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Book Reviews

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Gaine, C. & Weiner, G. (2005). *Kids in Cyberspace: teaching anti-racism using the internet in Britain, Spain and Sweden*. Oxford: Symposium Books. Pages: 168 Price: £24.00 (US$42.00) ISBN 1 873927 45 2
Reviewed by Dr. Janette Hughes, University of Ontario Institute of Technology

Gaine and Weiner, the editors of *Kids in Cyberspace,* offer a candid analysis of the success of *Eurokid,* a joint British, Spanish and Swedish project aimed at creating a digital space for teaching and learning about racism and anti-racism. The project's goal – to offer a counter discourse to the burgeoning numbers of racist websites accessible to adolescents – is certainly a laudable one. In this book, Gaine and Weiner give an overview of the *Eurokid* project, setting it within the context of electronic pedagogies, and discuss the challenges of designing an anti-racist website. They provide an account of the research undertaken at each of the sites (in Britain, Spain and Sweden) for the development of the websites and subsequent responses by students and the general public. Finally, the editors conclude with an explanation of the evaluation frameworks adopted for the project (questionnaires, case studies, observations of classroom use and interviews with teachers and students) and their own reflections on what those evaluations might mean in terms of implications for future projects of this sort.

Although the book includes a number of tables and figures which provide the reader with an idea of what the websites actually look like, I found that visiting the *Eurokid* website directly (http://www.eurokid.org/mc.html) helped me understand the full scope of the project and after navigating the various links in the *Britkid* site, the majority of my own questions were answered satisfactorily. The book chronicles the development of the *Eurokid* project, and begins with a description of the "key goals and dilemmas" faced by the authors of the project. Each of the sites is based around approximately nine fictional characters, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The user is invited to "hang out" with one of the characters and to see their homes, meet their families and friends and to gain a better understanding of their religious beliefs and culture. Another option for the user is to explore the sites by issue. Some of the issues explored include the understanding of different religions, racism in sport, prejudice, immigration and harassment. On the *Britkid* site then, a user might go to the "Football Club" in Britchester and read a discussion among three of the characters related to racism in sport.

The story format moves the user through the various issues. The authors argue that personalizing "abstract ideas makes them easier to relate to and identify with, hence building motivation into the structures of the sites" (p. 15). Story is a powerful communication medium as stories naturally structure our everyday thinking (Schank 1990; Bruner 1990, 1996) and as Douglas (2000) points out, a hypertext format provides readers with a "sense of participation in the unfolding of the narrative," which in turn affects our experience (p. 5). Schank (1990) suggests that our cognition is story-based. We think in terms of stories. We see

and understand our world through stories we have internalized. We tell stories not just for entertainment and pleasure but also for comprehension, explanation, memory, interest, and persuasion, as well as for the organization and preservation of our cultures. Bruner (1990, 1996) argues that "we frame the accounts of our cultural origins and our most cherished beliefs in story form, and it is not just the 'content' of these stories that grip us, but their narrative artifice" (p. 40). According to the outcomes of the evaluations of the websites, the storied episodes seem to appeal to the readers because they do not suggest a "correct' answer and because they offer a multivocal discussion of "difficult issues in a safe space" (p. 150). I would agree with the authors that this kind of a storied approach is a subtle and more creative educational setting, which possibly increases the potential that students will engage in imaginative and meaningful investigation, something that might not happen if students feel that they are being "preached at."

