

Group Work in International Schools: Examination of Individuals Identities Through Different Theories of Powers

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ABSTRACT

This literature review examined how power dynamics explain the different selves expressed during group work in the context of international schools. Using foundational theories from Bourdieu, Foucault, Weber, and Marx to explain the different dynamics of power during group work specifically in a multicultural setting. Selves that align with the dominant culture and have high status are recognized as legitimate leaders allowing themselves to express that self freely. Selves that lack status and cultural capital are suppressed to protect their overall influence and leadership of other selves. Each theory explains the relationship between the self and group work participation differently. When comparing and contrasting the four different theories together, this interaction is best explained through Bourdieu's theory of power, as it links both cultural identity, legitimacy and social hierarchy. The paper advises further investigation into whether students of the dominant culture participate more eagerly, directly due to systematic power imbalances.

INTRODUCTION

Group work has many different dynamics at play, allowing different people to have varying amounts of power. Individuals align their behavior to the norm because hierarchy and status define which identities are accepted. This results in individuals suppressing and expressing different selves. They strive to show different parts of themselves which would be most accepted by the group in order to maximize their own participation during group work. This research paper will focus on how power imbalances during group work encourage identities with more acceptance and authority while suppressing identities that lack those qualities. Understanding the connections between these factors matters because there has been a growing number of international schools but not enough research including how power dynamics shape individuals identity differently. The diverse and complex relations in an international school setting makes it a valuable setting for study. Since this is a complex relation including dynamics from both individuals and groups, this paper will use both sociology and psychology. By using theories of power from Sociology, this paper will analyze the psychology behind why students may sometimes suppress or express certain

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selves. Together with this interdisciplinary approach, the literature will compare Bourdieu, Foucault, Weber, and conflict theory to explain that power dynamics shape which identities are shown. Identities that align with the cultural, social, and academic interests of the group are more beneficial when expressed, while other identities are suppressed that do not align.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

International schools have cultural diversity with students and teachers from all around the world. This allows an interesting dynamic in which certain foreigners could have both a high or low level of power depending on the dominant culture in the school. The dominant culture is the culture that is predominantly used such as English or the parent country's native language. Parent country meaning the country that the school is located in. International schools also have a defining factor which is the use of a dominant language that could be different from the parent country. Since International schools have different ethnicities and cultures, students are able to have greater power by aligning with the school culture and norms by expressing certain identities that exaggerate those qualities.

Sedghi and Rushworth (2017) found that when asking both foreigners and local students about their view on multicultural group work, they both thought that they had a positive benefit to their productivity, management and inclusivity. Jensen (2025) on the other hand argued that students interact mostly with peers of the same race even when in a mostly mixed class. They also found that students who were in the ethnic majority were usually the leaders and dominated the group even if a student from the ethnic minority were more competent, they stayed in inferior positions. Even though the dominant language may be English the dominant culture may be different preventing a more diverse mix in friends. Other studies found that racial hierarchy is not fixed.

Abacioglu (2023) indicates that the effects found prior can be fixed through greater heterogeneity in a classroom. Classrooms with more diversity had better peer relations and behavioral impact compared to classrooms with less diversity. This supports the idea that if students create more meaningful relationships, they can promote more meaningful connections to allow inclusivity and prevent undermining students who are just as competent. Without these strong connections minorities would be suppressed or hidden.

Van Ryzin (2020) further exemplifies these effects by showing the effect of an effective classroom explained in the study before. Students of color performed similarly to white students when working in successful group work conditions while students of color without them continued to have racial disparity in academics.

All of these studies show that leadership, dominance and silence in group works are shaped through societal interactions. Students will constantly shape their identity to match the groups to maintain leadership and dominance. Depending on the group, multicultural students may constantly switch

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between different languages. With many cultures there could be multiple different identities for each group.

IN-GROUPS

In-groups and out-groups have a big impact during group work, as they could cause vastly different experiences for the people involved. Ashcraft and Treadwell (2008) defined the term in-group as “whom you, as a person, belong, and anyone else who is perceived as belonging to that group,” while out group is defined as “anyone who does not belong to your group”. People have a natural tendency to feel more belonging and trust towards students of their own in-group, while having less trust and belonging for peers in the out-group.

(Poort 2020) found using a questionnaire that students who experienced trust had the most positive correlation with engagement in group work. This means that students who felt the members of their group were part of their in-group would engage more, allowing an increase in productivity.

However, this can be complicated as status in a group has a direct impact on the intensity of aggression. When there is a bigger competition for the top of the status the aggression increases (Pattiselanno 2015). Even if they are part of your in-group, you can still feel aggression and disconnect when there is competition for the top spot in a group. Students could show a more dominant identity to maintain their power by showing aggression. Meanwhile, students who are lower in status or lose status in the group may have a more guarded or reserved identity. By standing out less, they can prevent further decline in status. Trust is not the only factor that would influence engagement in group work.

