

Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society
Jim Cummins, 1996, Ontario: CABE,
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I treasure this book like I treasure my copy of Joni Mitchell's 'Hejira'. And like that album it has all sorts of associations attached to it that have nothing to do with it but everything to do with what was going on with me at the time I first encountered it. So it's not just a book for me, it's a touchstone - my very own *madeleine*.

I remember buying the book at a conference held at the Reading and Language Information Centre at which Jim was speaking. It was the first time I'd heard him and the effect was inspiring, so now when I read the book I hear the voice and I see the man; as anyone who has met Jim knows, it's quite a voice and he's quite a man.

I remember Viv Edwards doing the vote of thanks at the end of his day-long presentation. She quoted the words on the front cover and related them directly back to him:

Our classroom was full of human knowledge. We had a teacher who believed in us ... he didn't hide our power, he advertised it.

She got it exactly right. The book is full of powerful voices that Jim advertises: the students, parents, teachers and wider community of Healdsburg, California who came together to develop a bilingual programme that did so much more than teach language but also forged real and lasting friendships between the diverse members of the community; the *Dual Language Program* of Manhattan's District 3 which covers some of the richest and poorest schools in the area and which became immensely popular with parents for its student-centred programme emphasising cooperative learning and cross-cultural understanding; the *Navajo-English Applied Literacy Program*, under which the school abolished its failing 'gifted-and-talented program' in favour of one that included all students and was congruent with Navajo cultural learning style; and the *Students for Cultural and Linguistic Democracy*, which was exactly what it sounds like and is best summed up by the students:

The most exciting thing we can remember is going into the classroom and having one of those deep and powerful dialogues. In these powerful dialogues we also shared and examined our own lives ... As students we were taking control of our lives, getting to know ourselves, and we were able to share our feelings with others. If we had known that sharing and looking closely at our cultures, our lives, and society was so transforming, we would have done it sooner!

Does that sound like a Literacy Strategy lesson to you?

The walls of the classroom were hung with huge butcher sheets filled with the students' writings, projects, research, and dialogue questions on their lives and social issues of importance to them. Their teacher, Bill Terrazas Jr. writes:

Many of my students return to visit me after being in my classes. In every case they never mention the grammar, vocabulary, writing, or reading lessons we studied. Instead, they always remember the critical dialogues we voiced in class. All of them have said that their classroom experiences changed their life and their way of looking at the world. At times, this baffles me. This wasn't what the university teacher training programs had taught me to do, nor to expect. I had learned how to design a lesson plan, to organize a good lecture, to select appropriate worksheets and assignments. I had learned how to keep my students quiet, managed, and passive. To listen silently. With my students I have learned another view of education, another approach to educating. I no longer practice a curriculum made for failure and poverty.

Oh brave new schools that have such people in them.

Apart from these inspiring example of how teaching and learning can transform both teacher and learner, the book is full of other glittering prizes.

It was where I first encountered the concepts of coercive and collaborative power relations, that Jim returns to again and again in his work and which I have been more and more aware of in the situations I have found myself in down the years as I have watched a frankly insane headteacher destroy a school I worked in. Coercive power relations 'refer to the exercise of power by a dominant group (or individual or country) to the detriment of a subordinated group (or individual or country). The assumption is that there is a fixed quantity of power ... the more power one group has the less is left for other groups ... the dominant group defines the subordinated group as inferior (or evil), thereby automatically defining itself as superior (or virtuous).' Sound like anyone or anywhere you know? Collaborative relations of power, 'on the other hand, operate on the assumption that power is not a fixed pre-determined quantity but rather can be *generated* in interpersonal and intergroup relations ... participants in the relationship are *empowered* through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in her or his identity and has a greater sense of efficacy to create change in his or her life or social situation... The power relationship is *additive* rather than *subtractive*. Power is *created with* others rather than being *imposed on* or *exercised over* others. Sound like anyone or anywhere you would like to know?

The book sets out the sort of curriculum we need to develop that is genuinely inclusive - unlike the regime currently widely in operation that seems to define

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inclusion as simply not-exclusion. He argues (and exemplifies) that effective (language) instruction must include:

- Active communication of meaning
- Cognitive challenge
- Contextual support
- Building student self-esteem

And will involve four, variable, phases:

- Activate prior knowledge
- Present cognitively engaging input with appropriate contextual supports
- Encourage active language use to connect input with students' prior experience and with thematically-related content
- Assess student learning in order to provide feedback that will build language awareness and efficient learning strategies.

The heart and soul of the book, however, resides in the challenge of negotiated identities for both teacher and learner within a framework of critical literacy:

Culturally diverse students will succeed educationally to the extent that the patterns of interaction in school challenge and reverse those that prevail in the society at large...

Central to the framework is the claim that the process of identity negotiation and the challenge to coercive relations of power are at least as important for students' academic development as any particular program or instructional technique. Instructional techniques become effective only to the extent that they contribute to the collaborative creation of power.

This may be a challenging idealism – and faced with 8M5 on Thursday afternoons I know I was glad and jealous of my coercive power at times, but on a good day, with 8M2 on Tuesday mornings, for example, then I was rather more glad and jealous of my ability to collaborate. The literacy strategy is meant to empower students for active citizenship in the 21st century, so why does it feel a hollow performance of 'literacy' with its joyless worksheet extracts (because you don't need to read a whole novel to identify a compound clause) and *vision* of reading as no more than running your highlighter over the writer's tricks. Magic isn't conjuring and being literate isn't a strategy.

The book was written some five years after the first Gulf war and some five years before the second. Re-reading it today amidst non-stop reports of soldiers and civilians killing each other because neither knows why the other is where they are, I am struck by how much of that nexus is reflected in his conclusion that remains doubly pertinent as we continue to fail to learn the lessons of history:

When classroom interactions are fuelled by collaborative relations of power, students gain access to ways of navigating difference that our domestic and international communities are sadly lacking at the present time. ... Schools that have brought issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity from the periphery to the center of their mission are more likely to prepare students to thrive in the interdependent global society in which they will live. The goal for all of us as educators is to strive to make our classrooms and schools microcosms of the kind of caring society that we would like our own children and grandchildren to inherit. I strongly believe that this is an attainable goal.

And thanks to books like this so do I.

If you don't own a copy already get one. A substantially revised second edition is on its way and I can't wait to read it and let it join its older sibling on the shelf, confident that neither one will get a chance to collect much dust. I wish I could say as much about me.

Frank Monaghan