In 1986, the Harvard Educational Review published Jim Cummins’s article “Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention,” which offered a theoretical framework for addressing the achievement gap of minority students. Despite considerable attention to this issue, educators have seen little encouraging progress. Even now, fifteen years after its original publication, Cummins’s article provides insightful perspective and practical advice about a vexing problem. Because of its relevance to current debates, the Editorial Board has chosen to reprint this article, part of the HER Classics Series. We also hope that the ideas in this landmark article will stimulate new discussion around theoretical and practical approaches that educators can take to solving the problem of the minority achievement gap.

Author’s Introduction — Framing the Universe of Discourse: Are the Constructs of Power and Identity Relevant to School Failure?

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In the fifteen years since “Empowering Minority Students: A Framework for Intervention” was first published in the Harvard Educational Review, issues related to educational reform have seldom been far from the headlines.¹ The
National Commission on Excellence in Education proclaimed a “crisis” in its 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. This “crisis” has gathered momentum through the late 1980s and 1990s. Politicians and many in the general public are convinced that literacy standards are in decline and that the educational system is failing both students and society. Specific scapegoats have been identified and denounced, including bilingual education (Porter, 1990, 1998), whole-language approaches to literacy teaching (Grossen, 1997), and even multicultural children’s literature (e.g., Stotsky, 1999). However, the central thrust of current reform efforts has been to implement an accountability system based on the specification of content standards in various subject areas of the curriculum, together with use of high-stakes tests to monitor students’ and schools’ attainment of these standards. In this way, underachieving schools (and teachers) can be identified and overhauled or removed from the system if they fail to respond rapidly to improvement efforts. While these reform efforts are ostensibly intended to strengthen the public school system, there is concern that they will have the opposite effect (e.g., McNeil, 2000). As I argue below, it is entirely predictable that these reforms will result in no long-term improvement in educational achievement. The likely consequence is that policymakers will be even more inclined to turn schools over to private businesses that claim they can educate students more efficiently than the public education system, and turn a profit at the same time (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Friedman, 1992).

Although the proposed reform strategies are different than they were fifteen years ago, the rhetoric remains much the same. In the opening paragraph of my 1986 article, I highlighted the lack of long-term success achieved by the educational reforms implemented to improve academic performance among culturally and linguistically diverse students. I believe that current attempts at reform will fail to boost achievement in any significant way for the same reasons that previous generations of reform were ineffective. These reasons are twofold: (a) empirical data relating to patterns of educational underachievement that challenge the current ideological mindset are systematically ignored or dismissed; (b) there is a deep antipathy to acknowledging that schools tend to reflect the power structure of the society and that these power relations are directly relevant to educational outcomes.

In reflecting on educational developments during the past fifteen years, I am even more convinced that we need to challenge the exclusion of human relationships from our understanding of what constitutes effective education. Current interventions to boost achievement are increasingly seen by policymakers as an exercise of instructional technique that can be scripted and controlled in scientifically supported ways. By contrast, a focus on human relationships assigns at least equal weight to the ways in which identities are negotiated in the interactions between educators and students. In social conditions of unequal power relations between groups, classroom interactions are never neutral with respect to the messages communicated to stu-
dents about the value of their language, culture, intellect, and imagination. The groups that experience the most disproportionate school failure in North America and elsewhere have been on the receiving end of a pattern of devaluation of identity for generations, in both schools and society. Consequently, any serious attempt to reverse underachievement must challenge both the devaluation of identity that these students have historically experienced and the societal power structure that perpetuates this pattern.

An Empirical Reality Check

The orchestrated panic in relation to declining standards has been convincingly debunked as a “manufactured crisis” that has had the effect of distracting Americans from the real problems of U.S. education and from thinking about useful steps that might be taken to resolve these problems (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). In international comparisons of reading comprehension achievement, the United States performs well in relation to other industrialized countries at the grade-four level, but less well at grade eight (Elley, 1992). The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data from 1971 through 1998 show no decline in reading scores (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999; Graves, Juel, & Graves, 2001). However, the consistency in levels of reading performance over a thirty-year period illustrates a more disturbing pattern. The most recent NAEP report (2001) found that, on average, there has been no closing of the gap between Euro-American students on the one hand and African American and Latino/Latina students on the other; rather, the gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students on the tests has increased. In addition, despite expectations that recent reforms might have begun to have an impact, no overall improvement in fourth-grade reading scores was evident.

Thus, there is no general decline in literacy standards. Rather, the “crisis” is an ongoing one: underachievement is concentrated among students who grow up in impoverished conditions and among groups such as African American, Latino/Latina, and Native American students. Historical patterns of discrimination contribute to the fact that many of these groups are also living in poverty (Payne & Biddle, 1999). Students from these groups continue to attend schools that are grossly substandard in both material and human resources relative to those attended by students from more affluent backgrounds (Barndt & McNally, 2001; Kozol, 1991).

The impact of these socioeconomic disparities and associated patterns of racial discrimination can be seen in the strong correlation between academic failure and the collective poverty level of children in a school (.68, according to Snow, Burns, & Griffin’s 1998 review). Yet, there has been little political will to push for equality of access to funding as a means of raising achievement in underfunded inner-city schools. It is much safer to focus on the presumed deficits that low-income children bring to school (e.g., lack of
phonological awareness) and teachers’ alleged lack of competence to re-
mediate these “deficits,” than to highlight inequities in the distribution of
economic and educational resources as causal factors in students’ under-
achievement.

In short, current reform efforts selectively highlight empirical data link-
ing individual student characteristics to underachievement while simulta-
neously ignoring much stronger empirical relationships between achieve-
ment and social and educational inequities. The implicit assumption
underlying these (and previous) reform efforts is that instructional inter-
ventions can remediate student “deficits” while ignoring the associated social
and educational inequities. There is little evidence of serious inquiry into
why thirty years of reform initiatives, each with its claims to scientific legiti-
macy, should have yielded such paltry results.

