Affirming Identity in Multilingual Classrooms

By welcoming a student's home language into the classroom, schools actively engage English language learners in literacy.

Jim Cummins, Vicki Bismilla, Patricia Chow, Sarah Cohen, Frances Giampapa, Lisa Leoni, Perminder Sandhu, and Padma Sastri
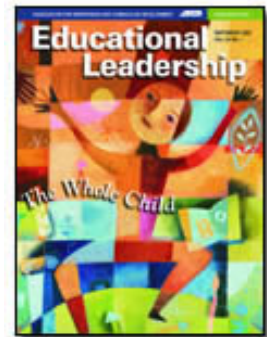
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In *How People Learn*, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking (2000) synthesized research regarding the optimal conditions that foster learning; a follow-up volume edited by Donovan and Bransford (2005) examines the application of these learning principles to teaching history, mathematics, and science. Bransford and colleagues emphasize the following three conditions for effective learning: engaging prior understandings and background knowledge, integrating factual knowledge with conceptual frameworks by encouraging deep understanding, and supporting students in taking active control over the learning process.

Any instructional intervention that claims scientific credibility should reflect these principles, which are particularly important when it comes to English language learners. Prior knowledge refers not only to information or skills previously acquired in formal instruction but also to the totality of the experiences that have shaped the learner's identity and cognitive functioning. In classrooms with students from linguistically diverse backgrounds, instruction should explicitly activate this knowledge.

Knowledge is more than just the ability to remember. Deeper levels of understanding enable students to transfer knowledge from one context to another. Moreover, when students take ownership of their learning—when they invest their identities in learning outcomes—active learning takes place. Numerous research studies have shown that scripted, transmission-oriented pedagogy, which tends to be both superficial and passive, fails to build on English language learners' pre-existing cultural and linguistic knowledge (Warschauer, Knobel, & Stone, 2004).

Pre-existing knowledge for English language learners is encoded in their home languages. Consequently, educators should explicitly teach in a way that fosters transfer of concepts and skills from the student's home language to English. Research clearly shows the potential for this kind of cross-language transfer in school contexts that support biliteracy development (Cummins, 2001; Reyes, 2001). It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when

school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture at the schoolhouse door.

Embracing Differences

Sidra's experiences as an English language learner illustrate some of these concerns. Two years after she emigrated from Pakistan with her family, she described her early days as a 5th grader in a Canadian school:

> I was new, and I didn't know English. I could only say little sentences. I wore cultural clothes, and people usually judge a new person by their looks. If they see the clothes that I am wearing are not like their clothes, they will just think that I'm not one of them. If we had any partner activities, no one will pick me as their partner. I felt really, really left out. Kids also made fun of me because I looked different, and I couldn't speak English properly.

Sidra highlights themes that are notably absent from the "scientifically proven" prescriptions of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). She talks about the struggle to express herself, not just linguistically, but also culturally. Her "cultural clothes" are an expression of an identity that her peers have rejected, causing her to feel "really, really left out." But Sidra also had caring teachers who welcomed her into school. As she explained,

> I was the only person in grade 5 who wore cultural clothes. The teachers liked what I wore. They tried to talk to me and ask me questions. I liked telling teachers about my culture and religion. It made me feel more comfortable and welcome.

Sidra's experiences show that human relationships are important in children's adjustment to schooling; engagement in learning, particularly for English language learners, is fueled as much by affect as by cognition. Despite her still-limited access to academic English, she writes extensively because she has a lot to share, and she knows that her teacher, Lisa Leoni, is genuinely interested in her experiences and insights. Sidra's account also illustrates the opportunity—and the responsibility—that teachers have to create environments that affirm the identities of English language learners, thereby increasing the confidence with which these students engage in language and literacy activities.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Affect, identity, respect, and human relationships: These constructs have not been evident in the radical education reforms ushered in by NCLB, which supposedly are based on scientific research. Numerous commentators have critiqued the scientific basis and instructional consequences of these policies (Allington, 2004; Garan, 2001; Krashen, 2004). Several false assumptions underlying these reforms apply specifically to English language learners:

- Students' home language is, at best, irrelevant. At worst, it is an impediment to literacy development and academic success.

- The cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities that English language learners bring to school have little instructional relevance.

- Instruction to develop English literacy should focus only on English literacy.

- Students can learn only what teachers explicitly teach.

- Culturally and linguistically diverse parents, whose English may be limited, do not have the language skills to contribute to their children's literacy development.

These assumptions, common before NCLB, have now become entrenched as a result of the ubiquity of high-stakes testing and the mandate for systematic and explicit phonics instruction from kindergarten through 6th grade (Lyon & Chhabra, 2004). Yet they violate the scientific consensus about how people learn (Bransford et al., 2000). They also reduce the opportunities for literacy engagement within the classroom (Guthrie, 2004). Finally, they are refuted by empirical data on literacy development among English language learners, which show that students' home language proficiency at time of arrival in an English-speaking country is the strongest predictor of English academic development (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

We present an alternative set of principles for promoting academic engagement among English language learners, which we draw from Early and colleagues' research project in Canada (2002). Central to our argument are two interrelated propositions:

- English language learners' cultural knowledge and language abilities in their home language are important resources in enabling academic engagement; and

- English language learners will engage academically to the extent that instruction affirms their identities and enables them to invest their identities in learning.

