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### BOOK REVIEW

#### **Power, Politics, Bilingual Education, and School Success**

A Review of:

Cummins, Jim. (2000). *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. (309 pages).

Crawford, James. (2000). *At War with Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters. (143 pages).

Ovando, Carlos J., & McLaren, Peter (Eds.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism and Bilingual Education: Students and Teachers Caught in the Cross Fire*. Boston: McGraw-Hill. (240 pages).

The popular rhetoric coming from the new Bush administration and well-funded conservative "think tanks" is that America is finally facing up to the crisis of poor academic performance of American Indian, Hispanic, and other ethnic minority students through the standards movement and high stakes testing. And, as with similar national movements in the past, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) is already jumping on board the standards bandwagon.

One needs a sense of history today to realize that at one time bilingual education was instituted, as standards and tests are today, as a panacea for language minority children. Now there is an "English-Only" backlash bankrolled by computer millionaire Ron Unz that has led to the passage of Proposition 227 in California in 1998 and 203 in Arizona in 2000.

Reasons for the recent upsurge in English-Only popular opinion include increased immigration and the widespread perception that bilingual education programs do not teach English, with minority students "languishing" in them. However, Jim Cummins, Stephen Krashen, and other prominent supporters of bilingual education continue to emphasize the need to introduce English early-on in bilingual programs while at the same time developing literacy in the children's home languages whenever possible.

Three new books focus on the current political battle being waged over bilingual education. They are Jim Cummins' *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*, James Crawford's *At War with Diversity: US Language Policy in an Age of Anxiety*, and Carlos Ovando and Peter McLaren's *The Politics of Multiculturalism and Bilingual Education: Students and Teachers Caught in the Cross Fire*.

### **Language, power and pedagogy**

Arguably the best recent exposition of bilingual education theory is Jim Cummins' new book *Language, Power and Pedagogy*. In it he rebuts his critics and clarifies his positions on the use of English and home languages in bilingual programs. He questions a "rigid" separation of languages in bilingual programs, "a near-exclusive emphasis" on the home language in the early grades, and the idea that literacy skills can transfer automatically from the home language to English (pp. 20-21).

Cummins especially has doubts about "delaying the instruction of English literacy for a considerable period" (p. 176). In regard to the well-known threshold and interdependency hypothesis he writes that "*neither hypothesis says anything about the appropriate language to begin reading instruction within a bilingual program nor about when reading instruction in the majority language should be introduced*" (p. 176, emphasis in original). He continues: "I believe, and have strongly argued, that a bilingual program should be fully bilingual with a strong English language arts (reading and writing) program together with a strong L1 language arts program" (pp. 24-25). He sees a special problem with delaying the introduction of English in Indian language programs because of the lack of indigenous language literature for older students.

Cummins also defends his well-known BICS/CALP categorization. Based on the research of Douglas Biber, David Corson, and others, he finds that Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are based largely on an "Anglo-Saxon-based lexicon" while the vocabulary of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is largely of "Graeco-Latin" origin, which is mainly found in books. "Graeco-Latin words tend to be three or four syllables long, whereas the everyday high frequency words of the Anglo-Saxon lexicon tend to be one or two syllables in length" (p. 78). Cummins writes:

An obvious implication of these data is that if second language learners are to catch up academically to Native-speakers they must engage in extensive reading of written text because academic language is reliability [QUERY AUTHOR ABOUT PRECEDING PHRASE] to be found only in written text. The research on reading achievement also suggests, however, that in addition to large amounts of time for actual text reading, it is also important for students to have ample opportunities to talk to each other and to a teacher about their responses to

reading.... Talking about the text in a collaborative context ensures that higher order thinking processes (e.g. analysis, evaluation, synthesis) engage with academic language in deepening students' comprehension of the text. (p. 79)

This extensive reading is necessary even for Native speakers of English if they are to do well in school.

Whole language advocates have criticized some of Cummins' work and tend to oppose any kind of standardized and criterion referenced tests, advocating in their place forms of authentic assessment. However, Cummins points out that in studies that utilize both types of assessment, there are "extremely strong correlations between communicative [often termed 'authentic'] assessments of reading and writing and discrete point measures," such as standardized and criterion referenced test scores (p. 137). These paper and pencil tests tend to measure students' academic vocabulary. In fact, while recognizing their misuse, he states that,

to the extent that standardized reading tests mirror the context-reduced demands of schooling and many real-life reading performances (e.g. reading and completing various forms), they can be considered potentially appropriate despite the fact they lack a task-based communicative orientation. (p. 137)

While Cummins strongly supports an emphasis on English and an academic focus for education, he retains his support for more progressive and active teaching approaches that he describes as "transformative." He characterizes these approaches as experiential and interactive, between teacher and student and among students, as opposed to more traditional "transmission" teaching methods that are teacher-centered and emphasize direct instruction.