Challenging Structures of Disempowerment through Classroom
Interaction

In the 1986 paper, I suggested an alternative causal analysis of school failure.
Specifically, a major reason previous attempts at educational reform have
been unsuccessful is that the power relationships between teachers and stu-
dents and between schools and communities have remained essentially un-
changed. These attempts have failed primarily because they have not seri-
ously challenged the societal power structure. Typically, innocuous surface
structure changes have been implemented at a very safe distance from the
deep structure of disempowerment. I suggested that students in subordi-
nated groups are empowered or disabled educationally as a direct result of
their interactions with educators in the schools. These interactions among
educators, students, and communities are never neutral; in varying degrees,
they either reinforce or challenge coercive relations of power in the wider
society. Traditionally, schools have reflected the societal power structure and
constricted students’ academic and intellectual possibilities in much the
same way that their communities have been devalued and excluded in the
wider society.

The influence of the societal power structure is mediated by the way edu-
cators define their roles in relation to students’ language and culture, com-
community participation, pedagogy, and assessment. For example, when educa-
tors discourage or prohibit students from using their home language in the
school, this echoes the societal discourse that proclaims “bilingualism shuts
doors” (Schlesinger, 1991, p. 108). This coercive discourse aimed at eradicat-
ing children’s bilingualism has recently become law in California and Ari-
izona as a result of Propositions 227 and 203, respectively.²

² Proposition 227 was passed in California in June 1998 by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent. It
severely restricted the extent to which any language other than English could be used as a medium of
What options do educators have under current conditions of top-down control reflected in English-only legislation, scripted curriculum, and high-stakes testing? The framework I proposed in 1986 suggests that individual educators are never powerless, although they frequently work in conditions that are oppressive for both them and their students. While they operate under many constraints with respect to curriculum and working conditions, educators do have choices in the way they structure classroom interactions and in the messages about identity they communicate to their students. Educators are capable of determining for themselves the social and educational goals they want to achieve with their students because they are responsible for the role definitions they adopt in relation to culturally diverse students and communities. Even in the context of English-only instruction, educators have options in the orientation they adopt to students’ languages and cultures, 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. However, this process of negotiating identities can never be fully controlled by forces outside of the teacher-student relationship itself. Thus, educators individually and collectively have the unique potential to work toward 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.

What directions for change does this theoretical synthesis imply, compared to the more typical initiatives that focus on remediation of presumed student deficits and monitoring compliance with top-down mandates through high-stakes standardized tests? Curriculum and instruction focused on empowerment, understood as the collaborative creation of power, start by acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, imaginative, and intellectual resources that children bring to school. These resources reflect the funds of knowledge abundantly present in children’s communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Educators can explore with individual children and parents how these resources might be developed and expanded in classroom interactions. If our image of the child includes her capacity to become fluently bilingual and biliterate, we will orchestrate our interactions to communicate this potential to the child (e.g., by encouraging the writing and classroom publication of child-authored bilingual stories, especially in “English-only” classrooms). When structures reflecting coercive relations of power have been
imposed (e.g., English-only instruction as a result of Propositions 227 and 203), we will redouble our efforts to affirm students’ bilingual and bicultural identity. When curriculum is implemented that constructs the child as a cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and imaginative *tabula rasa*, we will search for cracks in the structure to communicate a different message to children.\(^3\)

The framework implies that, as educators, our interactions with students are constantly sketching a triangular set of images:

- an image of our own identities as educators
- an image of the identity options we highlight for our students
- an image of the society we hope our students will help form

These images are transacted in classroom interactions and are inseparable from the ways we locate ourselves in relation to the power structure of the society. When we choose to frame the discourse about underachievement primarily in terms of children’s deficits in some area of psychological or linguistic functioning, we expel culture, language, identity, intellect, and imagination from our image of the child, and we eliminate these constructs from our image of the effective teacher of these children, and from policies that might guide instruction.

At issue are radically different conceptions of learning and education and their roles in society. Should education automatically reinforce the societal status quo or should it challenge societal structures and discourses that are at variance with the articulated (although perhaps only sporadically pursued) core values of the society, such as equality, social justice, and freedom? Do we truly want historically subordinated groups to develop active intelligence and imagination whose outcomes, by definition, cannot be predicted? Are we comfortable promoting the multilingual talents of our students and supporting the emergence of different perspectives on reality that this multilingual access might provide? Do we really believe that inner-city children should be encouraged to take pride in their linguistic creativity and further explore their varieties of English (Delpit, 1995), despite the fact that such varieties are stigmatized in the wider society? The answers to these questions will depend on the extent to which we see constructs such as power and identity as being in any way relevant to children’s education.

References

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\(^3\) The relationships among variables articulated in this framework are not just empty theoretical speculation of the kind frequently dismissed or, more benignly, ignored by the positivistically oriented researchers and policymakers. There is a vast amount of research data and hard-nosed theoretical synthesis to support these relationships that can be found primarily in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology (see reviews by Cummins 2000, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1996, 2001; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).


Empowering Minority Students: 
A Framework for Intervention

JIM CUMMINS

Jim Cummins presents a theoretical framework for analyzing minority students’ school failure and the relative lack of success of previous attempts at educational reform, such as compensatory education and bilingual education. The author suggests that these attempts have been unsuccessful because they have not altered significantly the relationships between educators and minority students and between schools and minority communities. He offers ways in which educators can change these relationships, thereby promoting the empowerment of students, which can lead them to succeed in school.

During the past twenty years, educators in the United States have implemented a series of costly reforms aimed at reversing the pattern of school failure among minority students. These have included compensatory programs at the preschool level, myriad forms of bilingual education programs, the hiring of additional aides and remedial personnel, and the institution of safeguards against discriminatory assessment procedures. Yet the dropout rate among Mexican American and mainland Puerto Rican students remains between 40 and 50 percent, compared to 14 percent for Whites and 25 percent for Blacks (Jusenius & Duarte, 1982). Similarly, almost a decade after the passage of the nondiscriminatory assessment provision of Public Law 94-142,¹ we find Hispanic students in Texas overrepresented by a factor of 300 percent in the “learning disabilities” category (Ortiz & Yates, 1983).