The Dual Language Identity Text

Teaching for cross-language transfer and literacy engagement can be problematic for teachers when multiple languages are represented in the classroom, none of which the teacher may know. One approach that we have been exploring in several schools in Canada's Greater Toronto area involves *identity texts*. These products, which can be written, spoken, visual, musical, dramatic, or multimodal combinations, are positive statements that students make about themselves.

Identity texts differ from more standard school assignments in both the process and the product. The assignment is cognitively challenging, but students can choose their topics. They decide how they will carry out the project and are encouraged to use the full repertoire of their talents in doing so.

For example, when she was in 7th grade—and less than a year after arriving in Canada—Madiha coauthored a 20-page English-Urdu dual language book titled *The New Country* (see illustration, at left). Together with her friends, Kanta and Sulmana, also originally from Pakistan, she wrote about "how hard it was to leave our country and come to a new country." Kanta and Sulmana were reasonably fluent in English because they had arrived in Toronto several years before, in 4th grade. Madiha, however, was in the early stages of English language acquisition.

Figure

Written by:
Madiha Bajwa
Sulmana Hanif
Kanta Khalid
Illustrated by:
Jennifer Du

Translated in
English
and Urdu

good bye...

نیا ملک

THE NEW

COUNTRY

...Hello!!

ILLUSTRATIONS PROVIDED BY JIM CUMMINS

Seventh graders coauthored a dual language book about their experiences immigrating to Canada from Pakistan.

The students collaborated on this project in the context of a unit on migration that integrated social studies, language, and ESL curriculum expectations. They researched and wrote the story over the course of several weeks, sharing their experiences and language skills. Madiha spoke little English but was fluent in Urdu; Sulmana was fluent and literate in both Urdu and English; Kanta, who was fluent in Punjabi and English, had mostly learned Urdu in Toronto. The girls discussed their ideas primarily in Urdu but wrote the initial draft of their story in English. Sulmana served as scribe for both languages.

In a "normal" classroom, Madiha's minimal knowledge of English would have severely limited her ability to participate in a 7th grade social studies unit. She certainly would not have been in

a position to communicate extensively in English about her experiences, ideas, and insights. When the social structure of the classroom changed in simple ways, however, Madiha could express herself in ways that few English language learners experience in school. Her home language, in which all her experience prior to immigration was encoded, became once again a tool for learning. She contributed her ideas and experiences to the story, participated in discussions about how to translate vocabulary and expressions from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu, and shared in the affirmation that all three students experienced when they published their story.

Students can create identity texts on any topic relevant to their lives or of interest to them. Sometimes teachers will suggest topics or ways of carrying out the project; in other cases, students will generate topics themselves and decide what form the projects will take. Because these projects require substantial time to complete, it is useful to aim for cross-curricular integration. That way, the project can meet standards in several different content areas. For example, students might research the social history of their communities through document analysis and interviews with community members. Such a project would integrate curricular standards in language arts, social studies, and technology.

Because students *want* to do the work in the first place, they generally treasure the product they have created and wish to share it with those they care about. This usually doesn't happen with worksheets, regardless of how accurately the student completes them. The worksheet has no life beyond its immediate function, whereas the identity text lives on for a considerable time, either in tangible form, as in a book, or as a digital text on the Web.

Language in the Classroom

Thornwood Public School, a K–5 school in the Peel District School Board in Toronto, Canada, pioneered the process of the dual language identity text (Chow & Cummins, 2003; Schecter & Cummins, 2003). As is common in many urban public schools in Canada, students in Thornwood speak more than 40 different home languages, with no one language dominating. Patricia Chow's 1st and 2nd grade students created stories initially in English, the language of school instruction, because most of the primary students had not yet learned to read or write in their home languages. Students illustrated their stories and then worked with various people—parents, older students literate in their home languages, or teachers who spoke their languages —to translate these stories into the students' home languages. The school created the Dual Language Showcase Web site (http://thornwood.peelschools.org/Dual) to enable students to share their bilingual stories over the Internet with parents, relatives, and friends, both in Canada and in the students' countries of origin. With identity texts, audience becomes a powerful source of validation for the student.

As the Thornwood Dual Language Showcase project has evolved, dual language books have become a potent tool to support the integration of newcomers and English language learners. Students write initial drafts of stories in whichever language they choose, usually in their stronger language. Thus, newcomer students can write in their home language and demonstrate not only their literacy skills but also their ideas and feelings, giving full play to

their imaginations. The image of newcomer students, in both their own eyes and in the eyes of others, changes dramatically when these students express themselves in this way within the school curriculum.

