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Review of
Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment
in a Diverse Society
by Jim Cummins
Borderlands: La Frontera
by Gloria Anzaldúa

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Introduction

"So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself"(p.59). So speaks Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana poet and feminist. Throughout her book she speaks eloquently of linguistic oppression and the necessity for maintaining one's native language. The purpose of a dual review of Cummins and Anzaldúa is to balance theory with the reflections of a language minority person who experiences first-hand the kind of coercive power relations which Jim Cummins talk about in his book.

Anzaldúa's book, *Borderlands*, is an evocative statement in both Spanish and English of the potency of linguistic integrity. Her words drift easily between poetry and prose to create her Chicano images. Her Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman's history of resistance. Even though Anzaldúa was the first person in six generations to leave her home, Texas, she brought the land with her: "I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry home on my back"(p.21). She also describes the necessity of preserving Chicano Spanish as a way to communicate in a secret language, to say to white society that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge white society's negation of a subordinate culture. She declares: "Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.....As long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate"(p.59)

To Anzaldúa, the concept of coercive power relations is highly personal: it is no less than linguistic terrorism. She recounts the time she was caught talking Spanish at recess and was hit across the knuckles three times with a sharp ruler. She remembers being sent to the corner of her classroom for talking back to her Anglo teacher when all she was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce her name. She was told to speak 'American'; if she didn't like it she should go back to Mexico. Even when she attended Pan American University, she and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes in order to get rid of their accents. It is hard to imagine such shameless behavior all for the purpose of linguistic dominance. It is no wonder that Anzaldúa

calls this experience terrorism. It is also no wonder that her reaction is rebellion: "Wild tongues can't be tamed, they can only be cut out" (p.54).

Language is rooted in culture so it is natural that Anzaldua talks about her inner conflict as she struggles to go between cultures. She straddles three cultures and value systems: white, Mexican, and indigenous. She describes herself as a *mestiza*, a combination of all three cultures, who undergoes a "struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war"(p.78). She believes that the new *mestiza* must cope by developing a tolerance for ambiguity: to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She becomes an expert at juggling cultures, as well as languages. She asserts, however, that she must accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex, and all the other languages that she speaks in order to accept the legitimacy of herself. She wants to be free to write bilingually and to switch codes without always having to translate. She passionately declares:

"Humildes yet proud, quietos yet wild, nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, perservering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain"(p.64).

Borderlands, thus, gives the reader an inside look at the inner struggles of a culturally diverse person. By alternating between English and Spanish, between poetry and prose, Anzaldua allows us to feel more intensely the power and beauty of language. Complementing this autobiographical piece is Cummins' passionate look at bilingual education. His work takes on new importance as we hear the words of *La Frontera* echoing in our ears. Cummins is best known for his theories and research on bilingual education. However, his latest book, *Negotiating Identities*, is his most powerful review of his own work as well as other noted theorists in the field.

The central argument of Cummins' book is that if schools and society are truly committed to reversing a pattern of school failure, the interactions between educators and students in schools must actively challenge historical patterns of disempowerment. He further states that "human relationships are at the heart of schooling...when students' developing sense of self is affirmed and extended through their interactions with teachers, they are more likely to apply themselves to academic effort and participate actively in instruction"(p.2) The process of negotiating identities recognizes the importance of culturally diverse students and their communities in resisting devaluation and in affirming their basic human rights. He restates this same principle in another way by challenging educators with a liberatory definition of empowerment: "...empowerment can be defined as the collaborative creation of power" (p.15) As an educator I find this definition more than challenging—I find it exhilarating. It gives me hope that despite inherent systemic racism, I can build a relationship with my students based on equity and understanding. As Freire would say I am able to create a dialogue with my students, not merely a conversation(Freire, 1970).

Another important addition to Cummins' latest book is his inclusion of several chapters of research studies which support bilingual education. He cites convincing data which has found an average of five to seven years is required for immigrant students to attain grade norms on

academic aspects of English proficiency (Collier,1987; Cummins, 1981b; Ramirez,1992). He goes on to explode the myth that merely more exposure to English will increase students' academic proficiency. He, in fact, cites research that shows that students who are proficient in their native language do better in English than students who are not literate in their first language(Beykont, 1994). This research supports Cummins' theory that there is an underlying cognitive/ academic proficiency that is common across all languages. This underlying proficiency makes possible the transfer of literacy-related skills from one language to another.