I have suggested that a major reason previous attempts at educational reform have been unsuccessful is that the relationships between teachers and

¹ The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142) guarantees to all handicapped children in the United States the right to a free public education, to an individualized education program (IEP), to due process, to education in the least segregated environment, and to assessment procedures that are multidimensional and nonculturally discriminatory.

This article is part of the HER Classics Series, which includes twelve of our most requested articles over the years. A list of the Classics can be found on the inside back cover.
students and between schools and communities have remained essentially unchanged. The required changes involve personal redefinitions of the way classroom teachers interact with the children and communities they serve. In other words, legislative and policy reforms may be necessary conditions for effective change, but they are not sufficient. Implementation of change is dependent upon the extent to which educators, both collectively and individually, redefine their roles with respect to minority students and communities.

The purpose of this paper is to propose a theoretical framework for examining the types of personal and institutional redefinitions that are required to reverse the pattern of minority student failure. The framework is based on a series of hypotheses regarding the nature of minority students’ educational difficulties. These hypotheses, in turn, lead to predictions regarding the probable effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, of various interventions directed at reversing minority students’ school failure.

The framework assigns a central role to three inclusive sets of interactions or power relations: 1) the classroom interactions between teachers and students, 2) relationships between schools and minority communities, and 3) the intergroup power relations within the society as a whole. It assumes that the social organization and bureaucratic constraints within the school reflect not only broader policy and societal factors, but also the extent to which individual educators accept or challenge the social organization of the school in relation to minority students and communities. Thus, this analysis sketches directions for change for policymakers at all levels of the educational hierarchy, and in particular for those working directly with minority students and communities.

The Policy Context

Research data from the United States, Canada, and Europe vary on the extent to which minority students experience academic failure (for reviews, see Cummins, 1984; Ogbu, 1978). For example, in the United States, Hispanic (with the exception of some groups of Cuban students), Native American, and Black students do poorly in school compared to most groups of Asian American (and White) students. In Canada, Franco-Ontarian students in English-language programs have tended to perform considerably less well academically than immigrant minority groups (Cummins, 1984), while the same pattern characterizes Finnish students in Sweden (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984).

The major task of theory and policy is to explain the pattern of school success and failure among minority students. This task applies both to students whose home language and culture differ from those of the school and wider society (language minority students) and to students whose home language is a version of English but whose cultural background is significantly different from that of the school and wider society, such as many Black and Hispanic students from English-language backgrounds. With respect to lan-
guage-minority students, recent policy changes in the United States have been based on the assumption that a major cause of students’ educational difficulty is the switch between the language of the home and the language of the school. Thus, the apparently plausible assumption that students cannot learn in a language they do not understand gave rise in the late 1960s and early 1970s to bilingual education programs in which students’ home language was used in addition to English as an initial medium of school instruction (Schneider, 1976).

Bilingual programs, however, have met with both strong support and vehement opposition. The debate regarding policy has revolved around two intuitively appealing assumptions. Those who favor bilingual education argue that children cannot learn in a language they do not understand, and therefore L1 (first-language) instruction is necessary to counteract the negative effects of a home/school linguistic mismatch. The opposition contends that bilingual education is illogical in its implication that less English instruction will lead to more English achievement. It makes more sense, the opponents argue, to provide language-minority students with maximum exposure to English.

Despite the apparent plausibility of each assumption, these two conventional wisdoms (the “linguistic mismatch” and “insufficient exposure” hypotheses) are each patently inadequate. The argument that language-minority students fail primarily as a result of a home/school language switch is refuted by the success of many minority students whose instruction has been totally through a second language. Similarly, research in Canada has documented the effectiveness of “French immersion programs” in which English-background (majority-language) students are instructed largely through French in the early grades as a means of developing fluent bilingualism. In spite of the home/school language switch, students’ first-language (English) skills develop as well as those of students whose instruction has been totally through English. The fact that the first language has high status and is strongly reinforced in the wider society is usually seen as an important factor in the success of these immersion programs.

The opposing “insufficient exposure” hypothesis, however, fares no better with respect to the research evidence. In fact, the results of virtually every bilingual program that has been evaluated during the past fifty years show either no relationship or a negative relationship between amount of school exposure to the majority language and academic achievement in that language (Baker & de Kanter, 1981; Cummins, 1983a, 1984; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984). Evaluations of immersion programs for majority students show that students perform as well in English academic skills as comparison groups despite considerably less exposure to English in school. Exactly the same result is ob-

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2 For a discussion of the implications of Canadian French immersion programs for the education of minority students, see California State Department of Education (1984).
tained for minority students. Promotion of the minority language entails no loss in the development of English academic skills. In other words, language-minority students instructed through the minority language (for example, Spanish) for all or part of the school day perform as well in English academic skills as comparable students instructed totally through English.

These results have been interpreted in terms of the “interdependence hypothesis,” which proposes that to the extent that instruction through a minority language is effective in developing academic proficiency in the minority language, transfer of this proficiency to the majority language will occur, given adequate exposure and motivation to learn the majority language (Cummins, 1979, 1983a, 1984). The interdependence hypothesis is supported by a large body of research from bilingual program evaluations, studies of language use in the home, immigrant student language learning, correlational studies of L1–L2 (second-language) relationships, and experimental studies of bilingual information processing (for reviews, see Cummins, 1984; McLaughlin, 1985).

It is not surprising that the two conventional wisdoms inadequately account for the research data, since each involves only a one-dimensional linguistic explanation. The variability of minority students’ academic performance under different social and educational conditions indicates that many complex, interrelated factors are at work (Ogbu, 1978; Wong Fillmore, 1983). In particular, sociological and anthropological research suggests that status and power relations between groups are an important part of any comprehensive account of minority students’ school failure (Fishman, 1976; Ogbu, 1978; Paulston, 1980). In addition, a variety of factors related to educational quality and cultural mismatch also appear to be important in mediating minority students’ academic progress (Wong Fillmore, 1983). These factors have been integrated into the design of a theoretical framework that suggests the changes required to reverse minority student failure.

