

Second Language Writing Practices, Identity, and the Academic Achievement of Children from Marginalized Social Groups A Comprehensive View

Shelley K. Taylor and Jim Cummins

Identity texts, literacy engagement, and multilingual classrooms: What do these terms mean and encompass, and how do they play out with today's highly diverse school-aged population, their teachers, and their families? The articles included in this volume of *Writing & Pedagogy* deal with the educational experiences of individuals from marginalized social groups, adding names and faces to individuals who teach and learn in multilingual classrooms. The latter term refers to classrooms that are multilingual by virtue of the large number of home languages spoken by students in these classrooms, home languages that are not the same as the language of instruction. The articles in this special issue illustrate how and why multilingual learners' literacy engagement, or personal investment in schooling, increases when teachers, peers, and their own parents view students' literacy productions positively. The term used for these productions or "texts" – be they written, spoken, visual, musical, or any combination thereof – is *identity texts* to emphasize that they express the learner's identity. Taken together, these articles offer readers a global view of the relationship between providing spaces that honor marginalized groups' languages and cultures, of why marginalized individuals invest themselves in those spaces, and of how such investment influences children's subsequent academic achievement. The contributors draw on Cummins' (2001; this volume) academic language learning and literacy engagement frameworks to capture, untangle, and illustrate the dialectical interplay and

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operational links between literacy engagement, identity texts, and marginalized students' academic achievement in multilingual classrooms.

This special issue builds on Baker and Hornberger's (2001) edited volume of Jim Cummins' theoretical contributions to the field of educational linguistics and a special issue of the *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* focusing on empirical studies influenced by Cummins' (2001) empowerment and academic language learning frameworks (Taylor and Sakamoto, 2009). As in the latter, Cummins' theoretical frameworks are applied in the contributions to this special issue though they play an even more central role in the present volume as all of the contributors either carried out their doctoral work under his supervision or drew significantly on his work in conceptualizing their own research. Both the articles centering on the academic language learning framework, and those centering on the literacy engagement framework support Cummins' (this volume) assertion that "broader patterns of societal power relations exert a major influence on educational outcomes." This assertion also underpins the research that Cummins and Early carried out in the context of a cross-Canada project focused on multiliteracies in education, the results of which were compiled in a recent volume on identity texts (Cummins and Early, 2011).

The impetus for the present special issue arose from the editor of *Writing & Pedagogy*, Prof. Martha C. Pennington, attending a colloquium that Shelley Taylor organized on April 5, 2008, at the TESOL convention held that year in New York City. Entitled "Identity Texts, Literacy Engagement and Multilingual Classrooms," the colloquium, which featured Jim Cummins and three contributors to this volume, focused on English language learners (ELLs) at the elementary level. The rationale for the colloquium was that identity texts enable teachers to develop children's knowledge, cognitive academic language proficiency (or CALP), and literacy – including American Sign Language (ASL) literacy. This rationale was based on the premise that ELLs unfamiliar with the English alphabet can still "read" "texts" (i.e. understand the discourses and meanings) in their homes and communities, and that teachers who acknowledge and value diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and multiliteracies encourage their students to engage with literacy. These arguments were developed in the colloquium presentations entitled:

- "Multilingual Identity Texts: Promoting Multilingualism, Engaging Students," by Sarah Cohen;
- "Mexican Multilingual English Teachers' Identity Texts: Challenging the Norms," by Mario E. Lopez-Gópar;

- “Developing American Sign Language Identity Texts,” by Kristin Snoddon; and
- “Framing Identity and Academic Learning,” by Jim Cummins.

Those presentations served as earlier drafts of the articles by Cohen, Lopez-Gópar, and Cummins that are included in this special issue of *Writing & Pedagogy*. Snoddon’s article on ASL literacy and identity for TESOL was published separately (Snoddon, 2010). Her contribution to this special issue focuses on using ASL texts to develop emergent literacy in young ASL/English bilingual learners and their parents in an early childhood education setting. Jim Cummins’ talk at the TESOL 2008 convention provided a framework for the articles of these other authors as does his article in this volume.

The original colloquium papers are supplemented by two application-type articles by Shelley K. Taylor and Vasilía Kourtis Kazoullis. Both articles describe case studies investigating writing practices designed to produce creative texts that challenge existing power structures by virtue of the identity affirmation which the practices entail. The book reviews by Vickie Wai Kei Li and Dawn Fyn included in this special issue focus on youth engagement in out-of-school writing practices, and cutting edge approaches to teaching second language writing.

