PUBLISHED BY
PI LAMBDA THETA

VOLUME 69, NUMBER 3
SPRING 1991

educational HORIZONS

DEPARTMENTS

Cover by Timothy Mayer

FEATURES

Kreyol Ekri, Kreyol Li: Haitian Children and Computers

Jo Anne Kleifgen

Fifth- and sixth-grade Haitian children are gaining literacy skills through a Harlem school computer project. Jo Anne Kleifgen describes how school personnel adjusted to the needs of children with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds to make the project work.

AT FIRST GLANCE, Ralph Bunche School (PS 125) is much like other elementary public schools in Harlem: most children are African American, most teachers are overworked, and inner-city life makes both teaching and learning difficult.[1] A closer look reveals something different—children eagerly gathered around computers during lab times as well as during lunch and before and after school. They explore software, read and respond to electronic messages, complete written assignments, write compositions of their own creation, and publish the school newspaper and various newsletters.

Among them is Esperans, who appears to be a typical eleven-year-old attending PS 125. Yet, he is different: born in Haiti with Kreyol as his native language, he is experiencing a strange new language and culture and a peculiar machine called a computer. Esperans is one of five hundred thousand Haitians living in metropolitan New York. This article describes how thirty Haitian fifth- and sixth-graders became part of a school where computers are used to teach reading and writing and, more particularly, how school personnel adjusted to teach children with a different cultural and linguistic background.

Meeting Haitian Children's Needs

Two years before coming to PS 125, Esperans and his family, along with other Haitian families and teachers, had been assigned to another public school district—a district they perceived as insensitive to their cultural

JO ANNE KLEIFGEN is assistant professor of linguistics and education at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City.

and educational needs. Haitian teachers, for example, had been instructed to conduct bilingual classes in French rather than Kreyol. At the request of parents and teachers, the board of education reassigned the children to the PS 125 district. With little time to prepare before September classes, the Haitians and the school community were suddenly thrown together. But because of efforts toward mutual accommodation, the children adapted well to their new environment. Esperans recorded his impressions:[2]

My First Day at PS 125

The first day at school was the worst day in my life. I was scared of the teacher. She looks different from the other teachers that I had last year, but by December she gave me a gift. It was a wonderful gift, but now I like her for my teacher, because she thinks that I'm the best student in her class. I love PS 125 and my favorite teacher is Ms. Janet.

From the beginning, school personnel sought creative ways to make computers available to the Haitian children and their bilingual teachers. Computer lab coordinator Paul Reese immediately worked the fifth- and sixth-grade bilingual classes into the regular weekly lab schedule. He introduced the children to procedures for logging onto the local area network and for retrieving, using, and saving files. He also showed them how to use software designed to develop keyboarding skills.

Despite increased access to the technology, learning did not come quickly. When students had difficulties logging onto the network and composing sentences using the word processor, Reese began searching for other ways to strengthen their computer and language skills. With funding from the New York State Board of Education, he purchased twenty Apple IIc computers. Edwidge Crevecoeur Bryant, a Haitian graduate student, and I collaborated with Reese and the Haitian teachers, parents, and children to implement a computer home-loan project that would increase access to technology outside school.

Computer Home-Loan

An all-day workshop for the children and their parents conducted in both English and Kreyol marked the onset of the project. The day began with demonstrations on assembling and starting up the Apple IIc. With assistance, students and parents opened boxes, assembled computers, and practiced using the word processor and keyboarding programs. In closing, family members signed agreements that students would keep logs of computer activities at home and practice keyboarding for a few minutes each day. Students also agreed to bring disks containing their writing to school on Wednesdays and to revise and print their work during a special after-school computer lab session.

The purpose of the home-loan project was to facilitate the natural development of a family-computer connection without much intervention. All family members were encouraged to use the home computer; they were free to write whatever they wished in any form, including personal diaries, poetry, fiction, news stories, or, for adults in the home, business and professional writing. They could write in English or Kreyol and were told they would be using part of the Wednesday afternoon sessions to publish their writing in a bilingual newspaper.