A Theoretical Framework

The central tenet of the framework is that students from “dominated” societal groups are “empowered” or “disabled” as a direct result of their interactions with educators in the schools. These interactions are mediated by the implicit or explicit role definitions that educators assume in relation to four institutional characteristics of schools. These characteristics reflect the extent to which 1) minority students’ language and culture are incorporated into the school program; 2) minority community participation is encouraged as an integral component of children’s education; 3) the pedagogy promotes intrinsic motivation on the part of students to use language actively in order to generate their own knowledge; and 4) professionals involved in assessment become advocates for minority students rather than legitimizing the location of the “problem” in the students. For each of these dimensions
of school organization, the role definitions of educators can be described in terms of a continuum, with one end promoting the empowerment of students and the other contributing to the disabling of students.

The three sets of relationships analyzed in the present framework — majority/minority societal group relations, school/minority community relations, educator/minority student relations — are chosen on the basis of hypotheses regarding the relative ineffectiveness of previous educational reforms and the directions required to reverse minority group school failure. Each of these relationships will be discussed in detail.

Intergroup Power Relations

When the patterns of minority student school failure are examined from an international perspective, it becomes evident that power and status relations between minority and majority groups exert a major influence on school performance. An example frequently given is the academic failure of Finnish students in Sweden, where they are a low-status group, compared to their success in Australia, where they are regarded as a high-status group (Troike, 1978). Similarly, Ogbu (1978) reports that the outcast Burakumin perform poorly in Japan but as well as other Japanese students in the United States.

Theorists have explained these findings using several constructs. Cummins (1984), for example, discusses the “bicultural ambivalence” (or lack of cultural identification) of students in relation to both the home and school cultures. Ogbu (1978) discusses the “caste” status of minorities that fail academically and ascribes their failure to economic and social discrimination combined with the internalization of the inferior status attributed to them by the dominant group. Feuerstein (1979) attributes academic failure to the disruption of intergenerational transmission processes caused by the alienation of a group from its own culture. In all three conceptions, widespread school failure does not occur in minority groups that are positively oriented toward both their own and the dominant culture, that do not perceive themselves as inferior to the dominant group, and that are not alienated from their own cultural values.

Within the present framework, the dominant group controls the institutions and reward systems within society; the dominated group (Mullard, 1985) is regarded as inherently inferior by the dominant group and denied access to high-status positions within the institutional structure of the society. As described by Ogbu (1978), the dominated status of a minority group exposes them to conditions that predispose children to school failure even before they come to school. These conditions include limited parental access to economic and educational resources, ambivalence toward cultural transmission and primary language use in the home, and interactional styles that may not prepare students for typical teacher/student interaction patterns in school (Heath, 1983; Wong Fillmore, 1983). Bicultural ambivalence and less effec-
tive cultural transmission among dominated groups are frequently associated with a historical pattern of colonization and subordination by the dominant group. This pattern, for example, characterizes Franco-Ontarian students in Canada, Finns in Sweden, and Hispanic, Native, and Black groups in the United States.

Different patterns among other societal groups can clearly be distinguished (Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, in press). Detailed analysis of patterns of intergroup relations go beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note that the minority groups characterized by widespread school failure tend overwhelmingly to be in a dominated relationship to the majority group.3

Empowerment of Students
Students who are empowered by their school experiences develop the ability, confidence, and motivation to succeed academically. They participate competently in instruction as a result of having developed a confident cultural identity as well as appropriate school-based knowledge and interactional structures (Cummins, 1983b; Tikunoff, 1983). Students who are disempowered or “disabled” by their school experiences do not develop this type of cognitive/academic and social/emotional foundation. Thus, student empowerment is regarded both as a mediating construct influencing academic performance and as an outcome variable itself.4

Although conceptually the cognitive/academic and social/emotional (identity-related) factors are distinct, the data suggest that they are extremely difficult to separate in the case of minority students who are “at risk” academically. For example, data from both Sweden and the United States suggest that minority students who immigrate relatively late (about ten years of age) often appear to have better academic prospects than students of similar socioeconomic status born in the host country (Cummins, 1984; Skut-

3 Ogbu (1978), for example, has distinguished between “caste,” “immigrant,” and “autonomous” minority groups. Caste groups are similar to what has been termed “dominated” groups in the present framework and are the only category of minority groups that tends to fail academically. Immigrant groups have usually come voluntarily to the host society for economic reasons and, unlike caste minorities, have not internalized negative attributions of the dominant group. Ogbu gives Chinese and Japanese groups as examples of “immigrant” minorities. The cultural resources that permit some minority groups to resist discrimination and internalization of negative attributions are still a matter of debate and speculation (for a recent treatment, see Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, in press). The final category distinguished by Ogbu is that of “autonomous” groups who hold a distinct cultural identity but who are not subordinated economically or politically to the dominant group (for example, Jews and Mormons in the United States).

Failure to take account of these differences among minority groups both in patterns of academic performance and sociohistorical relationships to the dominant group has contributed to the confused state of policymaking with respect to language-minority students. The bilingual education policy, for example, has been based on the implicit assumption that the linguistic mismatch hypothesis was valid for all language-minority students, and, consequently, the same types of intervention were necessary and appropriate for all students. Clearly, this assumption is open to question.

4 There is no contradiction in postulating student empowerment as both a mediating and an outcome variable. For example, cognitive abilities clearly have the same status in that they contribute to students’ school success and can also be regarded as an outcome of schooling.
nabb-Kangas, 1984). Is this because their L1 cognitive/academic skills on arrival provide a better foundation for L2 cognitive/academic skills acquisition, or, alternatively, because they have not experienced devaluation of their identity in the societal institutions, namely schools of the host country, as has been the case of students born in that setting?

Similarly, the most successful bilingual programs appear to be those that emphasize and use the students’ L1 (for reviews, see Cummins 1983a, 1984). Is this success due to better promotion of L1 cognitive/academic skills or to the reinforcement of cultural identity provided by an intensive L1 program? By the same token, is the failure of many minority students in English-only immersion programs a function of cognitive/academic difficulties or of students’ ambivalence about the value of their cultural identity (Cohen & Swain, 1976)?

