◯ IDENTITIES IN MOTION: RETHINKING TEACHER-STUDENT IDENTITY NEGOTIATION IN MULTILINGUAL SCHOOL CONTEXTS

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Recent scholarship within the field of applied linguistics highlights the fact that identities are not static but are fluid, multiple, changeable across time and space, and always constructed in relationship to interactions with others. In other words, identities are constantly in motion. This paper presents a framework for examining the notion of 'identities in motion' as a core analytic construct in understanding patterns of educational success and failure. This framework is contrasted with the implicit frameworks that have operated in many countries that consign notions of identity negotiation to the margins and focus on 'educational effectiveness' as a process of instructional and organisational efficiency in isolation from the historical and current social context.

KEY WORDS: Identity negotiation, teacher identities, power relations

INTRODUCTION

As illustrated by the papers in this special issue, there is a large degree of consensus within the field of applied linguistics that the construct of 'identity' is of central importance in understanding patterns of language learning and linguistic behaviour generally (e.g., Gee, 2004; Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995; Toohey, Day, & Manyak, 2007). Identity has also emerged as a prominent analytic construct to account for patterns of academic success and failure among students from socially marginalised communities (Cummins, 2001; Gee, 2000-2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The centrality of both identity negotiation and societal power relations in understanding patterns of school achievement was clearly expressed by Ladson-Billings: 'The problem that African-American students face is the constant devaluation of their culture both in school and in the larger society' (p. 485). The logical implication of this claim is that schools committed to reversing patterns of underachievement should implement instruction that actively challenges the devaluation of students and communities in the wider society. These forms of instruction have been variously labeled culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995), culturally responsive (Gay, 2010) and culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012).

In schools and classrooms where cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity is the norm, educators always locate themselves, consciously or unconsciously, in relation to this diversity. Their instruction and patterns of interaction with students reflect their own identities as educators and the identities they envisage for their students. For example, to

what extent do teachers define their role as simply transmitting to students the skills and knowledge embedded in the curriculum or do they aim to enable students to co-construct knowledge in ways that may go beyond the curriculum? To what extent do teachers accept the assumption (in English-speaking countries) that the classroom should be an English-only zone as opposed to a multilingual environment where students' languages and cultural knowledge are welcomed and encouraged?

Individually and collectively, educators exercise *choice* in relation to these issues and these choices simultaneously reflect and shape their identities as educators. Lisa Leoni, at the time an ESL teacher in a K-8 school, clearly expressed the process of identity negotiation in a presentation at the 2005 Ontario Teachers of English as a Second Language conference:

> The way I see it everything has to relate to the identity of the students; children have to see themselves in every aspect of their work at school. … My overarching goal as a teacher is to uncover all that is unknown to me about my students – linguistically and culturally, and especially to understand the community they are part of (their parents, their friends, their faith) and the list goes on. So when a student enters my class, I want to discover all that I can about that student as a learner and as a person. (Leoni et al., 2011, p. 48).

Despite the prominence of notions of identity negotiation and societal power relations in the academic literature relating to both language learning and achievement gaps between social groups, these notions have been largely ignored by 'mainstream' educational policy-makers in many countries whose vision of school improvement is simply to increase the effectiveness with which standardised curricula are transmitted to students. This 'effectiveness paradigm' focuses on ensuring that students meet universal, one-size-fits-all standards, which are assessed by standardised or state-developed tests, all in the ultimate service of greater economic competitiveness. The mantra accompanying this mandate is that teachers must be held accountable for student attainment, which should be measured on a regular basis to ensure quality control (for analysis of this paradigm in recent United States educational policies, see Ravitch, 2013).

The belief that 'educational effectiveness' should be the primary goal of education has been reinforced by large-scale research such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) carried out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). PISA ranks countries with respect to the achievement of 15-year olds in Reading, Science, and Mathematics. In addition to constructing 'league tables' of countries' educational achievement, PISA analyses the data with a view to determining both the causes of strong and weak educational performance and the instructional approaches that will maximise the returns on societies' educational investments. The resulting discourse in many countries frequently focuses on relatively narrow instructional issues such as which

approaches to initial reading instruction will yield the best reading scores, what is the best approach to teaching mathematics, and how should efficient learning strategies be taught to students. These are all legitimate issues but, as I argue in this paper, they are less relevant to understanding achievement gaps between social groups than broader issues related to the operation of societal power relations and their reflection in patterns of teacher-student identity negotiation. For many policy-makers, the normative starting point for this 'effectiveness' discourse is one of cultural/linguistic/religious homogeneity and a sanitised curriculum that reinforces nationalistic mythologies designed to obscure rather than elucidate historical and current realities.