The families then packed up their computers and collected various software programs, including the word processor, keyboarding lessons, and games. Children and parents left for home, rolling their computers in shopping carts along the sidewalks of central Harlem.

The participating children began meeting on Wednesdays after school in the computer laboratory to explore software on the local network and to revise and print work they and other family members had begun at home. Reese provided technical assistance, while the teachers, Crevecoeur Bryant, and I conferred with the children about their writing. We also made field notes on the children's computer activities and collected their printed texts.

WE NOTED some good things happening, among them a growing trust and rapport between school personnel and the Haitian community as they worked together. For example, teachers noticed close-knit family relationships as manifested by the presence of older siblings—many of whom came to accompany younger siblings home after the sessions—during after-school lab time. They, too, were encouraged to use the school computers on Wednesdays. Parents, in turn, became aware of the teachers' dedication. One mother told Reese, "I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart, because we know how much work you do." Another positive sign was that every child was fully engaged with the computer during after-school sessions. Some worked individually; many explored software on the network in pairs.

A few were bringing writing begun on the home computer. These children seemed to have found a purpose for writing—to talk about life in the city and their dreams and problems. One Haitian girl related the highly publicized killing of Yusuf Hawkins in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn to her own pain and loss:

About Yusuf Hawkins

On August 23, 1989 Yusuf Hawkins died . . . When Yusuf died I was sad, too, because I know how it is to lose someone you love because that happened to me too. I lost someone I really love. They will never forget him just like I won't forget my sister that died on July 27, 1989. I think what his family was doing—marching, talking about him—was a wonderful thing to do . . . I think everyone who has lost someone in their family just because they are black should do the same thing Yusuf's family did. And I think

Haitian students collaborating in the computer lab at Ralph Bunche School.
Photo: Paul Reese

they would feel better.

Others wrote imaginative pieces based on recollections of life in Haiti, a country with fertile valleys and seasonal rains. In the following excerpt, personification was used by another Haitian girl to describe a mango:

> Some Fruits Can Talk
>
> I look like an orange tree. I am the same color as an orange... I'm a tropical fruit. You can find me in Haiti. I came to the United States. They put me in the greenhouse in the Botanical Garden. I am not afraid but I am the only fruit which grows in a hot country. I am the cutest fruit in the world.

Religion was another favorite theme. The following excerpt illustrates the importance of the First Holy Communion for one Haitian boy:

> Communion Party
>
> On May 13, my sister and I are going to have our communion. And we are going to invite lots of people. Maybe our teachers will come too. At the church, we will receive our first holy communion. And after we get our communion, we will have an enormous crowd of people for our party. Everybody should have a great time.

In sum, there was modest progress in some children's literacy development the first semester. However, it became apparent that most of the children, even with easy access to computers, were not writing very much. When asked for samples of home writing, they often held out empty hands, saying they had forgotten or misplaced their disks. Many expressed lack of confidence in English-language skills. Although free to write in their mother tongue—all were studying in Kreyol-English bilingual classrooms—very few brought home writing in Kreyol. Increased access to computers and a social context in the lab, however, were not sufficient to nurture writing.

The Functions of Kreyol

Educational researchers suggest that non-English speaking children are motivated to learn on computers when they are given opportunities to use their native language as a bridge to learning.[3] The Haitian children used Kreyol in the bilingual classrooms and spoke it at home. Yet, they resisted using it to write at the computer.

The complex historical, cultural, and linguistic workings of the Haitian community provide some clues as to why this was true. Haitians in New York are not a homogeneous group,

Increased access to computers and a social context in the lab, however, were not sufficient to nurture writing.

but rather come from diverse socioeconomic, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. Immigrants in the late 1950s were from the country's elite, educated in French-language schools. Later, middle-class immigrants and skilled laborers arrived; those who arrived by boat in the early 1980s were unskilled workers and peasants.[4] Thus, French is spoken as a second language in few Haitian homes and English is increasingly becoming the second language; yet, the predominant language spoken among family members is still Kreyol. Today, Haitians living in New York can be overheard skillfully alternating languages during their conversations. At home, language alternation is prevalent, with family members switching between Kreyol and English, French, or Spanish.