In addition to providing educators with important research evidence to combat English-only movements current in the United States today, Cummins also provides teachers with best practices in bilingual education. He highlights six distinguished high schools in California and Arizona which support students' academic success. He summarizes three distinctive components crucial to successful schools: affirmation of students' cultural identity and encouragement of native language literacy; encouragement of active parental participation; and cognitively challenging instruction that provides students to draw on their background experiences while exploring issues that are relevant to their lives(p.146). It is clear from these delineations that Cummins believes in the importance of the affective dimension of the interactions between educators and students. Supporting his findings are case studies by Igoa(1995) and Nieto(1996) that also show the centrality of identity issues in students' successful achievement in school. Thus, Cummins flawlessly weaves research, theory, and practice as he argues his case for bilingual education.

Coupled with his passion for equity and collaborative empowerment is his commitment to deep educational reform. He asserts that the achievement gaps between students from dominant and subordinated groups remain extremely large, and that a huge part of this failure is related to the tremendous disparities in educational spending between affluent and impoverished school districts. This political stance extends to his contention that the power relations in the broader society are reflected in the organization of schooling itself, in such areas as curriculum, tracking, and assessment practices. He further suggests that:

"the reversal of the pattern of school failure requires that educator-student interactions be oriented towards empowerment, defined as the collaborative creation of power. Creating contexts of empowerment in the classroom entails a direct challenge to the coercive relations of power operating in the wider society that are at the root of culturally diverse students' school failure" (p.136).

This requires classroom teachers to take courageous stances in their classrooms. To do less is to rob subordinated groups from equal educational opportunity. Throughout his book, Cummins challenges educators to become political agitators. He would agree with Donaldo Macedo's assertion that only through a full understanding of the historical context of colonialism can we truly understand the complexity of bilingualism in the United States(Macedo, 2000). Joining forces with such critical theorists as Paulo Freire(1989) and Ira Shor (1987), he advocates critical literacy through a discussion of transformative pedagogy, which uses collaborative critical inquiry to enable students to relate curriculum content to their individual experience. This inquiry can then lead to a discussion of how social realities might be transformed through various forms of democratic participation and social action. This kind of problem-posing, in

particular, reflects Freire's influence. His understanding of literacy is predicated on the notion that reading the world precedes reading the word. Language and reality are dynamically linked (Freire, 1987).

Cummins' final chapter sums up his central beliefs for educational reform. He asserts that genuine critical literacy threatens established systems of privilege, because one does not simply accept policies of disinformation or the historical discourses in dominant texts. Critical literacy challenges students to assess society's inequities in terms of their own social reality. Cummins reminds us that the realities of the twenty-first century must take into account the fact that cultural diversity is the norm in both the domestic and the international arenas. He declares: "Hirsch got it wrong; students require not just cultural literacy, but intercultural literacy" (p.225). In the economic arena, students graduating into today's job markets will require the skills of abstract higher-order thinking, critical inquiry, and collaboration. Educating all students is necessary to a healthy global economy. Moreover, it is myopic to discourage linguistic diversity: to compete in the world market, companies need people who speak two and three languages. Our linguistic minority students have the potential of becoming our future leaders in the twenty-first century's economic picture.

Cummins also reminds us that we are in the midst of the largest transfer of wealth in the nation's history. The already rich are getting richer and life for the working class is quickly deteriorating. In this kind of atmosphere, it is easy to direct people's anger against immigrants and bilingual education which, of course, diverts attention from the massive transfer of wealth from middle-class and poor to the rich. Despite these political realities, Cummins is optimistic. He inspires us all by his concluding statement:

"The goal for all of us 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" (p.236).

In conclusion, reading *Negotiating Identities and Borderlands* in tandem gives educators a clear and passionate understanding of bilingual education within its historical and sociopolitical context. These issues cannot be overlooked. Our language minority children are the mirrors reflecting our democratic society in the twenty-first century.

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