These questions are clearly difficult to answer; the point to be made, however, is that for minority students who have traditionally experienced school failure, there is sufficient overlap in the impact of cognitive/academic and identity factors to justify incorporating these two dimensions within the notion of “student empowerment,” while recognizing that under some conditions each dimension may be affected in different ways.

**Schools and Power**

Minority students are disabled or disempowered by schools in very much the same way that their communities are disempowered by interactions with societal institutions. Since equality of opportunity is believed to be a given, it is assumed that individuals are responsible for their own failure and are, therefore, made to feel that they have failed because of their own inferiority, despite the best efforts of dominant-group institutions and individuals to help them (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984). This analysis implies that minority students will succeed educationally to the extent that the patterns of interaction in school reverse those that prevail in the society at large.

Four structural elements in the organization of schooling contribute to the extent to which minority students are empowered or disabled. As outlined in Figure 1, these elements include the incorporation of minority students’ culture and language, inclusion of minority communities in the education of their children, pedagogical assumptions and practices operating in the classroom, and the assessment of minority students.

**Cultural/linguistic incorporation.** Considerable research data suggest that, for dominated minorities, the extent to which students’ language and culture are incorporated into the school program constitutes a significant predictor of academic success (Campos & Keatinge, 1984; Cummins, 1983a; Rosier & Holm, 1980). As outlined earlier, students’ school success appears to reflect both the more solid cognitive/academic foundation developed through intensive L1 instruction and the reinforcement of their cultural identity.
Included under the incorporation of minority group cultural features is the adjustment of instructional patterns to take account of culturally conditioned learning styles. The Kamehameha Early Education Program in Hawaii provides strong evidence of the importance of this type of cultural incorporation. When reading instruction was changed to permit students to collaborate in discussing and interpreting texts, dramatic improvements were found in both reading and verbal intellectual abilities (Au & Jordan, 1981).

An important issue to consider at this point is why superficially plausible but patently inadequate assumptions, such as the “insufficient exposure” hypothesis, continue to dominate the policy debate when virtually all the evidence suggests that incorporation of minority students’ language and culture into the school program will at least not impede academic progress. In other words, what social function do such arguments serve? Within the context of
the present framework, it is suggested that a major reason for the vehement resistance to bilingual programs is that the incorporation of minority languages and cultures into the school program confers status and power (jobs, for example) on the minority group. Consequently, such programs contravene the established pattern of dominant/dominated group relations. Within democratic societies, however, contradictions between the rhetoric of equality and the reality of domination must be obscured. Thus, conventional wisdoms such as the insufficient exposure hypothesis become immune to critical scrutiny, and incompatible evidence is either ignored or dismissed.

Educators’ role definitions in relation to the incorporation of minority students’ language and culture can be characterized along an “additive-subtractive” dimension. Educators who see their role as adding a second language and cultural affiliation to their students’ repertoire are likely to empower students more than those who see their role as replacing or subtracting students’ primary language and culture. In addition to the personal and future employment advantages of proficiency in two languages, there is considerable, though not conclusive, evidence that subtle educational advantages result from continued development of both languages among bilingual students. Enhanced metalinguistic development, for example, is frequently found in association with additive bilingualism (Hakuta & Diaz, 1985; McLaughlin, 1984).

It should be noted that an additive orientation does not require the actual teaching of the minority language. In many cases a minority language class may not be possible, for reasons such as low concentration of particular groups of minority students. Educators, however, communicate to students and parents in a variety of ways the extent to which the minority language and culture are valued within the context of the school. Even within a monolingual school context, powerful messages can be communicated to students regarding the validity and advantages of language development.

Community participation. Students from dominated communities will be empowered in the school context to the extent that the communities themselves are empowered through their interactions with the school. When educators involve minority parents as partners in their children’s education, parents appear to develop a sense of efficacy that communicates itself to children, with positive academic consequences.

Although lip service is paid to community involvement through Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) in many education programs, these commit-

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5 The terms additive and subtractive bilingualism were coined by Lambert (1975) to refer to the proficient bilingualism associated with positive cognitive outcomes on the one hand, and the limited bilingualism often associated with negative outcomes on the other.

6 PACs were established in some states to provide an institutional structure for minority parent involvement in educational decisionmaking with respect to bilingual programs. In California, for example, a majority of PAC members for any state-funded program was required to be from the program target group. The school plan for use of program funds required signed PAC approval.
tees are frequently manipulated through misinformation and intimidation (Curtis, 1984). The result is that parents from dominated groups retain their powerless status, and their internalized inferiority is reinforced. Children’s school failure can then be attributed to the combined effects of parental illiteracy and lack of interest in their children’s education. In reality, most parents of minority students have high aspirations for their children and want to be involved in promoting their academic progress (Wong Fillmore, 1983). However, they often do not know how to help their children academically, and they are excluded from participation by the school. In fact, even their interaction through L1 with their children in the home is frequently regarded by educators as contributing to academic difficulties (Cummins, 1984).

Dramatic changes in children’s academic progress can be realized when educators take the initiative to change this exclusionary pattern to one of collaboration. The Haringey project in Britain illustrates just how powerful the effects of simple interventions can be (Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 1982). In order to assess the effects of parental involvement in the teaching of reading, the researchers established a project in the London borough of Haringey, whereby all children in two primary-level experimental classes in two different schools read to their parents at home on a regular basis. The reading progress of these children was compared with that of children in two classes in two different schools who were given extra reading instruction in small groups by an experienced and qualified teacher who worked four half-days at each school every week for the two years of the intervention. Both groups were also compared with a control group that received no treatment.

All the schools were in multiethnic areas, and there were many parents who did not read English or use it at home. It was found, nevertheless, to be both feasible and practicable to involve nearly all the parents in educational activities such as listening to their children read, even when the parents were nonliterate and largely non-English-speaking. It was also found that, almost without exception, parents welcomed the project, agreed to hear their children read, and completed a record card showing what had been read.