Just as speaking practices vary, so do literacy practices. Literature from Haiti, published in French as well as Kreyol, is available in New York alongside English publications. Haitians today are exposed more than ever to models of written Kreyol. A body of Kreyol literature has grown considerably, especially since 1980. Kreyol newspapers and periodicals are published in New York. Modern drama, poetry, and novels are written in Kreyol, and there is written documentation of Haitian folklore—stories, songs, and proverbs.[5] Educational materials also are being written in Kreyol, and Haitian-English bilingual programs are growing. Most Haitian children attending school in New York are learning in both Kreyol and English. Some have had prior schooling in Haiti, where they have learned to read and write in Kreyol or French. However, many are not able to read or write in any language, and some never had schooling before their arrival in New York.

There is ambivalence in the Haitian community about the functions of Kreyol. Whereas Haitian educators are committed to teaching in Kreyol, opinions vary about appropriate situations for using the language. Generally, Haitians still regard Kreyol as a spoken rather than a written language, one that is "caught" rather than taught.[6] English and French are perceived to be the languages of reading, writing, and learning. Because French traditionally has represented the language of upward mobility and achievement in Haiti, some parents still regard it as the preferred language for education and literacy despite the fact that only about 5 percent of Haitians back home can actually speak it. One sixth-grade girl participating in the computer project said her French-educated parents would not allow her to write in Kreyol at home, though it was the family's spoken language. This ambivalence is articulated in the lyrics of a song written by a popular Haitian musician, the late Ti Manno. Singing in Kreyol, he challenges those who attach so much prestige to learning French:

> *Nap viv avek yon konpleks*
> *denferiorite . . .*
> *Pale franse vin tounen metye.*
> (We live with an inferiority
> complex . . .
> To speak French becomes a
> profession.)
>
> "Sort Tiers Monde"[7]

While parents and educators have differing views about the role of Kreyol in children's lives, the children face their own problems regarding language and cultural identity. They worry about gaining peer acceptance in school and fear being labeled by other children—or even adults. Press reports reinforce negative stereotypes: classmates often tease them as being carriers of AIDS, refugees from a backward country, and ones who speak an "incomplete" language.[8] As a result, Haitian children may experience ambivalence toward their own language and culture; teachers report that some even attempt to conceal their ethnolinguistic background. "I am not Haitian," a PS 125 teacher overheard a Haitian boy tell his classmate. Haitian children already share with other subordinated groups many barriers to learn-

Since Kreyol is seen primarily as a language of spoken communication in the Haitian community, sending messages through electronic mail would be a way to foster Kreyol writing.

ing and achievement.[9] The fears of prejudice that Haitian schoolchildren experience magnify those barriers.

These ambivalences, along with the broad range of language and literacy skills and practices documented in the wider Haitian community, were reflected in the group of children participating in the computer project. All the children spoke Kreyol and at least some English. Some could write in Kreyol, and, among those, a few were beginning to write in English. Others were not writing in any language. Spoken Kreyol was the common language of all the children. It was used in bilingual classrooms as the bridge to both Kreyol and English literacy, and we wanted to extend this approach to the development of writing on the computer.

For the Haitian children in the project, Kreyol appeared to serve two broad functions: it was the principal language in the home or in exclusively Haitian gatherings, and it was a bridge to learning skills and concepts in the bilingual classroom. Those of us guiding the project believed that the children spoke Kreyol comfortably in both situations because the language was given "safe haven"; in these contexts the children were sheltered from outside biases. Further, for those children who were just beginning to develop reading and writing skills in the bilingual classrooms, we suspected they were equating literacy practices in Kreyol exclusively with school lessons.