Of course, probably the greatest challenge of this kind of approach is the question of representation. One of my initial questions on viewing the *Eurokid* website was "how were decisions made about which ethnic minority groups to include and which to leave out?" Another concern was the portrayal of nine "cool" characters – all of them are hip, well-dressed, attractive, physically able and heterosexual. In a discussion of the design of the websites, Gaine and Weiner admit that a great deal of attention was paid to the details of the characters' "clothing, hairstyles, speech patterns and so on, to render them as compelling as possible to young people" (p. 12). The authors address these concerns overtly in the book, arguing that while they have tried "as much as possible to avoid gender and other forms of stereotyping," (p. 19) to address all forms of inequality effectively the websites would have to be much larger in size and such an examination lay outside the scope of a project dealing specifically with racism and anti-racism. They also suggest, "The key dilemma, in practice, was to illustrate attributes like religion and language which are important in people's lives, and the limits and barriers presented by racism, *without* painting an over-deterministic picture without scope for individual agency, multiple identities, and contradiction" (p. 65, emphasis in the original). Recognizing that minority ethnic groups have different backgrounds and experiences and histories that "do not just differ between majority and minority ethnicities or between different ethnic groups, but within each group" as well (p. 106), the authors made conscious decisions on the creation of characters based on the view that the characters "exist more as vehicles for the issues than as 'representatives' of specific groups" (p. 106). Still, according to the authors, there have been people who have taken exception to the way they feel a particular ethnic minority group has been portrayed.

Another one of the declared goals of the Eurokid project was to use the Web to provide "the opportunity for interactive, attractive and motivating material to challenge and educate users, with huge potential for easy nationwide and international use" (p. 9). Setting aside issues of access (given the scope of this review), the question of how the websites are "interactive" remains. A common justification for using digital learning environments such as this one is their supposed "interactivity." Many educational digital resources are touted as

'interactive' both by their creators and proponents. In fact, interactivity seems to be the gold standard by which such resources are judged. Rose argues that "the concept of interactivity has become so firmly entrenched within the discourse of educational computing that it is a truism to say that instructional software is interactive and that interactivity promotes learning, and a kind of heresy to dispute it" (p. 59). However, attempts to define interactivity have failed to yield any common agreement as to its nature. Surely it means more than to point and click the computer mouse. Although the user is able to navigate the *Eurokid* sites through various links and an attempt was made to include "some interruptions in the dialogues to press the user to consider the points and arguments being raised" (p. 116), the authors of the project acknowledge that interaction is limited. Learner control, which is often equated with interactivity, is also limited; however, interaction does exist to the extent that students are immersed in a rich and meaningful learning environment. As the authors point out, utilizing the full potential of a digital learning environment requires resources that are not always readily available.

As for whether this project has had any impact on the attitudes or ideas of those who have used it, the responses seem to suggest that the "site has had at least some of the anticipated effect and influence" (p. 149). The authors and developers of the project are soliciting feedback and hope to continue to improve the sites. As an educator, I look forward to following the progress of this project and I will definitely be using the websites in my own classroom.

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Zhang, Sheri (2006). *Understanding modern China through its language and culture*. Gatineau, QC: Asia Communications Québec Inc.
Reviewed by Xuemei Li, Queen's University

China opened its doors to the world about 30 years ago and, since then, each decade has witnessed striking changes occurring at an accelerating pace. People from other parts of the world coming into contact with Chinese people are becoming aware that the stereotypical images of China are outdated and oversimplified. However, neither folklore nor the popular (and perhaps biased) western media are able to appropriately satisfy the curiosity of the western public with authentic information about this rising nation. Some textbooks on China in western countries (e.g., Arnold, 1999; BonBernard, 1998, 1987) still contain outdated pictures and materials portraying China as it was decades ago. Interested language learners, educational professionals and the general public are eager for a book rich in up-to-date information on contemporary Chinese society--its language, its quickly evolving culture, and its recent political and economical developments; hence the significance of *Understanding Modern China through its Language and Culture* by Sheri Zhang, a professor of Chinese origin who has traversed linguistic and national borders in her academic career in China, Canada, and Japan. This book is valuable for both academic and non-academic readers, as it includes personal experiences and anecdotal stories of the author which, even if at times subjective, are written in language accessible to the general public. In spite of the author's occasionally idiosyncratic views and language choice, the book succeeds in its goal of providing a comprehensive picture of modern China at a great level of detail and complexity, and is a useful addition to the resources on Chinese language and culture at the introductory level.