The researchers report that parental involvement had a pronounced effect on the students’ success in school. Children who read to their parents made significantly greater progress in reading than those who did not engage in this type of literacy sharing. Small-group instruction in reading, given by a highly competent specialist, did not produce improvements comparable to those obtained from the collaboration with parents. In contrast to the home collaboration program, the benefits of extra reading instruction were least apparent for initially low-achieving children.

In addition, the collaboration between teachers and parents was effective for children of all initial levels of performance, including those who, at the beginning of the study, were failing in learning to read. Teachers reported that the children showed an increased interest in school learning and were better behaved. Those teachers involved in the home collaboration found
the work with parents worthwhile, and they continued to involve parents with subsequent classes after the experiment was concluded. It is interesting to note that teachers of the control classes also adopted the home collaboration program after the two-year experimental period.

The Haringey project is one example of school/community relations; there are others. The essential point, however, is that the teacher’s role in such relations can be characterized along a collaborative-exclusionary dimension. Teachers operating at the collaborative end of the continuum actively encourage minority parents to participate in promoting their children’s academic progress both in the home and through involvement in classroom activities. A collaborative orientation may require a willingness on the part of the teacher to work closely with mother-tongue teachers or aides in order to communicate effectively, in a noncondescending way, with minority parents. Teachers with an exclusionary orientation, on the other hand, tend to regard teaching as their job and are likely to view collaboration with minority parents as either irrelevant or detrimental to children’s progress.

Pedagogy. Several investigators have suggested that many “learning disabilities” are pedagogically induced in that children designated “at risk” frequently receive intensive instruction that confines them to a passive role and induces a form of “learned helplessness” (Beers & Beers, 1980; Coles, 1978; Cummins, 1984). This process is illustrated in a microethnographic study of fourteen reading lessons given to West Indian Creole speakers of English in Toronto, Canada (Ramphal, 1983). It was found that teachers’ constant correction of students’ miscues prevented students from focusing on the meaning of what they were reading. Moreover, the constant corrections fostered dependent behavior because students knew that whenever they paused at a word the teacher would automatically pronounce it for them. One student was interrupted so often in one of the lessons that he was able to read only one sentence, consisting of three words, uninterrupted. In contrast to a pattern of classroom interaction that promotes instructional dependence, teaching that empowers will aim to liberate students from instruction by encouraging them to become active generators of their knowledge. As Graves (1983) has demonstrated, this type of active knowledge generation can occur when, for example, children create and publish their own books within the classroom.

Two major pedagogical orientations can be distinguished. These differ in the extent to which the teacher retains exclusive control over classroom interaction as opposed to sharing some of this control with students. The dominant instructional model in North American schools has been termed a transmission model (Barnes, 1976; Wells, 1982). This model incorporates essentially the same assumptions about teaching and learning that Freire (1970, 1973) has termed a “banking” model of education. This transmission model will be contrasted with a “reciprocal interaction” model of pedagogy.
The basic premise of the transmission model is that the teacher’s task is to impart knowledge or skills that she or he possesses to students who do not yet have these skills. This implies that the teacher initiates and controls the interaction, constantly orienting it toward the achievement of instructional objectives. For example, in first- and second-language programs that stress pattern repetition, the teacher presents the materials, models the language patterns, asks questions, and provides feedback to students about the correctness of their response. The curriculum in these types of programs focuses on the internal structure of the language or subject matter. Consequently, it frequently focuses predominantly on surface features of language or literacy such as handwriting, spelling, and decoding, and emphasizes correct recall of content taught by means of highly structured drills and workbook exercises. It has been argued that a transmission model of teaching contravenes central principles of language and literacy acquisition and that a model allowing for reciprocal interaction among students and teachers represents a more appropriate alternative (Cummins, 1984; Wells, 1982).  

A central tenet of the reciprocal interaction model is that “talking and writing are means to learning” (Bullock Report, 1975, p. 50). The use of this model in teaching requires a genuine dialogue between student and teacher in both oral and written modalities, guidance and facilitation rather than control of student learning by the teacher, and the encouragement of student/student talk in a collaborative learning context. This model emphasizes the development of higher-level cognitive skills rather than just factual recall, and meaningful language use by students rather than the correction of surface forms. Language use and development are consciously integrated with all curricular content rather than taught as isolated subjects, and tasks are presented to students in ways that generate intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation. In short, pedagogical approaches that empower students encourage them to assume greater control over setting their own learning goals and to collaborate actively with one another in achieving these goals.

The development of a sense of efficacy and inner direction in the classroom is especially important for students from dominated groups whose experiences so often orient them in the opposite direction. Wong Fillmore (1983) has reported that Hispanic students learned considerably more English in classrooms that provided opportunities for reciprocal interaction with teachers and peers. Ample opportunities for expressive writing appear to be

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7 This “reciprocal interaction” model incorporates proposals about the relation between language and learning made by a variety of investigators, most notably in the Bullock Report (1975), and by Barnes (1976), Lindfors (1980), and Wells (1982). Its application with respect to the promotion of literacy conforms closely to psycholinguistic approaches to reading (Goodman & Goodman, 1977; Holdaway, 1979; Smith, 1978) and to the recent emphasis on encouraging expressive writing from the earliest grades (Chomsky, 1981; Giacobbe, 1982; Graves, 1983; Temple, Nathan, & Burris, 1982). Students’ microcomputing networks such as the Computer Chronicles Newswire (Mehan, Miller-Sousiney, & Riel, 1984) represent a particularly promising application of reciprocal interaction model of pedagogy.
particularly significant in promoting a sense of academic efficacy among minority students (Cummins et al., in press). As expressed by Daiute (1985):

Children who learn early that writing is not simply an exercise gain a sense of power that gives them confidence to write — and write a lot... Beginning writers who are confident that they have something to say or that they can find out what they need to know can even overcome some limits of training or development. Writers who don’t feel that what they say matters have an additional burden that no skills training can help them overcome. (pp. 5–6)

The implications for students from dominated groups are obvious. Too often the instruction they receive convinces them that what they have to say is irrelevant or wrong. The failure of this method of instruction is then taken as an indication that the minority student is of low ability, a verdict frequently confirmed by subsequent assessment procedures.