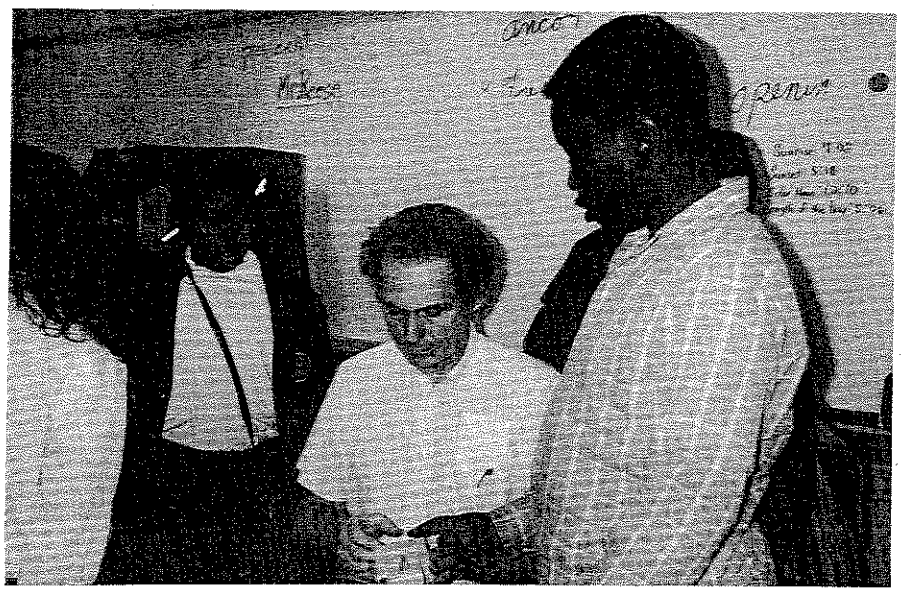
In appropriate contexts, the development of literacy in the native language occasions positive transfer of those skills to literacy in a second language.[10] Therefore, we wanted especially to encourage those children who had weak literacy skills and limited English proficiency to draw on their abilities in spoken Kreyol to begin writing. So that the children would identify structured writing activities with school literacy practices, these activities were incorporated into part of the Wednesday afternoon lab sessions and led by a Kreyol-speaking adult. Another way we encouraged writing in Kreyol was to take advantage of the talk-like characteristics of communication occasioned by electronic mail, where the distinction between speaking and writing tends to blur. People communicate with each other by sending written messages; they expect and often get immediate responses. Since Kreyol is seen primarily as a language of spoken communication in the Haitian community, sending messages through electronic mail would be a way to foster Kreyol writing.

Kreyol Ekri, Kreyol Li

Haitians have a proverb that illustrates the strength of Kreyol as a marker of Haitian identity: *Kreyol pale, Kreyol konprann*—Kreyol speaks, Kreyol understands. This might be expanded to include, *Kreyol ekri, Kreyol li*—Kreyol writes, Kreyol reads. In implementing the structured writing activities, the children responded positively to the importance adults in the lab attached to Kreyol. The English speakers asked the children to read their developing texts aloud and then to paraphrase in English. Some of the English speakers began learning Kreyol. When Crevecoeur Bryant first appeared, the children were excited to have a visitor who could speak their language. One girl later testified in her writing:

> Color
>
> When I was in the computer room in my school I (saw) a black woman when I saw her I knew she was a Haitian but I didn't mention that but then after a while she came over to me while I was doing my work and she was talking my language I was so surprised that I met someone like me and talking my language with me.

Drawing on their eagerness to speak with her in Kreyol, Crevecoeur Bryant began organizing small groups for dialogues in Kreyol, using topics that absorbed the children's interest and planning ways to write and publish their work. Recent political events in Haiti stimulated a surge of pride in



Computer lab coordinator Paul Reese (center) examines a modem as Nicole Backman and Lufientz Dely look on.
Photo: Paul Reese

being Haitian and in identifying with the homeland and prompted more children to talk (and write) about life there.[11] One child expressed deep emotional attachment to Haiti and her hometown, Kenskoff, in a composition entitled "Sou Peyi Nou Ayiti" ("About Our Country, Haiti"). The translated version follows:

> About Our Country, Haiti
>
> Haiti is a little country that I remember a lot. When you are sitting down inside your house and listening to the rain falling outside, and your feet are next to the stove while eating corn on the cob, there is nothing more beautiful than that. You need to hear more—it is when you go to Kenskoff—you have to be in my heart to see how much I really love Haiti. You who haven't known Haiti, get to know it.

