

research

EQUITY AND LITERACY ENGAGEMENT

Jim Cummins

Improving language and literacy learning in multilingual school contexts.

By focusing on English language learners' linguistic, cultural and intellectual assets rather than on their current limitations in English, Jim Cummins explores innovative ways of enabling students to engage with literacy.

Until recently, researchers, policy-makers, and educators have largely ignored the educational implications of a considerable body of research on language learning. The “two solitudes” model of bilingual education tries to keep the languages separate and isolated from each other. But students' first language is not the enemy. A more effective instructional approach brings the languages into contact, draws attention to where cognates exist and recasts deficits as accomplishments.

As the central component of this method, Jim has developed the use of bilingual “identity texts”. Students mobilize their home language resources and prior knowledge by using digital tools such as PowerPoint, iMovie and storytelling software to showcase their experiences and intellectual achievements. They take ownership of these artifacts as a result of having invested their identities in them. During this process, attention is also given to how identities are negotiated in teacher-student relationships. Teachers make use of common underlying proficiencies between the two languages and help connect a sense of self-image to literacy accomplishment.

Jim's future research challenges include linking his pedagogical insights with broader school improvement initiatives, and supporting teachers who are interested in exploring ways of developing the full range of students' linguistic and intellectual talents.

Jim Cummins is a Canada Research Chair in Language Learning and Literacy Development in Multilingual Contexts, a member of the Centre for Educational Research on Languages and Literacies and a professor in the department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning.



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