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Coercive vs. Collaborative Relations

Explanation of the Cummins' Model

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In his book *Language, Power, and Pedagogy* (2000), Cummins explains that there are certain coercive power relations between dominant and subordinated groups within the wider society that directly influence pedagogical spaces within our classrooms. As educators, we always have a choice in how to orchestrate our classroom interactions regardless of institutional constraints. And with this choice comes an ethical responsibility and a pedagogical opportunity. Cummins' coercive and collaborative relations model is based in a simple motto, "*human relationships are at the heart of schooling*" (p. 40). It helps us understand the complex and dynamic nature of teacher-student relationships within the classroom considering the larger context educational institutions and society and what impact these factors may have on the behavior and learning outcomes of individual students. Understanding this model may help educators see the options they have as they work within their students.

This reading will help you unpack the Cummins' model. Notice that there are two similar looking charts explaining the model. These

charts are identical except for the language they use. One chart uses researcher-oriented language, the other chart is directed at teachers. As you study the model and review these two charts, consider how the type of language used influences your learning of content and your learning of academic language. Consider the implications it may have for your work with English learners in your classroom. To help you see the charts side by side as you study this reading, you can right-click and view each chart in a new tab.

According to a study by Poplin and Weeres (1992), students report liking school best when people, particularly teachers, show that they care about the students. They hate being ignored, not being cared for, or receiving negative treatment. In harmony with this finding, teachers say their best experiences occur when they connect with students and are able to help them. Teachers also report that they do not always understand culturally diverse students, and therefore are not always able to help them. Teachers may feel isolated and unappreciated. In schools, no group felt adequately respected, connected or affirmed. These findings form the basis of the initial statement:

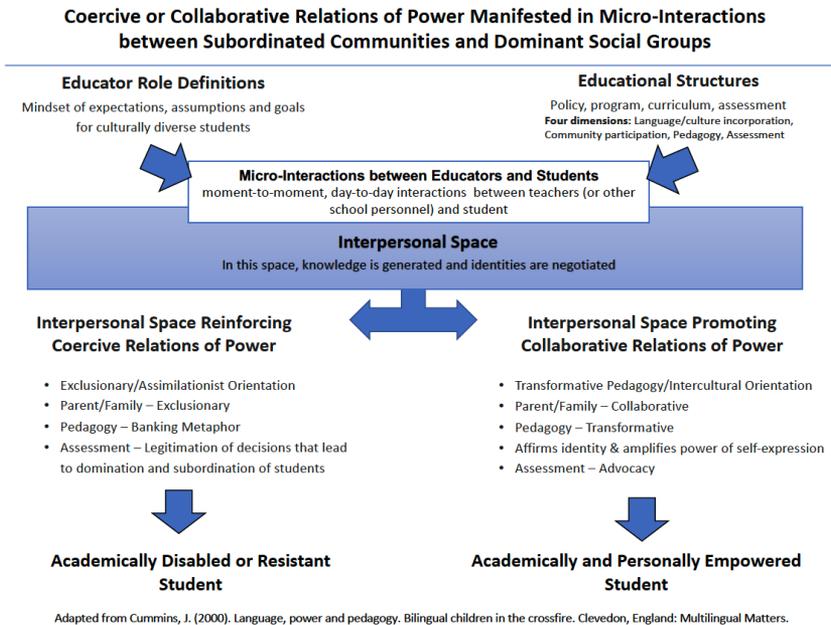
"Human relationships are at the heart of schooling."

Cummins' model (see Figure 1) begins with the phrase *Coercive & Collaborative Relations of Power Manifested in Micro-Interactions Between Subordinated Communities and Dominant Social Groups*. To understand the chart, we need to understand this phrase. It means that in the day-to-day, face-to-face contact in classrooms (*micro-interactions*) between teachers and students relationships develop that are either controlling, condescending or denigrating (*coercive*) or positive and supportive (*collaborative*). Classrooms are communities that reflect the social and cultural makeup of the community the

school draws from. This means that students and teachers in school classrooms are representatives of both the majority and minority groups within a community (*dominant social groups and subordinated communities*). The majority social group is present even in schools that draw from mainly minority populations because schools are an institution of the larger society, administered by it and therefore representative of it. Further, success in school is perceived as leading to success in society (*relations of power*).

Figure 1

Cummins' Model (Researcher-Oriented Description)



Cummins' model illustrates that teachers' and administrators' beliefs and assumptions (*educator role definitions*) about the abilities,

dispositions, and potential of minority students show up in the face-to-face, day-to-day contacts in schools and classrooms (*interpersonal space*). What also has an impact on those interactions are policies, practices, programs, and curriculum (*educational structures*). The policies and programs that shape the teacher-student interactions in a classroom center around the way in which language and culture show up in curriculum and school life, the ways in which the minority community participates with the schools in the education of their children, the appropriateness of the pedagogy used, and the purposes behind the use of assessment.