Several children wrote compositions in Kreyol based on Haitian rural life, where chickens and ducks are commonly raised for food. One child wrote about why she liked ducks: they have beautiful blue eyes, beautiful white wings. Then she wrote about experiences with ducks when she lived in Haiti. The translation from Kreyol follows:

> Ducks
>
> When I lived in Haiti, I had a cousin who was getting married. They killed five fat ducks. When I was living in Haiti, I used to see a duck in front of the house. When I see them, they eat worms from the sewer, they drink water from the sewer, they have beautiful colors and they like to chase chickens. When nighttime arrives, they go to sleep at their house. The ducks that I used to see belong to my cousin. They used to lead very good lives. They eat, they drink. I like ducks a lot because they have beautiful colors.

Thus, by selecting themes with which children could identify and using a more structured approach to group discussion and writing in Kreyol, the reluctant writers began to respond positively.

To encourage the children to "talk" via electronic mail, we connected their computers to an electronic bulletin board, the New York Youth Network, established for young people. The network staff created addresses for the children and a space called Klib Kreyol (Kreyol Club) for those who wished to share their stories and poems with other Kreyol-speaking children. The children also could send

messages to adults with whom they were working. The very first message I received came from a group of four boys who, until then, had been reluctant to write at the computer. They wrote in both English and Kreyol. Knowing that I speak English and am trying to learn Kreyol, the children were testing my understanding. The boys' electronic mail communication is reproduced here:

> iam very h
> appy to know you
> WE are j udt
> We are just leasrninj
> We are just learning to use the modem
> I am very happy
> nou fek comanse apran kijan pou
> nou itilize yon modem

In my reply, I sent them a translation of the Kreyol that was in their message, asking them to check my understanding. They sent a second message thanking me in English; then they corrected part of my translation:

> Thanks for the message yoau sent us.
> Kijan pou means 'how'.

As a matter of course, the boys began taking the role of language teacher during our message exchanges.

The electronic mail system is now being used as a way of studying literacy practices in selected homes. We are helping the families install modems on the home computers so that electronic messages can be sent and received there, and we will be visiting the families to check equipment and software. We will observe literacy activities taking place and conduct informal interviews in the home. We believe learning about family- and community-based literacies will help us adapt the way we teach school-based literacies.[12]

Continuations

We are now making efforts to increase the presence of family members during lab times. In a recent letter to the parents, we reminded them in Kreyol, "You as well as your child's siblings are invited to attend the computer program each Wednesday from 3:00 to 4:30." Moreover, older siblings and their teachers from the junior high school are participating formally in the home-loan and after-school activities. We also are attempting to expand the children's writing audience. Through Apple-Link, another electronic communications system, the children are initiating connections with Haitian children attending a school in Miami. We think that the Haitian themes developed in group writing will carry over as children communicate with other Haitians around the city and in Florida. Finally, we hope to learn from our home visits about ways to connect family literacy practices to computer writing.

Though the project continues and many questions remain unresolved, there are some important points worth highlighting. In the early 1980s, a national survey of more than one thousand schools revealed that students of color and of limited English proficiency were getting less access to computers than other students.[13] During the exploratory phase of this project, we found that offering greater access to computers is only the beginning. We wanted to give the children opportunities for group activities in the lab. Sociocultural approaches to learning provided a framework for collaborative work at the computer,[14] which appears to have helped some children improve academically.[15] We also acted on linguistic and cultural considerations: understanding the workings of the children's language and culture; building on these for literacy development; and using computers in ways that adapt to the language functions of the community.