As indicated in its title, the book is composed of two parts: the first focuses on the recent development of Chinese language and how it is linked to the social changes in China; the second part deals with some important current culture-specific issues, including the changes in women's status and the historical reasons underlying them, recent government policies and their influence on current cultural norms and the economic developments in China.

In the language section, Zhang elaborates on the reasons for and effects of the language reforms since the founding of the People's Republic of China, clarifying the connections between Mandarin and regional dialects such as Cantonese. She describes the bilingual policies in Hong Kong, Macao and ethnic minority areas; language teaching approaches and the status of Chinese and English in China and related language tests; and the historical influence of Chinese language on the language of neighboring countries such as Japan and Korea. She also focuses special attention on the relationships of Traditional and Simplified Chinese characters and the phonetic Mandarin--*Pinyin*, which is very important for Chinese language learners to know and may be an interesting topic for language researchers.

In Part Two, Zhang spotlights some customs and cultural phenomena that are unique to Chinese people and central to the recent social and economic developments in China, for example, food and hospitality, women and family, and rural-urban migration. Among them, the issues related to women and family have a prominent position in the book. Zhang dedicates one-third of the section to significant political movements and social changes during the second half of the last century that have had impacts on women's roles and status, and on family values, including Confucian ethics and rehabilitation, the well-publicized one-child policy, abortion, marriage and divorce.

Zhang's book is a significant contribution to the western Chinese-learning/teaching population at a time when the popularity of the Chinese language among non-native speakers is on the rise, with more than 3 million people around the world studying Chinese as an additional language, over 2,500 universities outside of China offering classes on the language, and around 1 million people in 120 countries having registered for Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi—the HSK-test or the Chinese Language Proficiency Test (United Press International, August 11, 2006). Zhang's focus on the two systems of Chinese characterters is particularly relevant, as most current textbooks of Chinese language use either simplified or traditional Chinese characters without explicating the connections between the two, and therefore fail to inform learners of the contexts in which these two versions apply. For example, a textbook like *A Primer for Advanced Beginners of Chinese* (Liu & Wang, 2003) can be very confusing to learners with its characters in the Traditional form, but its phonetic description in *pinyin*, the phonetic Mandarin used in Mainland China where the Simplified version of characters is used. With regard to this point, the introduction on the language simplification and standardization in Zhang's book fills this gap perfectly with terms and examples illustrated in both versions of Chinese characters as well as in *pinyin*. Although not a textbook for teaching the language, it is all about the Chinese language and culture, and therefore is a must-read for the growing number of interested readers.

Zhang also elaborates on the process of language simplification and standardization since the founding of the People's Republic of China. While the standardization of Mandarin Chinese language is often seen as threatening the existence of minority languages, Zhang also emphasizes the benefits that standard Chinese/Mandarin has brought to the Chinese people in terms of the quality of education, the economic boom, and the cultural exchange intra-nationally and inter-nationally. Language simplification and standardization have facilitated China's rapid development in recent decades. Further research is required to look into how China's bilingual education in the minority areas helps maintain the local language, and in what ways it promotes or hinders the preservation of the minority language and culture.

It is noteworthy that the author explicates some of the facts that are not always unambiguous to many people, including the historical influences of the Chinese language and culture on those of neighboring countries such as Japan and Korea, and the status of Cantonese as one of the many dialects of Chinese

language. The fact that China had been politically and economically weak during the centuries of the 1800s and most of 1900s should not obscure the fact that ancient Chinese civilization as one of the oldest in the world has had important contributions to East Asian culture. It should also be noted that the mass Cantonese immigrant population overseas during the past centuries should not alter the recognition of the fact that Cantonese is not another language; it is a dialect of Chinese. There have been misunderstandings about this issue among western people. It is important that the author has made an effort to clear the confusion in this regard.

