benjamins  
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CATHERINE E. SNOW, M. SUSAN BURNS, & PEG GRIFFIN (eds.), *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998. Pp. 448 pp. Hb \$35.95.

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Milestones in early reading and reading education seem to be measured by periodic publications that set the course for research and practice, as well as for professional debate, for the ensuing years (cf. Pearson 1999). The book under review is one of those milestone publications, whose ancestors include Flesch, *Why Johnny can't read* (1955), Chall, *Learning to read: The great debate* (1967), Anderson et al., *Becoming a nation of readers* (1985), and most recently Adams, *Beginning to read* (1990). The authors of these books attempt to set the course for early literacy education by presenting their versions of state-of-the-