In describing what happens in the *interpersonal space*, Cummins reminds us that it is in that face-to-face interaction between adult and child or child and peer that children learn content but also about themselves—who they are and whether they are respected and valued.

He then posits two opposing ways of describing the classroom space. The first which relates to Coercive Power Relationships, he describes as *exclusionary* (practices that keep certain students from participating with the group or gaining any of the special privileges the group can offer) or *assimilationist* (practices that try to assert or make students whose backgrounds are different from the majority culture just like it). He outlines the characteristics of these classrooms: they communicate that parents are unwelcome (*exclusionary*); teachers use teaching practices that attempt to deposit knowledge into the student in the way we deposit money in banks (*banking metaphor*); tests, grades, and classification practices are used to justify the poor success rates of minority children (*legitimation*).

The second relates to Collaborative Power relationships. These he describes as *transformative pedagogy* (using teaching that helps students become bilingual, bidialectal, and bicultural) or Intercultural Orientation (values and respects the heritage, language, culture of

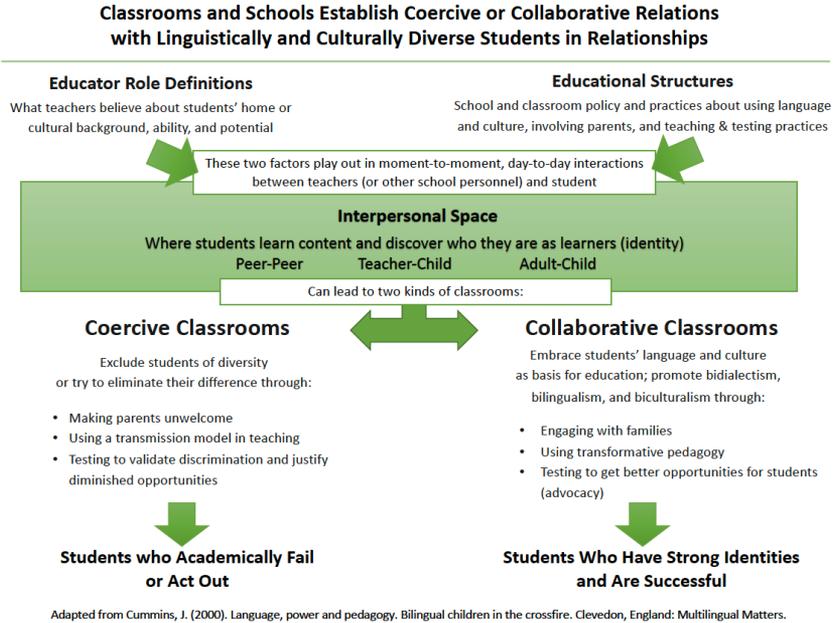
each child) (see Figure 2). He characterizes this classroom space as one where parents and teachers join together in the education of children (*collaborative*). Teaching practices always embrace the understanding, knowledge, and background of the student and then move their skills and knowledge forward (*transformative-affirms identity & amplifies power of self-expression*). Testing is used as a tool to demonstrate student learning and to garner new opportunities for students (*advocacy*).

The *coercive relations of power interpersonal space* results in students who fail, are misidentified as children with disabilities, or act out (*academically disabled or resistant students*). These students are those Ogbu identifies as caste minorities or involuntary minorities. Cummins reports work done in Canada (Wagner, 1991) that identified two kinds of illiteracy, called *Analphabétisme de minorité* (subordinated group illiteracy), evident in these groups. The first is the *illiteracy of resistance*, instituted by minorities who wish to safeguard their own language and culture and avoid assimilation. The group rejects the form of education imposed by the majority group and would rather be illiterate than risk losing its language. The group celebrates its own oral traditions and culture. The second is the *illiteracy of oppression*. This results from school practices that attempt to integrate minority groups by assimilation. These practices result in the slow destruction of identity and the means of the minority community to resist. Often minority group members become ashamed and see themselves, their culture, their heritage and language as less valuable, complex, or desirable because of interaction with the majority culture, language, and heritage.

The *collaborative relations of power interpersonal space* educates students who have strong identities, are academically successful, and are able to capitalize on the benefits of resources in both society and home cultures.

Figure 2

Cummins' Model (Teacher-Oriented Description)



Adapted with permission from:

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Teemant, A. & Pinnegar, S. (2007). *Understanding Language Acquisition Instructional Guide.* Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership.



Principles of Language Acquisition

Bohdana Allman



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