Another major strength of this book is that it contains a host of very up-to-date information. For example, China's joining the WTO in 2001 and winning the bid to host the 2008 Olympics, and these being the catalyst to an English-learning fever in China; the introduction of TOPE (Test of Professional English), a new nation-wide test system to China in 2003; and China's estimated 1.3 billion population in 2005, a slower growth than anticipated as a result of one-child policy. It also includes many pictures depicting different aspects of modern China, such as those of young street musicians in Xi'an, the consumer-oriented banner slogans in department stores, and the statue of Confucius on the new campus of Nanchang University. These most updated resources are by all means the highlights of the book, making it valuable reading to people keen on understanding today's China.

As far as the second part is concerned, the body of information on women and family is particularly helpful to western readers in understanding Chinese women's equal social status. Some of the facts may be astonishing to western readers, such as women were believed to be able to "hold up half the sky" at Mao's time, women have been encouraged to participate in all walks of life ever since the 1950s, and women maneuver between family and work responsibilities. Other facts help to clear the confusions among western people. For example, Chinese women do not take their husband's last name after marriage. As a result, it is awkward to address a married Chinese woman as Mrs. X as their last name is different from that of their husband, unless their last names are coincidentally the same. This is an indication of women's equal status to men in the People's Republic of China. In recent decades, children are found taking their mother's last name instead of their father's. Zhang also raises the issues of China's one-child policy and legal abortion, topics that have long been stirring in the media. She provides background information and rationale for this government-imposed policy and the common practice of abortion for birth-control purposes. While listing the benefits of these practices, Zhang also thoughtfully points out the problems inherent to them. Readers may want to give it a second thought next time when they are confronted with such controversial topics.

Even though this book goes a long way in countering some of the stereotypes of Chinese culture, there are places where cultural aspects may be over-simplified and certain generalizations may be over-stated because of the personal anecdotes that are recounted and the language the author uses. Let us take the remarks concerning hiring domestic helpers as an example. On page 37

under the title "Sociocultural change—language change", the author asserts "Hiring babysitters *was unknown* in China *then* [when the author was young]. Even today, hiring a babysitter *is not common at all*; babysitting is handled casually by friends and neighbours within the collective community" [italics added]. However, on page 91 under the title "Mothers combine family with work", the author changes the tone to say "Hiring such helpers [low-paid young women from rural areas] *has now become more common* in China than in North America [italics added]. In the China of the 1950s and early 1960s [that is, when the author was young], only privileged people could afford a maid". One is left to wonder where did the author get this information, and what evidence did she have to be so assertive.

Such broad generalizations appear in a few other places in the book too. For example, on page 70 under the title "Mao: 'Women can hold up half the sky'", the author asserts that men did most of the housework during the Cultural Revolution when their women joined the work force and played a leading role. While Chinese men did share housework with women as a result of women's emancipation starting in the 1950s and as a result of the political propaganda during the Cultural Revolution, one can hardly claim that women did less housework than men in general. It might be true with some families, but one cannot make such a generalization based on personal observations of a few.

Zhang's personal experiences such as communication with a souvenir peddler have added a few vivid strokes to the big picture. However, readers have to be cautioned that some subjective observations and anecdotal stories may not represent the major characteristics of the culture and the general trend in the society. For example, women staying at home doing housework in contemporary China and parents holding pictures in the park to look for dates for their adult children may be true with some individual cases, but they are by no means widely recognized practices. Considering the fact this book is not only written for the academic audience but is also intended for the general public, I feel it appropriate to remind readers to give some of the subjective content more thought and to undertake in-depth exploration in order to get more comprehensive information on the issues in which they are interested. Readers should bear in mind that modern China is in fact many cultures and subcultures, and what might be a reasonably truthful generalization for one may not be so for another. Therefore, any generalization is going to be limiting and create a new stereotype.