This transformative pedagogy, described in Chapter 10, is essential for building students' identities and not making them leave their home culture at the classroom door. It enables "students to relate curriculum content to their individual and collective experience and to analyze broader social issues relevant to their lives" (p. 246). He quotes one of his earlier books, *Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society*, where he wrote: "if teachers are not learning much from their students, it is probable that their students are not learning much from them" (p. 52). Dick Littlebear, president of Dull Knife Memorial College, has referred to the teacher side of this learning curve as "crossing the cattle guard" that forms a break in the fences that surround many reservation school compounds to see what challenges students face in their lives. Teachers need to facilitate Native students developing an identity that is supportive of academics but lets them remain Indian.

### **At War with Diversity**

While Cummins' book is a lengthy exposition and defense of his theoretical positions related to bilingual education, James Crawford's *At War with Diversity* gives an overview of the politics of bilingual education. Two of its six chapters titled "Endangered Native American Languages: What is To Be Done and Why?" and "Seven Hypotheses on Language Loss" focus on American Indian languages. He also dissects both the political support for Proposition 227 in California and some of the mistakes made in fighting it. Learning from the mistakes made in California and Arizona is important, as computer millionaire

Ron Unz who bankrolled the support for both 203 and 227, is currently moving his campaign against bilingual education to Colorado, Massachusetts, and New York.

Crawford's seven hypotheses include first the idea that it is hard for outsiders to kill a language, which is supported by the fact that most American Indian languages survived years of suppression in BIA schools. Second, demographic changes like moving to cities, economic pressures related to employment, mass media like TV, and social and peer pressure have tremendous effects on the language use of tribes. Third, as mainstream values like individualism, pragmatism, and materialism invade Indian communities, they bring along English with them. Fourth, language revitalization efforts need to include shifting tribal members back to traditional values. Fifth, outsiders and schools can help with language revitalization efforts, but they can't even begin to do it alone. Sixth, efforts at language revitalization have to start with an analysis of where a community or tribe is currently at in terms of language loss. And seventh, in the United States today it is critical to develop indigenous leadership for language revitalization efforts. Examples of language shift and retention provided by Crawford include Navajo, Hualapai, Pascua Yaqui, and Mississippi Choctaw.

Crawford faces head-on some of the key issues threatening indigenous language survival, which can be seen in his Navajo example. He reports, "among Navajo youth, the Native language tends to have very low status—lower than on any other reservation I visited. It seems to be associated with rural

backwardness, with people who are not making it in today's society." In addition, "opposition to bilingual education has been fanned by fundamentalist Christian groups who fear its potential to encourage Navajo religion" (p. 74). However, some Christian groups, even rather fundamentalist ones, support "speaking our language" [quotation marks added].

### **The Politics of Multiculturalism and Bilingual Education**

For an overview of both Cummins and Crawford's positions on bilingual education, their respective chapters in Ovando and McLaren's *Politics of Multiculturalism and Bilingual Education* are a good start. This book is the most radical of the three, with several chapters taking a strong critical pedagogical stand. It has two sections: "The Moral and Political Cross Fires of Multiculturalism" and "Teachers and Students Caught in the Cross Fire." While the opponents of bilingual education are generally castigated, Cummins points out that even conservative opponents of bilingual education have supported dual language programs. These programs mix English-speaking children with the speakers of another language so that, in the instance of a new program in Flagstaff, Arizona, the English speakers learn Navajo and the Navajo speakers learn English.

Pugh, Ovando, and Schonemann in the first chapter note that language is by nature metaphorical and that "metaphors are tools of conscious persuasion; they do not merely describe a situation but also serve as a heuristic that constructs understanding through shaping an influential image" and "the

metaphors of those in power can obscure other metaphors, and they reinforce and perpetuate the power holder's version of reality and play a crucial role in the construction of social and political realities" (p. 8).

The authors examine metaphors of the senses, of conflict and pathology, of deviance and disease, and of topography. Terms like savages, reservations, nations, sovereignty, and freedom carry historical baggage that impact their modern usage. As a joint statement of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English in 1994 declared,

Language is very much like a living organism. It cannot be put together from parts like a machine, and it is constantly changing.... Language does not contain meaning; rather, meaning lies in the social relationships within which language occurs. Individuals in communities make sense of language within their social relationships, their personal histories, and their collective memory. (as quoted in Ovando & McLaren, p. 5-6)

Warren Nord's chapter on multiculturalism and religion decries how religion has been removed from the public school curriculum that now nurtures a secular mentality. He notes how a large number of groups have stated that while "public schools may neither promote nor inhibit religion; ... the study of religion is essential to a good education" (p. 71). Navajo linguist Paul Platero has stated he dislikes public schools because Navajos start and finish all important activities with a prayer.