Assessment. Historically, assessment has played the role of legitimizing the disabling of minority students. In some cases assessment itself may play the primary role, but more often it has been used to locate the “problem” within the minority student, thereby screening from critical scrutiny the subtractive nature of the school program, the exclusionary orientation of teachers toward minority communities, and transmission models of teaching that inhibit students from active participation in learning.

This process is virtually inevitable when the conceptual base for assessment is purely psychoeducational. If the psychologist’s task is to discover the causes of a minority student’s academic difficulties and the only tools at his or her disposal are psychological tests (in either L1 or L2), then it is hardly surprising that the child’s difficulties will be attributed to psychological dysfunctions. The myth of bilingual handicaps that still influences educational policy was generated in exactly this way during the 1920s and 1930s.

Recent studies suggest that despite the appearance of change brought about by PL 94-142, the underlying structure of assessment processes has remained essentially intact. Mehan, Hertweck, and Meihls (1986), for example, report that psychologists continued to test children until they “found” the disability that could be invoked to “explain” the student’s apparent academic difficulties. Diagnosis and placement were influenced frequently by factors related to bureaucratic procedures and funding requirements rather than to students’ academic performance in the classroom. Rueda and Mercer (1985) have also shown that designation of minority students as “learning disabled” as compared to “language impaired” was strongly influenced by whether a psychologist or a speech pathologist was on the placement committee. In other words, with respect to students’ actual behavior, the label was essentially arbitrary. An analysis of more than four hundred psychological assessments of minority students revealed that although no diagnostic
conclusions were logically possible in the majority of assessments, psychologists were most reluctant to admit this fact to teachers and parents (Cummins, 1984). In short, the data suggest that the structure within which psychological assessment takes place orients the psychologist to locate the cause of the academic problem within the minority student.

An alternative role definition for psychologists or special educators can be termed an “advocacy” or “delegitimization” role. In this case, their task must be to delegitimize the traditional function of psychological assessment in the educational disabling of minority students by becoming advocates for the child in scrutinizing critically the societal and educational context within which the child has developed (Cazden, 1985). This involves locating the pathology within the societal power relations between dominant and dominated groups, in the reflection of these power relations between school and communities, and in the mental and cultural disabling of minority students that takes place in classrooms. These conditions are a more probable cause of the 300 percent overrepresentation of Texas Hispanic students in the learning disabled category than any intrinsic processing deficit unique to Hispanic children. The training of psychologists and special educators does not prepare them for this advocacy or delegitimization role. From the present perspective, however, it must be emphasized that discriminatory assessment is carried out by well-intentioned individuals who, rather than challenging a socioeducational system that tends to disable minority students, have accepted a role definition and an educational structure that makes discriminatory assessment virtually inevitable.

Empowering Minority Students: The Carpinteria Example
The Spanish-only preschool program of the Carpinteria School District, near Santa Barbara, California, is one of the few programs in the United States that explicitly incorporates the major elements hypothesized in previous sections to empower minority students. Spanish is the exclusive language of instruction, there is a strong community involvement component, and the program is characterized by a coherent philosophy of promoting conceptual development through meaningful linguistic interaction.

The proposal to implement an intensive Spanish-only preschool program in this region was derived from district findings showing that a large majority of the Spanish-speaking students entering kindergarten each year lacked ad-

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8 See Mullard (1985) for a detailed discussion of delegitimization strategies in anti-racist education.

9 Clearly, the presence of processing difficulties that are rooted in neurological causes is not being denied for either monolingual or bilingual children. However, in the case of children from dominated minorities, the proportion of disabilities that are neurological in origin is likely to represent only a small fraction of those that derive from educational and social conditions.
equate skills to succeed in the kindergarten program. On the School Readiness Inventory, a districtwide screening measure administered to all incoming kindergarten students, Spanish-speaking students tended to average about eight points lower than English-speaking students (approximately 14.5 compared to 23.0, averaged over four years from 1979 to 1982) despite the fact that the test was administered in students’ dominant language. A score of twenty or better was viewed by the district as predicting a successful kindergarten year for the child. Prior to the implementation of the experimental program, the Spanish-background children attended a bilingual preschool program — operated either by Head Start or the Community Day Care Center — in which both English and Spanish were used concurrently but with strong emphasis on the development of English skills. According to the district kindergarten teachers, children who had attended these programs often mixed English and Spanish into a “Spanglish.”

The major goal of the experimental Spanish-only preschool program was to bring Spanish-dominant children entering kindergarten up to a level of readiness for school similar to that attained by English-speaking children in the community. The project also sought to make parents of the program participants aware of their role as the child’s first teacher and to encourage them to provide specific types of experiences for their children in the home.

The preschool program itself involved the integration of language with a large variety of concrete and literacy-related experiences. As summarized in the evaluation report: “The development of language skills in Spanish was foremost in the planning and attention given to every facet of the pre-school day. Language was used constantly for conversing, learning new ideas, concepts and vocabulary, thinking creatively, and problem-solving to give the children the opportunity to develop their language skills in Spanish to as high a degree as possible within the structure of the pre-school day” (Campos & Keatinge, 1984, p. 17).

Participation in the program was on a voluntary basis and students were screened only for age and Spanish-language dominance. Family characteristics of students in the experimental program were typical of other Spanish-speaking families in the community; more than 90 percent were of low socioeconomic status, and the majority worked in agriculture and had an average educational level of about the sixth grade.

The program proved to be highly successful in developing students’ readiness skills, as evidenced by the average score of 21.6 obtained by the 1982–1983 incoming kindergarten students who had been in the program, compared to the score of 23.2 obtained by English-speaking students. A score of 14.6 was obtained by Spanish-speaking students who experienced the regular bilingual preschool program. In 1983–1984, the scores of these three groups were 23.3, 23.4, and 16.0, respectively. In other words, the gap between English-background and Spanish-background children in the Spanish-only preschool had disappeared; however, a considerable gap re-
mained for Spanish-background students for whom English was the focus of preschool instruction.