Finally, it is important to reiterate that the most substantial improvements in language and literacy skills have occurred in the classrooms of skilled teachers. They make pedagogical choices that encourage productive classroom interaction and engagement in tasks that are meaningful, challenging, and culturally sensitive to students.[16] There is nothing inherent in a computer that can make a difference in cultivating literacy skills and practices, especially in trying circumstances. It is what is done with the machine, how, and by whom that makes the difference for Esperans—and, for that matter, all children.[17]

1. The names of the school, the computer coordinator, and the researchers are real and used with permission; other names are fictitious. This article is adapted from a paper presented at a meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March 1991.
2. Children's texts are unedited, as originally submitted in the classroom.
3. Stephen Diaz, *Bilingual-Bicultural Computer Experts: Traditional Literacy through Computer Literacy* (Paper presented at a meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Denver, November 1984); James Levin et al., "Muktuk Meets Jaccuzi: Computer Networks and Elementary Schools," in *The Acquisition of Written Language*, ed. Sarah W. Freedman (New York: Ablex, 1984), 160-171; Hugh Mehan, Luis Moll, and Margaret Riel, *Computers in Classrooms: A Quasi-Experiment in Guided Change*, NIE Report 6-83-0027 (Washington, DC: National Institute of Education, 1985); Dennis Sayers, "Bilingual Sister Classes in Computer Writing Networks," in *Richness in Writing*, eds. Donna M. Johnson and Duane H. Roen (New York: Longman, 1989), 120-133.
4. Robert Lawless, "Creole Speaks, Creole Understands," *The World & I* 3 (January 1988): 474-83; idem, "Kreyol Pale, Kreyol Konprann," *The World & I* 3 (February 1988): 510-21.
5. Lawless, "Kreyol Pale, Kreyol Konprann," 516-17.
6. Edwidge Crevecoeur Bryant and Bambi B. Schieffelin, *First Language Acquisition in Haitian Children* (Paper presented at the Symposium on Successful Strategies for the Education of Haitian Students, New York University, New York City, November 1990).
7. Ti Manno, "Sort Tiers Monde," *Gemini All Stars de Ti Manno* (New York: Chancy Records, n.d.).
8. Nina Glick-Schiller and George Fouron, "'Everywhere We Go, We Are in Danger': Ti Manno and the Emergence of a Haitian Transnational Identity," *American Ethnologist* 17 (May 1990): 329-47; Lawless, "Creole Speaks, Creole Understands."
9. See John Ogbu, *Minority Education and Caste: The American System in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Academic Press, 1978); Peggy Miller, *Amy, Wendy and Beth: Learning Language in South Baltimore* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982); and Carol Ascher, "Improving the School-Home Connection for Poor and Minority Urban Students," *The Urban Review* 20 (Spring 1988): 109-123.
10. See Jim Cummins, "Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention," *Harvard Educational Review* 56 (February 1986): 18-36; Kenji Hakuta, *Mirror of Language* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); and Nancy Hornberger, "Continua of Biliteracy," *Review of Educational Research* 59 (Fall 1989): 271-296.
11. Glick-Schiller and Fouron, "'Everywhere We Go, We Are in Danger'," 330.
12. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms* (New York and Cambridgeshire, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Brian Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
13. Center for Social Organization of Schools, *School Uses of Microcomputers: Reports from a National Survey*, issues 1-6 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1983-84).
14. Lev S. Vygotsky, "Thinking and Speech," in *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*, vol. 1, *Problems of General Psychology*, eds. Robert W. Rieber and Aaron S. Carton, trans. Norris Minick (New York: Plenum Press, 1987), 39-285.
15. See Michael Cole and Peg Griffin, eds., *Contextual Factors in Education: Improving Science and Mathematics Education for Minorities and Women* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987).
16. Jo Anne Kleifgen, "Computers and Opportunities for Literacy Development," *ERIC Digest* 54 (New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, 1989).
17. Hugh Mehan, "Microcomputers in Classrooms: Educational Technology or Social Practice?" *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 20 (March 1989): 4-22.

EH