I highly recommend this book to the Chinese learning, teaching, and researching population, as well as to people simply interested in knowing the modern China. It is particularly useful for the general public and beginner-intermediate language learners who wish to get a quick view of the Chinese language and contemporary Chinese society. However, readers keen on a deeper exploration of Chinese cultural heritage, women's issues, and Chinese philosophy may want to consult such scholarly publications as *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* edited by Giskin and Walsh, *Women and Writing in Modern China* by Wendy Larson, *Comparative Approaches to Chinese Philosophy* edited by Bo Mou, *Chinese Philosophy in an Era of Globalization* by

Robin Wang, and *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination* edited by John Makeham.

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Research and Evaluation for Educational Development is a case study of the Kenya Primary School Management Project (PRISM), which began in Kenya in March 1996 and was completed in October 2000. The Project was supported jointly by the United Kingdom=s Department for International Development and the Kenyan Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MOEST) and managed collaboratively by the Center for British Teachers and MOEST. In this book, the authors adopt a reflective approach aimed at providing "an historically informed and accessible account of the PRISM school management training initiative, and the related research and evaluation strategy@ (p. 18). The vision underlying PRISM is of a more positive, attractive, and better-managed learning environment for all Kenyan primary school children. The five important areas identified by PRISM are school development planning, curriculum management, management of people, resource management, and teacher training.

The six chapters in the book address several aspects of PRISM, including its inception, the methodology, assessment of its success, and possible applications to other contexts.

Chapter one provides a justification for PRISM's in-depth critical reflective analysis. The authors note that disseminating educational research on Africa is important since such research is often neither readily accessible nor well understood. The chapter also provides a brief overview of the historical context under which PRISM was initiated. The major historical developments include: (i) globalization and the continued dominance of the project approach to development assistance; (ii) increasing recognition of the potential of well-targeted research and evaluation by national and international development agencies; (iii) the negative social and educational consequences of structural adjustment programs promoted by the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s, necessitating a reprioritization of attention to basic education; and (iv) the need for educational research to be more sensitive to local cultural and contextual realities. The authors observe that PRISM was as much an internationally inspired project as a local initiative, since its objectives were in conformity with many of the dominant international education agendas of the 1990s. For example, PRISM's goals of improving the quality and access of primary education, management training of head teachers, and promotion of decentralization of responsibility and accountability to schools and communities, were all priorities in the post-Jomtien educational initiatives.

In Chapter two, the authors identify factors leading to changes in development understandings and policies towards education. Two noteworthy factors are: (i) a shift by development agencies in the North from aid models that emphasize transfer of resources from the North to the South to those that emphasize capacity building, and (ii) budgetary cutbacks in the North, coupled with improvements in global information technology, forcing development agencies to "reposition themselves as providers of knowledge and policy expertise" (p. 24). The authors note that despite the seemingly different challenges facing educational research in the North and South in the face of globalization, these issues are closely linked and cannot be fully understood in isolation. They, however, emphasize the need to recognize different forms of knowledge between the North and the South. As the role of research and evaluation may be changing in the South, the dominant ways of doing social and education research are often not suited to many contemporary needs, especially in the development arena. Consequently, any efforts to strengthen research and evaluation in the South should take into account cultural and textual differences. Research and evaluation methodology must also change in response to globalization and changing development priorities. The chapter concludes with highlighting the need for more participatory and collaborative methodologies in social and educational research and evaluation alongside more established modes of research and evaluation.

