**Jim Cummins Demolishes NCLB’s Ideology and Practice**

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Two days before Jim Cummins stood behind the podium at the annual conference of the organization of California Teachers of Other Languages (CATESOL) in San Diego, the place buzzed about his coming appearance. Four standing ovations indicated that he did not disappoint.


*Jim Cummins*

No surprise. A treasured, no-nonsense voice in the world of second-language acquisition, during the past three decades, Cummins, now a professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, has touched the life of many an English as a second language teacher, inspiring thousands with a thoroughly grounded iconoclastic approach to the pedagogy of language. He has shattered myths, developed new theories and concepts, promoted innovations in the classroom, affected policy, and arguably done as much to shift the paradigm of language instruction as Noam Chomsky 20 years earlier did to shift scientific thought toward a paradigm of innate universal grammar.

Cummins is Canada Research Chair in Language and Literacy Development in Multilingual Contexts at the University of Toronto and a prolific author of books on second language learning and literacy development. His research has focused on the nature of language proficiency and second language acquisition with particular emphasis on the social and educational barriers that limit academic success for culturally diverse students. Recent books include *Literacy, Technology, and Diversity: Teaching for Success in Changing Times, Language, Power and Pedagogy, Negotiating Identities: Education for Empowerment in a Diverse Society, and Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education*?

In a simultaneously scathing and humorous talk, "I’m not just a coloring person," Cummins laid out a case that what is happening now in the schools is not science but ideology, with federal and state policies imposing a pedagogical divide in which "poor kids get behaviorism and rich kids get social constructionism." In practice, that means skills for the poor and knowledge for the rich. That ideologically based approach ignores and rejects research into the way students learn, particularly how they learn language and how to read, he said.

Cummins challenged educational practices resulting from federal No Child Left Behind legislation, with its emphasis on standardized tests and consequent teaching "to the tests," saying instructional approaches now being imposed are something that most in the audience wouldn’t want their own children to suffer. These approaches have, he said, more to do with teaching rats than humans. He urged his audience to reclaim good instruction with attention to the lessons of social constructionism instead of treating students with a behaviorist approach in which, as B.F. Skinner proved, even pigeons can be taught to play ping-pong.

"We have choices," Cummins asserted. "A lot of folks at higher levels in the hierarchy don’t want you to know that you have choices because the dominant model of school improvement that is being inflicted in many states as part of the No Child Left Behind reading-first approach is to impose what is viewed as a scientifically supported approach to instruction and to wipe out teacher choice, to make it as teacher-proof as possible."

In spite of an array of ideological and bureaucratic efforts to undermine teachers, he said, "we always have choices. Even when we’re not conscious we have choices, even when we’re teaching in constrained conditions, where our principals, our superintendents, our administrators, our coaches, are ensuring that we use choice in as limited way as possible, we’re always making choices." To make a positive difference under these circumstances, he said, "We need to make the choice to reclaim our identities as educators ..."

Comparing the research into instructional methods that work with what actually happens today in the schools, particularly in inner cities, it is "very clear," Cummins said, that the current approach in too many U.S. schools is 90% ideology and 10% science. Research is ignored, misunderstood, misinterpreted and distorted to favor that ideology.

Sprinkling the findings of researchers throughout his speech, Cummins repeatedly pointed out that when students’ identities are affirmed in the classroom, they feel comfortable investing their identities into the literacy activities and practices, and they learn more. When they are encouraged to share unique personal experiences, when use of their first language is not discouraged, when "decoding" techniques are not the end-all and be-all of instruction, when students feel they have a voice in the classroom and that people want to hear what they have to say, when "shared inquiry," "critical literacy," "grand conversations" and "social justice" are accepted parts of the teaching process, students learn better and become engaged with their own education. "I haven’t been able to find those terms in No Child Left Behind," he said.

How does NCLB fit into the pedagogical picture?

Bilingual and English learners are now part of the accountability map. "That’s the good news. ...That’s the end of the good news."

On the negative side, he lamented:

• standardized tests dominate curriculum and instruction; first language literacy is discouraged and undervalued;
• going against extensive research into reading, the NCLB focus is primarily on early reading (that is, "decoding");
• reading comprehension is neglected in the junior and intermediate grades, leading to fourth grade "slump." In effect, students don’t know what they are reading;
• there is no focus on the affective sphere or student identity in reading engagement, and for low-income and bilingual/ELL students, transmission approaches dominate to the exclusion of transformative approaches.

One problem with the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB is that many policymakers don’t want to change and "there is a lot of resistance to listening." In other words, it doesn’t seem to matter what the researchers who actually know something about instruction have to say.

Two causal factors underlie the assumptions behind NCLB and Reading First, both of them profoundly flawed and contradicted by researchers.

Causal factor 1 is students’ ineffective phonological awareness and phonics instruction, which Reading First advocates seek to remedy with a "systematic, explicit, intensive, sequential phonics instruction" and "direct instruction (pre-teaching) of vocabulary to promote reading comprehension." The drawback, Cummins argued, is that one of things the U.S. National Reading Panel "showed, which has been systematically fudged and distorted by folks who brought you Reading First, is that intensive phonics instruction – what they *call* intensive instruction – showed no positive effect on reading comprehension beyond the first grade for either low-achieving or normally achieving readers. ... For low-achieving kids, for normally achieving kids, any effects of phonics instruction washed out after grade one. That has not been broadly advertised by the Feds."

Causal factor 2 is a lack of accountability to obtain quality control, for which the NCLB-prescribed remedy is "tests, tests, tests."

Said Cummins, "Schooling has been reduced to the transmission of scripted skills and facts to the exclusion of inquiry, critical literacy, and social awareness. In schools across the country, instruction focuses relentlessly on teaching to the test. This is particularly the case in schools in low-income areas, which are considered most at-risk of failing to demonstrate ‘adequate yearly progress’." He cited an ESL Maryland public schools teacher who calculated that in the 2004-2005 school-year, English learners in a fifth-grade class took five different standardized tests, some of them more than once. The consequences? "During the course of the year," the teacher wrote, "my students missed 33 days of ESL classes, or about 18% of their English instruction due to standardized testing."

Classroom practices undertaken to deal with these causal factors are "absolutely at variance with what the research is telling us."

Just how far off the mark the NCLB’s behaviorist approach has taken us is apparent when "many of the reading programs being funded require that all children’s literature be removed from classrooms." The rationale is that if students are exposed to texts for which they haven’t been taught the phonics rules, they will figure out that spending so much time on such rules is useless. Phonics instruction is important, Cummins agreed, but it should not be done "in a mindless way" that ignores the research into its efficacy.

Cummins offered an alternative to the NCLB approach – under which more and more inner-city schools are failing every day. That alternative is school-based language planning which instructs along the lines of what the research has shown. Boiled down to its essentials, Cummins said, literacy attainment is directly related to literacy engagement. Such engagement requires participation, and effective participation requires that student identity is affirmed, which means first language learning should not be discouraged because "new understandings are constructed on a foundation of existing understandings and experiences."

His alternative focuses on a four-element approach: scaffolding meaning, activating prior knowledge and building background knowledge, affirming student identity and extending language in a way that uses the students’ first language.

One example of a technique for developing participation is the student identity text – a kind of "journal" that can be written, spoken, visual, musical or multimodal combinations of these, and which holds "a mirror up to the student in which his or her identity is reflected back in a positive light."

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