A recent example of attempts to obscure and sanitise historical patterns of power relations appears in the Texas edition of a McGraw-Hill textbook. *The Guardian* newspaper described the controversy as follows:

> The offending passage was in pages titled Patterns of Immigration in McGraw-Hill Education's World Geography book. A colourful map of the US was adorned with a speech bubble which said: "The Atlantic Slave Trade between the 1500s and 1800s brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations." (Dart, 2015)

The implication that slaves were economic migrants caused outrage on social media with the result that McGraw-Hill agreed to change the passage. Many other examples from virtually every country could be given of the ways in which educational curricula shield national, dominant group, and religious identities from critical scrutiny. In the Canadian context, for example, curricula have typically highlighted the early cooperation between Europeans and First Nations peoples while saying virtually nothing about the physical, sexual, and cultural abuse inflicted on children in residential schools by religious orders whose goal (supported and funded by the Canadian government) was to destroy the identities of both children and communities. The fact that societal power relations are, and always have been, infused in the operation of schooling raises the question of how educators position themselves in relation to these power relations – do they simply teach the curriculum as mandated, or do they negotiate identities with their students in ways that challenge the operation of coercive power relations?

In the next section, I outline a framework (Cummins, 2001) that posits societal power relations and their reflection in patterns of educator-student identity negotiation as direct determinants of student achievement. This framework stands in direct opposition to mainstream accounts of educational effectiveness that assign issues of power and identity to the margins and attribute academic success to narrowly defined instructional variables in isolation from their social context. If underachievement among marginalised social groups is rooted in the operation of societal power relations, it follows that 'effectiveness' can only be realised when educators, individually and collectively, challenge the operation of coercive

relations of power. This represents a very different role definition or educator identity than the 'efficient-transmitter-of-curriculum' identity reflected in mainstream policies and many initial teacher education programs.

TEACHER IDENTITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF UNEQUAL POWER RELATIONS

The starting point for this analysis is that societal power relations, and their reflection in patterns of identity negotiation in schools, operate as causal factors in explaining underachievement among students from socially marginalized communities who have experienced discrimination and restricted educational and employment opportunities, often over generations. Educational responses to underachievement that fail to address the causal role of identity devaluation, and its roots in historical and current patterns of coercive power relations, are unlikely to be successful.
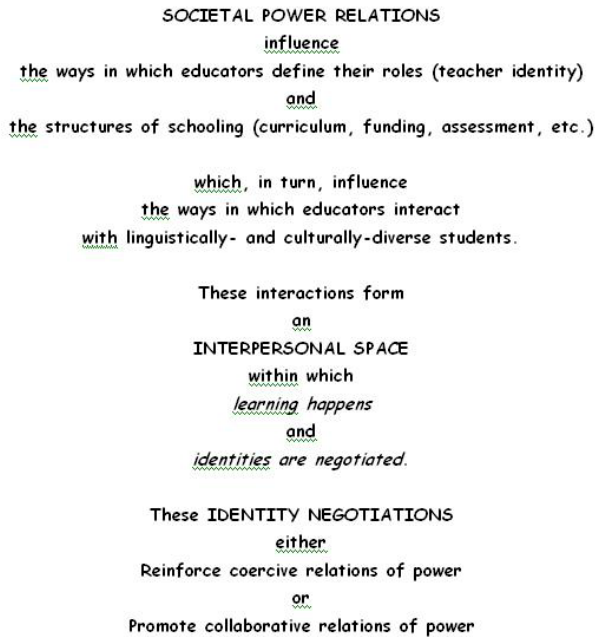
The framework (Cummins, 2001) proposes that relations of power in the wider society, ranging from coercive to collaborative in varying degrees, influence both the ways in which educators define their roles and the types of structures that are established in the educational system (Figure 1). Coercive relations of power refer to the exercise of power by a dominant individual, group, or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group or country. The assumption is that there is a fixed quantity of power that operates according to a zero-sum or subtractive logic; in other words, the more power one group has the less is left for other groups.

Collaborative relations of power, by contrast, reflect the sense of the term 'power' that refers to 'being enabled,' or 'empowered' to achieve more. Within collaborative relations of power, 'power' is not a fixed quantity but is generated through interaction with others. The more empowered one individual or group becomes, the more is generated for others to share. The process is additive rather than subtractive.

Within this context, empowerment can be defined as the collaborative creation of power. Students whose schooling experiences reflect collaborative relations of power participate confidently in instruction as a result of the fact that their sense of identity is being affirmed and extended in their interactions with educators. Schooling amplifies rather than silences their power of self-expression regardless of their current level of proficiency in the dominant school language.