In Chapter three, the authors examine the potential and limitations of the participatory and collaborative models of research and evaluation and the potential for North-South partnerships in education research. They note that participatory research and evaluation (e.g., participatory rural appraisal, participatory action research, and action research) is increasingly being acknowledged for its contribution to human development and empowerment. Furthermore, it addresses the issue of cultural and textual relevance by "involving practitioners and other stakeholders in research conceptualization and design" (p.42). However, the challenges facing participatory education research involving many stakeholders include (1) enhancing communication; (2) project evaluation difficulties arising from multiple perspectives of the stakeholders; (3) the risk of ignoring national, regional, or global perspectives in favor of the local; and (4) difficulties in accounting satisfactorily for the different views of different stakeholders. The authors note that one way of remedying these problems is participation at multiple levels. Advantages of international research partnerships, such as PRISM, include "bringing together comparative and cross-cultural perspectives to bear on local situations" (p. 44) and opportunities to share information and strengthen research capacity building. However, the authors caution against the possibility of unhealthy partnerships, especially those with relatively affluent partners. Successful partnerships may require better teamwork skills, and the ability to negotiate, adapt, and be culturally/linguistically sensitive, even when working in a

'familiar' educational context. Overall, this chapter presents a realistic view of PRISM's research methodologies.

Chapter four is a detailed account of the international and national contexts in which PRISM was born, which is largely a reiteration of the historical context discussed in chapter one. Additional aspects of this chapter include: (i) the detailing of domestic factors such as rapid population growth, widespread poverty, budgetary constraints, and debt pressures, which led to the decline in education in Kenya, especially in the 1980s, providing a rationale for PRISM; (ii) description of the cascade model of management training, which resulted in the training of more that 10,000 primary school head-teachers at a much reduced cost; and (iii) description of the participatory and collaborative research and evaluation process, and four research and evaluation components, namely, research training, quantitative studies, qualitative studies, and research dissemination. I, however, found lack of details on the methods employed in the qualitative and quantitative studies, which makes it difficult to assess the validity of PRISM's research findings.

An account of the achievements and problems encountered in the implementation of PRISM is provided in Chapter five. Among the successes were the development of effective management training materials, as evidenced by the results of impact studies conducted, the significant success of the cascade management training system, and the development of a wide range of tools to monitor project implementation and to generate useful feedback. Based on their experience with PRISM, the authors caution that genuine partnerships and collaboration between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners take time to establish. These may conflict with demands to meet stringent goals and timetables, which characterize the culture of the "Western clock." There are also problems with skills development and research training in situations where regular and unanticipated personnel changes are likely.

Chapter six examines the broader implications of the analysis of the PRISM research and evaluation experience, with reference to their practical, theoretical, and methodological reference for possible initiatives in Kenya and elsewhere. Valuable lessons from the authors' PRISM experience include school management training, cascade implementation strategies, professional development, cost sharing, school/community relations, and the processes of educational development and implementation. However, the authors caution against taking their PRISM experience as a blueprint for direct transfer elsewhere.

Four recurrent themes emerge from the book. First, research and evaluation methodology must evolve over time in response to changing environments. Second, there is little to lose and much to gain from collaborative and context sensitive-research. Third, the PRISM experience is not a blueprint for others to copy, as such experience cannot necessarily be generalized. Fourth, it is

dangerous to uncritically transfer educational policies and practices internationally.

Although it is noted in the book that PRISM pioneered collaborative, mixed mode educational research and fieldwork in Kenya, there is little use of quantitative research in the project. The nine appendices of the book are helpful in reinforcing the understanding of PRISM. However, brief summaries of the PRISM research and evaluation reports, listed in Appendix 2, would have clarified some issues in Chapter four.

Overall, this book is very informative. People interested in international development issues can learn ways in which globalization has shaped international development initiatives. They can also learn about the role of education in development, the influence of international agencies in development, as well as the utility of a collaborative international development project. Those interested in comparative education can gain insights on the different views of what constitutes an education in different settings, hence the dangers of transferring a system that works well in one setting to another. Educational historians are exposed to the history of educational development in Kenya. Education researchers can learn the advantages and limitations of different types of research strategies.

Finally, for a project such as PRISM, which is conceived with long-term goals, regular re-evaluations are advisable as new challenges facing education in Kenya arise, such as the introduction of Free Primary Education policy in 2003.

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