The basic position of Ovando and McLaren's (2000) book is that the power structure of the United States, while speaking the rhetoric of equality, is perfectly satisfied if ethnic minorities remain disempowered. The individualism exalted by conservatives and libertarians alike is embedded in "the Anglo-American tradition



of common law...[which] almost always endows rights to individuals rather than to groups" (p. 120). Thus the freedom accorded citizens is an individual rather than a group right, which disempowers efforts at minority cultural survival.

### **Conclusion**

The Bilingual Education Act, Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, passed without dissent in 1968 as a way to address the underachievement of language minority students. Like many other educational reforms, bilingual education was oversold as a panacea to solve the multitude of problems faced by ethnic minority students, raising expectations that were impossible to satisfy.

Bilingual education as funded under Title VII deserves some criticism, but not because it does not emphasize English. A few schools serving American Indian and Alaska Native students have done an admirable job with bilingual education, teaching both a tribal language and English, but most are neither improving students' English skills adequately nor doing much to help maintain tribal identities, including tribal languages. Students may learn little more than the names of animals, colors, and numbers in their tribal language. This is acceptable for some elders as they have a deep distrust of the schools, held over from the days when they were punished in school for speaking "Indian." In addition, some younger Indians, echoing the materialistic and assimilationist values of the larger society, see no economic utility in speaking their tribal language and thus see it as unimportant for their children.

Bilingual education is under attack today from assimilationists pushing a monocultural curriculum embodied in the “standards” movement that requires high-stakes tests for promotion and graduation and punishes teachers and schools whose students don’t measure up. This forces teachers to focus on teaching to these tests with the result that important subjects such as tribal languages and cultures, which are not in the standards and therefore not tested, are ignored or, at best, sidelined in the curriculum.

The Navajo Tribe reacted in 2000 and adopted their own *Diné Cultural Content Standards for Students* (T'áá Shá Bík'ehgo Diné Bi Na'nitin dóó lhoo'aah). However, these standards suffer from the same weakness as state standards in that teachers are provided no curriculum and insufficient student materials with which to implement them. The schools themselves lack the resources to develop the extensive curriculum that their teachers need. What discretionary money the schools have is increasingly going to buy mandated tests and instructional programs, often computer driven, that make promises to prepare students for these high stakes tests.

When the Bilingual Education Act was passed there were many problems associated with it. One of the first difficulties was to find anyone qualified to teach in bilingual classrooms. To remedy this deficiency, the Act was expanded to include funding for teacher training. Then it was found that there were not enough professors trained to teach the teachers, so funding was provided for students to earn doctorates in bilingual education and for colleges of education to hire faculty to teach bilingual education courses.

As the problems described above have been worked through since 1968, bilingual education has matured and, coincidentally, there is a growing interest in indigenous language revitalization that has been reflected in special issues of journal after journal in the past few years. While the anti-bilingual education forces continue to view language as a problem, more and more it is being seen as a resource, with bilingualism, and even multilingualism, enhancing rather than subtracting from a person's identity. Progress in viewing language as a resource, like the passage of the Native American Languages Act of 1990, is proving useful, as the Arizona Attorney General was able to cite it as a reason for declaring that Proposition 203's provisions did not apply to American Indian language programs on or off reservations.

While it is easy to point fingers at under-funded schools and inappropriate monocultural curriculum for the low average performance of Native students, it remains with Indian students and their families both to work to change Indian education for the better and to seek academic success in spite of the obstacles put in their way. These three books authored by Jim Cummins, James Crawford, Carlos Ovando and Peter McLaren provide educators wishing to improve Indian education both academically and culturally much food for thought. As a journalist, James Crawford provides the most readable of the three books, while Carlos Ovando and Peter McLaren provide the most iconoclastic look at American education, and Jim Cummins puts forth the strongest argument for schools to be truly bilingual, bicultural, and academically rigorous.

#### **Note**

Earlier versions of James Crawford's two chapters can be found on the Internet as follows:

"Endangered Native American Languages: What is To Be Done and Why?" at

<http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/crawford/endangered.htm> and "Seven Hypothesis on

Language Loss" at <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/miscpubs/stabilize/ii-policy/hypotheses.htm>

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