As outlined in Figure 1, educator role definitions refer to the mindset of expectations, assumptions and goals that educators bring to the task of educating linguistically and culturally diverse students. Educational structures refer to the organisation of schooling in a broad sense that includes policies, programs, curriculum, and assessment. While these structures will generally reflect the values and priorities of dominant groups in society, they are not by any means fixed or static. As with most other aspects of the way societies are organised and

resources distributed, educational structures are contested by individuals and groups. The volatile debates in the United States since the 1970s about the legitimacy of bilingual education for linguistically diverse students illustrates this process (Cummins, 2001).

SOCIETAL POWER RELATIONS

influence

the ways in which educators define their roles (teacher identity)

and

the structures of schooling (curriculum, funding, assessment, etc.)

which, in turn, influence

the ways in which educators interact

with linguistically- and culturally-diverse students.

These interactions form

an

INTERPERSONAL SPACE

within which

learning happens

and

identities are negotiated.

These **IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS**

either

Reinforce coercive relations of power

or

Promote collaborative relations of power

Figure 1. Societal power relations, identity negotiation, and academic achievement. Adapted from Cummins (2001, p. 20). © 2001 J. Cummins. Reprinted with permission.

Educational structures, together with educator role definitions, determine the patterns of interactions between educators, students, and communities. These interactions form an interpersonal space within which the acquisition of knowledge and formation of identity are negotiated. Power is created and shared within this interpersonal space where minds and identities meet. As such, these teacher-student interactions constitute the most immediate determinant of student academic success or failure.

The interactions between educators, students and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees, they either reinforce coercive relations of power or promote collaborative relations of power. Consider, for example, the implicit or explicit policies in many contexts that students should not use their home languages within the school. Such policies are entirely ideological and without empirical justification with respect to either language learning or academic achievement. They reflect coercive relations of power by devaluing students' linguistic

accomplishments and defining them only in relation to their deficiency in the school language (e.g., as an English language learner rather than a bilingual/plurilingual student).

On the other hand, in contexts where teachers have chosen to be proactive in validating students' multilingual talents within the school context (e.g., through encouraging students to write and share their ideas in their home languages as well as the school language), typically both students and teachers experience a sense of empowerment. The transformation of identity that students experience when they are enabled to use the full range of their intellectual and linguistic talents is powerfully expressed by Kanta, a student in Lisa Leoni's grade 7 classroom, who collaborated with two of her Urdu-speaking classmates in writing a 20-page dual language book, entitled *The New Country*, about their experiences of coming to Canada from Pakistan:

> How it helped me was when I came here in Grade 4 the teachers didn't know what I was capable of. I was given a pack of crayons and a colouring book and told to get on colouring with it. And after I felt so bad about that--I'm capable of doing much more than just that. I have my own inner skills to show the world than just colouring and I felt that those skills of mine are important also. So when we started writing the book [*The New Country*], I could actually show the world that I am something instead of just colouring. And that's how it helped me and it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something, and here today [at the Ontario TESL conference] I *am* actually doing something. I'm not just a colouring person—I can show you that I am something. (Leoni et al., 2011, p. 50)

THE POWER OF CHOICE

How can educators create contexts of empowerment in their classrooms and schools? If empowerment is the goal, then choice is the means. Educator agency or choice represents a core analytic variable in conceptualising and implementing school change. Exercise of pedagogical choice represents the key means whereby individual educators can challenge the narrow conception of education (and the construction of their own identities) implied by the effectiveness paradigm. Choice is anathema to the effectiveness paradigm because choice challenges control. Top-down control of educational systems is explicitly designed to limit educator choices by means of standardised curricula policed by high-stakes assessments. However, although choice can be limited by top-down mandates, it can never be fully eliminated.

Thus individual educators always exercise agency – they are never powerless, although they frequently work in conditions that are oppressive both for them and their students. While they rarely have complete freedom, educators do have choices in the way they structure the interactions in their classrooms. They determine for themselves the social and educational goals they want to achieve with their students. There are always options with respect to educators'

orientation to students' language and culture, in the forms of parent and community participation they encourage, and in the ways they implement pedagogy and assessment.

In short, educators define their own identities through their practice and their interactions with students. Students, likewise, go through a process of defining their identities in interaction with their teachers, peers, and parents. This process of negotiating identities can never be fully controlled from the outside. Thus, educators individually and collectively, have the potential to work towards the creation of contexts of empowerment. Within these interpersonal spaces where identities are negotiated, students and educators together can generate power that challenges structures of inequity in small but significant ways.

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