Of special interest is the performance of the experimental program students on the English and Spanish versions of the Bilingual Syntax Measure (BSM), a test of oral syntactic development (Hernandez-Chavez, Burt, & Dulay, 1976). Despite the fact that they experienced an exclusively Spanish preschool program, these students performed better than the other Spanish-speaking students in English (and Spanish) on entry to kindergarten in 1982 and at a similar level in 1983. On entrance to grade one in 1983, the gap had widened considerably, with almost five times as many of the experimental-program students performing at level 5 (fluent English) as other Spanish-background students (47% v. 10%) (Campos & Keatinge, 1984).

The evaluation report suggests that although project participants were exposed to less total English, they, because of their enhanced first language skill and concept knowledge, were better able to comprehend the English they were exposed to. This seems to be borne out by comments made by kindergarten teachers in the District about project participants. They are making comments like, “Project participants appear more aware of what is happening around them in the classroom,” “They are able to focus on the task at hand better” and “They demonstrate greater self-confidence in learning situations.” All of these traits would tend to enhance the language acquisition process. (Campos & Keatinge, 1984, p. 41)

Campos and Keatinge (1984) also emphasize the consequences of the preschool program for parental participation in their children’s education. They note that, according to the school officials, “the parents of project participants are much more aware of and involved with their child’s school experience than non-participant parents of Spanish speakers. This is seen as having a positive impact on the future success of the project participants — the greater the involvement of parents, the greater the chances of success of the child” (p. 41).

The major relevance of these findings for educators and policymakers derives from their demonstration that educational programs can succeed in preventing the academic failure experienced by many minority students. The corollary is that failure to provide this type of program constitutes the disabling of minority students by the school system. For example, among the students who did not experience the experimental preschool program, the typical pattern of low levels of academic readiness and limited proficiency in both languages was observed. These are the students who are likely to be referred for psychological assessment early in their school careers. This assessment will typically legitimize the inadequate educational provision by attributing students’ difficulties to some vacuous category, such as learning disability. By contrast, students who experienced a preschool program in which (a) their cultural identity was reinforced, (b) there was active collaboration with parents, and (c) meaningful use of language was integrated into
every aspect of daily activities were developing high levels of conceptual and linguistic skills in both languages.

Conclusion

In this article I have proposed a theoretical framework for examining minority students’ academic failure and for predicting the effects of educational interventions. Within this framework the educational failure of minority students is analyzed as a function of the extent to which schools reflect or counteract the power relations that exist within the broader society. Specifically, language-minority students’ educational progress is strongly influenced by the extent to which individual educators become advocates for the promotion of students’ linguistic talents, actively encourage community participation in developing students’ academic and cultural resources, and implement pedagogical approaches that succeed in liberating students from instructional dependence.

The educator/student interactions characteristic of the disabling end of the proposed continua reflect the typical patterns of interaction that dominated societal groups have experienced in relation to dominant groups. The intrinsic value of the group is usually denied, and “objective” evidence is accumulated to demonstrate the group’s “inferiority.” This inferior status is then used as a justification for excluding the group from activities and occupations that entail societal rewards.

In a similar way, the disabling of students is frequently rationalized on the basis of students’ “needs.” For example, minority students need maximum exposure to English in both the school and the home; thus, parents must be told not to interact with children in their mother tongue. Similarly, minority children need a highly structured, drill-oriented program in order to maximize time spent on tasks to compensate for their deficient preschool experiences. Minority students also need a comprehensive diagnostic/prescriptive assessment in order to identify the nature of their “problem” and possible remedial interventions.

This analysis suggests a major reason for the relative lack of success of the various educational bandwagons that have characterized the North American crusade against underachievement during the past twenty years. The individual role definitions of educators and the institutional role definitions of schools have remained largely unchanged despite “new and improved” programs and policies. These programs and policies, despite their cost, have simply added a new veneer to the outward facade of the structure that disables minority students. The lip service paid to initial L1 instruction, community involvement, and nondiscriminatory assessment, together with the emphasis on improved teaching techniques, has succeeded primarily in deflecting attention from the attitudes and orientation of educators who interact on a daily basis with minority students. It is in these interactions that stu-
Students are disabled. In the absence of individual and collective educator role redefinitions, schools will continue to reproduce, in these interactions, the power relations that characterize the wider society and make minority students’ academic failure inevitable.

To educators genuinely concerned about alleviating the educational difficulties of minority students and responding to their needs, this conclusion may appear overly bleak. I believe, however, that it is realistic and optimistic, as directions for change are clearly indicated rather than obscured by the overlay of costly reforms that leave the underlying disabling structure essentially intact. Given the societal commitment to maintaining the dominant/dominated power relationships, we can predict that educational changes threatening this structure will be fiercely resisted. This is in fact the case for each of the four structural dimensions discussed earlier.10

In order to reverse the pattern of widespread minority group educational failure, educators and policymakers are faced with both a personal and a political challenge. Personally, they must redefine their roles within the classroom, the community, and the broader society so that these role definitions result in interactions that empower rather than disable students. Politically, they must attempt to persuade colleagues and decisionmakers — such as school boards and the public that elects them — of the importance of redefining institutional goals so that the schools transform society by empowering minority students rather than reflect society by disabling them.

References


10 Although for pedagogy the resistance to sharing control with students goes beyond majority/minority group relations, the same elements are present. If the curriculum is not predetermined and presequenced, and the students are generating their own knowledge in a critical and creative way, then the reproduction of the societal structure cannot be guaranteed — hence the reluctance to liberate students from instructional dependence.


Discussions at the Symposium on Minority Languages in Academic Research and Educational Policy held in Sandbjerg Slot, Denmark, April 1985, contributed to the ideas in the article. I would like to express my appreciation to the participants at the Symposium and to Salder Alladina, Jan Curtis, David Dolson, Norm Gold, Monica Heller, Dennis Parker, Verity Safiullah Khan, and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas for comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Grant No. 431-79-0003), which made possible participation in the Sandbjerg Slot Symposium.