As noted, the goal of this volume is to explore in depth the relationship between identity texts, literacy engagement and multilingual classrooms. A key theme that arises is the issue of identity as counter-discourse. As Cummins (this volume) argues, the act of focusing on identity issues in marginalized social groups goes against the norm, and therefore constitutes a counter-discourse in and of itself. That is, if the norm is to set policy and engage in pedagogical practices based on assumptions rather than research findings, putting faces and names to individuals can counter the status quo. To go further and construct minority groups and their children as individuals with great promise counters a thread of discourse that constructs minority groups and learners as *problems*. Seen in this light, identity texts themselves constitute a form of counter-discourse as they enable marginalized social groups to create representations of themselves, which is empowering (Denzin, 2005; Smith, 2002; Taylor, this volume). As such, identity texts shift who has the power to define a situation or group, and whose definition is seen, heard and valorized.

A related theme is how teacher-student and peer-peer identity negotiation in the classroom influences whether marginalized students feel valued in their learning situations and exert their autonomy by investing themselves (affectively, socially, culturally, and academically) in their learning. The articles address how students’ (lack of) investment in particular learning

situations relate to whether the situations preserve or damage their sense of ethnic pride and self-worth. While the self-preservation mechanisms of distancing themselves or disengaging from (potentially damaging) learning environments may protect marginalized learners' sense of ethnic pride and self-worth, these same mechanisms can lead to academic underachievement and elevated student dropout rates.

The same forces that cause students to disengage can influence them when they become student teachers or parents. This theme plays itself out in the present volume in terms of teacher agency or teachers' ability to decide whether or how to orchestrate inclusive classroom practices, which Cummins (this volume) refers to as "pedagogies of choice." It also plays itself out in terms of what parents from marginalized groups (e.g. Aboriginal¹ or Deaf parents) can do to overcome the damaging situations they experienced earlier in life by creating better situations for their own children.

A special issue of a journal that adds faces to names, identifying marginalized "Others," also constitutes a counter-discourse. This discourse is important at a time when the adage "numbers speak" is commonly accepted, but infrequently challenged. This volume looks beyond the numbers to the processes underlying student investment in learning. It illustrates that more is involved in understanding the academic (under-)achievement of marginalized multilingual students than (stereotypical) categorizations and statistics devoid of contextualization. The ways the contributors approach the task of deconstructing damaging beliefs, and the roles that writing and pedagogy play in their research are described next, beginning with a Featured Essay and three research articles included in the Research Matters section, followed by two application style articles in the Reflections on Practice and From the e-Sphere sections, and concluding with two New Books reviews.

The first article is the **Featured Essay**, "Identity Matters: From Evidence-Free to Evidence-Based Policies for Promoting Achievement among Students from Marginalized Social Groups," by Jim Cummins. In the **Research Methods** section, the first article, by Sarah Cohen, is "Making Room for Identity in Second Language Writing: The Promise and Possibilities of Dual Language Identity Texts." This is followed by Mario E. López-Gopar, Ángeles Clemente, and William Sughrua's article, entitled "Co-creating Identities through Identity Texts and Dialogical Ethnography." The final article in this section is "Action Research with a Family ASL Literacy Program" by Kristin Snoddon. The themes of counter-discourses and pedagogies of choice that provide space for multilingual learners (and student teachers) to negotiate their identities in the classroom in ways that

lead to greater engagement with literacy are clear in the Featured Essay and in each article in the Research Matters section.

Cummins' featured essay highlights the fact that policies intended to reduce the academic achievement gap between "haves" and "have nots" have ignored the relationship between identity (texts), literacy engagement, and multilingual students' academic achievement. He argues that this omission is a major reason why these policies have failed to reduce the achievement gap in any significant way. To clarify the relationship between student identity and academic achievement, he presents the Literacy Engagement framework, and illustrates how and why this explanatory framework captures factors chronically overlooked by policy-makers – factors that hinge on the sorts of power differentials that shape relationships in multilingual classrooms. Cummins argues that the evidence does not support the implementation of policies devoid of an identity focus. He posits that activities based on the literacy engagement theory and policies which support their implementation can play a role in promoting achievement among students from marginalized social groups. These themes are explored in the remaining articles of the special issue.