(Jensen 2025) shows that in-group formation usually occurs among students of the same culture, while mixed students have a higher chance of having a more diverse in-group. This could be due to cultural differences and language differences that would be barriers to creating a sense of belonging.

During group work, students may express more open and dominant identity when the group has members who are part of their in-group, as they feel more trust and belonging. Meanwhile, they would be more reserved if the majority were an out-group to stop judgment and disregard from other members.

BOURDIEU: CULTURAL CAPITAL

One theory of power that I will be focusing on is Bourdieu's theory of power. Bourdieu (1986/2024) explains that there are 4 forms of capital that each individual has, which are economic, social, cultural, and symbolic. People are able to have varying levels of power due to individuals having unequal spread of these capitals. The most important for this paper is cultural capital, which focuses on features like language, background, and skills. People who are able to speak English or are from the dominant culture will have the most power. This theory shows that power is based more on capital possessed rather than

effort. For example, if English is the predominantly spoken language in a group, no matter how much effort you put into mastering Korean, it will be less effective than for someone who speaks English because it is their native language. What matters is the cultural context of the group. Even people who are smarter or more informed on the topic of the assignment could be undermined due to a lack of communication skills, which is a lack of capital. With that in mind, students with cultural capital which align with the group will have identities expressing dominance, allowing them to have leadership roles. Students whose cultural capital does not align may suppress their identity and settle for lesser roles regardless of their potential for contribution. Misalignment results in suppression because their cultural capital and status are not recognized as legitimate.

FOUCAULT: DOMINANT DISCOURSE

Another theory of power is Foucault's theory of power. Foucault (1975/2020) focuses on the view that power is not held by one person and is all around us. The amount of power people have is ever changing as they interact with different people. He also emphasizes that knowledge is directly impacting power, but needs to be applied with dominant discourse. Dominant discourse means speaking in a way that other members of the group would respect and value as legitimate. People who are able to speak their knowledge using the correct speech that fits the context of the group is able to gain the most amount of power. This theory explains why some ideas may be accepted more depending on the person rather than the validity of the information itself. Students would express identities that are able to communicate the most effectively with the group in order to convey their ideas and beliefs. They will have to suppress certain identities that would decrease their validity in their ideas. This will allow them to effectively convey and protect their ideas.

WEBER: LEGITIMACY AND LEADERSHIP

Weber. M (1971/2019) explains that his theory of power focuses on the legitimacy of the person. People need to be accepted by the majority of the group that they are reliable or are the most fitting of a leadership position. Power is given by the group's belief that a person has the right to lead. This legitimacy can come from charisma, rules, and public image. Power comes from the shared idea that a person has legitimacy and, therefore, their ideas are valid. People who are seen as leaders would be able to express their ideas openly without suppressing their identity. Students without validity would have to suppress their identity and instead yield to the leader of the group, as their leadership is not acknowledged.

CONFLICT: COMPETITION

Conflict theory views society as a competition where individuals compete for the limited resources in the world. Marx (1848/2019) explains that dominant groups control most of the resources, and the inferior group continues to engage to gain control over the resources. The role of a leader, grades, and recognition

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are all finite resources that groups might compete over. People are in constant competition for power in group work, working to maintain or gain control of the group. To do this, they need to communicate with those who are dominant, allowing them to maintain control and continue gaining the limited resources. Selves with less dominance are suppressed in order to survive in competition, which prevents getting any of the limited resources.

Most of these theories imply that people are able to have power due to the imbalance in certain factors. Bourdieu's theory suggests that the imbalances in forms of capital allow power, which also reaffirms the legitimacy of a person connecting to Weber's theory. Foucault's theory, however, focuses more on small interactions between people, allowing power to be continuously changing. While Bourdieu and Weber's theory of power may be more constant. The conflict theory also diverges in the way that, instead of focusing on individuals, it focuses on society itself and the bigger groups at play. These contrasting and connecting theories will explain how distinct versions of the self are suppressed or expressed.

HOW SELF BECOMES VISIBLE

People have many versions of themselves, and the version of the self they choose to show is the self they believe is the most socially accepted and recognized in the group. The version of themselves that is suppressed or expressed depends on the power dynamic in a group context. For example, students who use slang would switch to more professional and confident speaking during group work to receive validation in the classroom. Allowing the professional version of themselves to be expressed. Considering that this is in the context of an international school, the visible self is affected by cultural norms and power dynamics between cultures. Different power levels among cultures and norms shape which identities are legitimized and dismissed.

From Weber's theory of power, it has been explained that the legitimacy of the person is key to having power. Naturally, students more aligned with school norms and culture will have the most legitimacy among both teachers and students. Cohen (1982) found that even if tasks were not related to race, white students were more active and had more acceptance for their decisions. White people are viewed as the ethnically dominant and superior race, which allows them to gain influence and participation. Even though in the study, the students used in the research had similar characteristics, rather than skills, ethnicity had a greater basis for influence. This implies that students may gain pressure to align more with the dominant culture in order to gain influence and acknowledgement.

