



Language Diversity and Education. Corson, David. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. 253 pp.

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David Corson provides ample evidence that standard ways of dealing with language diversity seriously disadvantage students who belong to language minorities. In order to increase social justice as well as learning in the classroom, he argues for a methodological shift from positivism to postmodernism. The former supports assimilationist language policies, whereas the latter encourages teachers to accept linguistic diversity as a valuable form of cultural capital—the main theme of his clearly written text aimed at beginning graduate students in education, anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

From our perspective, Corson does not adequately discuss the relationships among culture, language, and discourse. He subsumes all symbolic activity under discourse, but unequal power and resource sharing, even when evidenced in discursive practices, is not always amenable to language solutions. Corson advocates empowering students and communities to set their own goals, and to speak of the conditions that oppress them, but at times he casts them in rather passive roles. He describes children and adults as "continually renegotiating their subject positions and their identities within multiple and competing discourses" (p. 14), but in the next paragraph he asserts that "The discourse surrounding children teaches them who they are, what their place is in the world, and what they need to do to become autonomous and valuable citizens" (p. 14). We need to remember that autonomy is not a highly valued goal in all language communities.

Corson makes use of Foucault's concept of hegemonic discourses, and Bourdieu's notion that discourse competence constitutes a form of cultural capital. Students who do not acquire proficiency in the discourse strategies of the larger society are at a severe disadvantage. Diversity continues to exist nevertheless, and "can no longer be excluded from decisions about social and educational policies and practices" (p. 33). Corson cites R. Bhaskar when pointing out that social justice requires us to consider the interests of all groups through on-going consultation.

Corson recommends that speakers of minority languages and dialects be given every opportunity to become fully bilingual and bicultural, while acknowledging this is an impossible goal in situations of high diversity. People certainly need to be proficient



in the predominant language, but the language practices of minorities also need to be generally respected. In addition to documenting how educators harm students by rejecting the discourse norms of minority languages, Corson emphasizes the importance of viewing the standard variety of English used in schools as "appropriate" rather than "correct." The former characterization allows for effective teaching that begins from local language practices and moves toward proficiency in the standard variety of the larger society. The latter reinforces negative views of students who speak so-called incorrect varieties.

Corson reviews the latest research on classroom practices that (1) successfully incorporate students' language practices, or (2) fail to acknowledge such practices and thus impede learning. Best results are obtained when teachers understand the norms of the students and can help them acquire increased competence in multiple discourse strategies. Teachers must recognize when their expectations are incongruent with those of students, and understand the nature of these differences as well as their affects in the classroom.

Corson also cites research showing that teachers are often unaware of the ways in which they favor students who come to school already familiar with the dominant forms of discourse. He advocates changes in training teachers in order to raise their awareness and make them a force for change. In his review of the literature on bilingual education and English as a Second Language, including deafness, Corson highlights research that shows that supporting children's first language proficiency in the early years facilitates second language acquisition, and that learning more than one language may enhance certain cognitive functions. Corson then introduces the sensitive issue of gender differences in discourse strategies by broadly contrasting the competitive male with the cooperative female. His description of likely educational outcomes for girls and boys seems a bit simplistic. Girls will develop more "ligatures" and be happily ensconced in peer networks, while boys will take advantage of "options" to gain at the expense of others. In such a bifurcated world, immigrant girls "are often among the most vulnerable beings alive." However disadvantaged they may sometimes be, Corson's view of immigrant girls as the disempowered, passive, and communal "other" is an unfortunate stereotype.

To his credit, Corson does document the important effects of context on gender dynamics. He notes that the language of boys and girls is not very different when they act as caretakers, or when they adopt subordinate social roles. In order to mitigate the damaging affects of strong gender bias, Corson recommends that an ethos of mutual courtesy, respect, and noncompetitiveness be encouraged in the classroom. Some of his suggestions, such as singling immigrant girls out for special recognition, must be



used with care. In some societies, any direct acknowledgement of accomplishments would run counter to a general preference for more subtle and non-verbal acknowledgments, as Corson notes earlier for Navajo students.

In his preface, Corson promises the reader a clear, jargon free graduate text that is "thoroughly postmodern" (p. x). Except for an occasional overuse of popular perspectival and martial metaphors, his style is straightforward, and his ideas are provocative. Whether Corson consistently adopts a postmodern stance and remains "critically real" with respect to all the issues that he raises will be for his readers to judge.

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