Cohen's case study research documents the teaching practices of two elementary school teachers that made it possible for them to *write* their multilingual students' identities *into* the literacy curriculum. Her research illustrates how writing can be conceived of as a site for identity negotiation and language learning. She draws on classroom observations, student interviews, and analyses of their dual language writing (or identity texts) from the perspective of how literacy engagement theory plays out in the choices these teachers make and the extent to which the multilingual students invest themselves in the learning situation.

López-Gopar, Clemente, and Sughrua focus on how and why student teachers in a Mexican BA TESL education program utilize *bilingual identity texts* and *dialogical ethnography* to counter pervasive (yet discriminatory) beliefs about who can be an ESL teacher. Their research challenges existing power relationships and asserts the legitimacy of multilingual identities. The methods employed in this study included analyzing two student teachers' identity texts, two autobiographies and related collages, interviews with all four participants, and an analysis of their written reflections.

Snoddon investigated a rare cultural space for Deaf parents and children and an environment for Deaf literacy programs. Seen thus, the ASL Parent-Child Mother Goose Program in which she conducted ethnographic action research constituted a counter-discourse in and of itself. The program counters prevailing pathologizing medical discourses on Deafness by focusing on ASL, emergent ASL literacy, bilingualism and Deaf bilingual education, and Deaf identity. The study involved thirteen Deaf and hearing

parents, infants, and a program leader. Snoddon conducted open-ended and structured observations, semi-structured and focus group interviews, and document analysis.

Shelley K. Taylor's **Reflections on Practice** article is entitled "Identity Texts as Decolonized Writing: Beyond the Cowboys and Indians Meta-Narrative." The **From the e-Sphere** contribution is by Vasilisa Kourti Kazoullis: "Internet-based Sister Classes and Writing." Vickie Wai Kei Li and Dawn Fyn review the following **New Books**: *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media* by Mizuko Ito and a host of other authors, and Susan Kasten's edited volume, *Effective Second Language Writing*.

Taylor's reflection on practice applies the themes of how identity negotiation in the classroom influences students' investment in learning, and writing as counter-discourse to a book-writing activity for Aboriginal adults. Schooled at a time of damaging learning environments in which the identities reflected back to them in curricular materials led to negative self-representations and disengagement from schooling, the Aboriginal adults participated in a book writing session for their children. Using ancestral languages formerly forbidden in school settings, the books which the parents wrote created positive identity texts for their children.

Kourti-Kazoullis' article is an application of the theme of how greater identity negotiation in the classroom and online (in this case, in sister class activities conducted on the Internet) can influence student investment in learning situations. Her case study research crosses second and foreign language settings, countries, and time frames: foreign and second/heritage learners of Greek and English, elementary and tertiary students in Greece, Canada, and Australia, and pre- and post-Web 2.0. Kourti-Kazoullis' case studies support her claim that effective pedagogy rather than technology alone is the key to student investment in language learning.

The book which Li reviews highlights important information about adolescents' out-of-school writing engagement and digital identities that has emerged in recent studies. Based on a three-year ethnographic study synthesizing twenty-eight case studies, the book provides a snapshot of the daily routines of adolescents who are digital natives. They routinely engage with new media and writing outside of school. The book divides this engagement along thematic lines rather than by different digital practices. Common themes across the new media include friendship, intimacy, family, gaming, creative production, and work. This view into adolescent worlds of engagement can inform teachers' pedagogical choices.

Fyn's review contribution deals with a collection of articles on writing in a second language. The book is divided into sections ranging from designing writing tasks to academic and professional writing to critical writing,

primarily with a focus on adult learners in post-secondary institutions. The ideas it presents for incorporating technology in second language writing classroom would work well for tech-savvy teachers. Overall, the topics covered in this edited volume lend themselves both to teachers of adult learners and K-12 teachers interested in making the necessary modifications to suit a wide range of language learners' writing needs.

Taken together, all of the articles in this special issue provide readers with cutting-edge theoretical, practical, and situated overviews of specific aspects of writing and the teaching of second language writing and other "texts." These articles span different age groups, roles (parent, student teacher, learner), and second languages (English, ASL, Aboriginal languages) of marginalized social groups. They also illustrate the connection between in- and out-of-school "texts" in the development of second-language writing. It is the editors' and contributors' hope that these articles will further conversations among readers interested in advancing the theory and practice of writing pedagogy across different contexts and educational systems.

Note

- 1 In this special issue, the term "Aboriginal" is used – rather than the more commonly used term "indigenous" – as the Canadian government uses the term "Aboriginal" to encompass peoples of First Nations, Métis and Inuit backgrounds (Government of Canada, Statistics Canada, 2007).

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