Figure

A dual language (English-Urdu) storybook created by 7th graders for younger readers.

When none of the teachers or class members speaks the language of a particular newcomer student, the school explores contacts with community members or board-employed community liaison personnel or involves older students from the same language background whose English is more fluent. High school students from various language backgrounds receive credit for their involvement as community service work. Consequently, dual language texts have become a catalyst for fruitful forms of school-community engagement.

At Floradale Public School, another highly multilingual school in the Peel District School Board,

teacher-librarian Padma Sastri has integrated both student-created and commercial dual language books into all aspects of library functioning. She prominently displays student-created dual language books near the library entrance, welcomes parents into the library to read books to students in their native languages, and encourages students to check out dual language books to take home to read with their families.

When students gather around her for the day's lesson in the library, Sastri enlists students to read a given story out loud in English. She also encourages various students to retell the story afterward in their home language. Said one observer,

> I listen amazed as one by one the students retell the story in Urdu, Turkish, Vietnamese, Chinese, Gujerati, Tamil, Korean, and Arabic. The other students in the class appear to be equally entranced, although neither I nor they understand most of the languages being used. It is captivating to hear the same story repeated in different languages with new or sometimes the same gestures to express a change in action.

By welcoming a student's home language, schools facilitate the flow of knowledge, ideas, and feelings between home and school and across languages.

Elementary school teacher Perminder Sandhu integrated discussions about students' language and culture into the curriculum of her 4th grade class in Coppard Glen Public School of Toronto's York Region District School Board. Students wrote about their languages, discussed the importance of continuing to speak their languages, and worked in pairs to create dual language or multilingual books, often with the help of their parents. One of Sandhu's students writes about his engagement with literacy and popular culture outside the school. Jagdeep, who is fluent in Punjabi, Hindi, and English, illustrates the importance of connecting, both cognitively and affectively, with students' prior experience:

> I love Punjabi stories. They're so exciting. When it comes to Hindi movies, I just can't stop watching them! They are very funny, and the problems are very sophisticated. It makes me proud of my cultural background.

For Sandhu, acknowledging and actively promoting students' linguistic and cultural capital is not simply a matter of activating students' prior knowledge—she fuses these practices in a pedagogy of respect. Sandhu explains,

> It informs my practice through and through. It runs in the bloodstream of my classroom. It's all about relationships, how we validate students' identities, how they accept their own identities. That ethos is fundamentally important—it's not an add-on. It takes less than two extra minutes of my time to get students to see the humanity of another human being at a most basic level. Because once they begin to see their own and one another's vulnerabilities, inhibitions, and realities, they connect.

The pedagogical orientation illustrated in the examples above differs from many schools' current policies and practice in two major respects. First, the teacher acknowledges that the

language in which English language learners' prior experience is encoded is an important resource for learning. Consequently, instruction explicitly aims for transfer of knowledge and skills across languages. Second, instruction communicates respect for students' languages and cultures and encourages students to engage with literacy and invest their identities in the learning process.

Aims of Education

The job of an educator is to teach students to see vitality in themselves.

—Joseph Campbell

The Heart of Schooling

Educators, individually and collectively, always have choices. They can choose to go beyond curricular guidelines and mandates. They can meet curricular expectations and standards in ways that acknowledge and respect students' prior knowledge. They can engage English language learners in powerful literacy practices, such as creating identity texts. Identity texts also encourage collaboration among teachers, parents, and students. By including parents in the process, these practices affirm the funds of knowledge available in the community.

When we talk about the *whole child*, let us not forget the *whole teacher*. The process of identity negotiation is reciprocal. As teachers open up identity options for students, they also define their own identities. The teachers who supported and appreciated Sidra in her struggles to express herself and belong in her new school were also expressing what being educators meant to them. They saw Sidra not as a "limited-English-proficient" student but as a young person with intelligence, emotions, aspirations, and talents. They created classrooms that enabled her to express her identity.

Although NCLB has reinforced the bleak pedagogical landscapes that exist in many urban school systems, it *has* reinserted the achievement of English language learners and low-income students into policy discussions. Schools cannot meet adequate yearly progress goals without improving these students' achievement. Schools can achieve this goal much more effectively when they take into account identity investment as a core component of learning.

Many teachers understand intuitively that human relationships are at the heart of schooling. Student achievement will increase significantly only when this insight permeates all levels of education policymaking.

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Jim Cummins (jcummins@oise.utoronto.ca) is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto (OISE/UofT). **Frances Giampapa** is a Postdoctoral Fellow and **Sarah Cohen** is a PhD student in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning at OISE/UofT. **Vicki Bismilla** is the Superintendent of Equity and **Lisa Leoni** and **Perminder Sandhu** are elementary school teachers in the York Region District School Board. **Patricia Chow** and **Padma Sastri** are elementary school teachers in the Peel District School Board.