This is also connected to Bourdieu's theory of power. People with the most amount of cultural capital that is valued in the classroom have the highest power, allowing their identity to be openly expressed. Isserles and Dalmage (2000) define Bourdieu's theory as cultural capital obtained through experience, allowing them to "present oneself vis-a-vis relations of power" Page 160. This means that students who already have this cultural capital and ability are able to express their identity without suppression. Instead, other group members will suppress their identity to align with the dominant identity.

Foucault's theory of power shows how daily interactions give power to certain groups of power by making it into a norm. Jensen (2025) further explains how the ethnic majority students took leadership roles and dominated over ethnic minorities. Repeated patterns normalize the norm that people of the ethnic majority should take leading roles. This creates a system where only ethnic majorities can express their identity freely. Ethnic minorities will try to follow the cultural norms and use the language spoken by the majority.

From the perspective of conflict theory, students are in constant competition for scarce resources. Wang and Burton (2010) showed that students who had a collective identity salience worked better in groups and had leadership roles. While individual identity salience focusing only on themselves did not cooperate well with the group, preventing group harmony. Students need to express the identity that fits the group instead of only themselves, which allows them to lead and gain scarce resources.

The concept of in-groups and out-groups also shows that students who contain all of these powers are more easily accepted into the in-group of the group. Students who lack them are positioned as out-group members. To prevent themselves from becoming out-group members, students may feel pressured to imitate or adapt identities in order to be part of the in-group. This shows that in-group and out-group dynamics have a direct effect on the shaping of school identities.

HOW SELF BECOMES SUPPRESSED

Different amounts of power allow certain selves to be visible, but other selves are suppressed to prevent a lack or decrease of power. These selves are hidden when working in groups. This suppression of identity prevents exclusion, decrease in status and influence.

Bourdieu's theory of power explains that a student's identity, which lacks cultural capital, can lead to negative interactions during group work. This may be the students' identity and way of speech shaped by their own culture, but it could result in a decrease in members' evaluation of the person, as it does not fit their norms. Isserles and Dalmage (2000) explained that there is a secret curriculum in classrooms which are following classroom norms and rules in which students learn what kind of identity is expected of them. Students who do not follow these rules may be more susceptible to ostracization, suppressing the identity that caused it.

Weber's theory directly connects to this since students who lack cultural capital also lack legitimacy. Without legitimacy, other group members are less willing to follow or accept your ideas, preventing productive group work. Jensen (2025) found that ethnic minorities take inferior roles and "do not challenge ethnic majority children's authorities" page 12. This shows that students without legitimacy are forced to suppress their identity and take inferior roles even if they are similar in academic level and leadership skills. Blomquist (2009) shows this in a different view where they focus on code switching among students. They found that students strategically code-switch based on the situation. Students talk to

people of their own culture in their native language, while with other classmates they may use the dominant language. However, since group works have classmates of the majority, they need to use the dominant language, suppressing their ethnic identity.

These power differences have a direct effect shown through Foucault's theory of power. Students who stay quieter during group work may not be because of a lack of interest but because of the norm. Zhang (2025) showed that peer pressure was the highest predictor of silence in classrooms. Students may remain silent in response to repeated experiences of rejection of ideas due to a lack of validity. From the perspective of Bourdieu, rather than expressing their identity and losing even more cultural capital and legitimacy, staying silent allows them to preserve the little power they already have.

Conflict theory explains how students try to maintain the dominance that they already have. Just like how students stay silent to preserve some of the power they have. Pattiselanno (2015) showed that high status members of cliques use aggression in order to maintain their hierarchy. This also happens in group work, where students try to gain control. This use of aggression prevents members of low-status to express themselves comfortably. Suppressing their identity allows for less aggression from high-status members because the low-status members are no longer in competition for the top spot as leaders.

In-group and out-group dynamics also show that out-group members tend to suppress their identity. High status individuals may continue to show aggression to prevent competition from similar or lower-status people. Higher status may decrease or outcast individuals who challenge their status. By suppressing their identity, there would be a lesser possibility of this happening. Similarly, out-group members face a higher risk if they challenge the ideas of in-group members, putting them at a disadvantage if they remain in the out-group. They must either suppress or challenge the dominant, but with the latter being the majority, they are at a disadvantage. In international schools, out-group members are usually the ethnic minority, which causes themselves to silence themselves to prevent themselves from being perceived as a threat to their status from the dominant members. Among the four theories of power, Bourdieu's theory of power best explains the claim. This theory connects both cultural context, legitimacy, and dominance, and their effect on the suppression and expression of the self. While Weber only focuses on legitimacy and conflict theory in constant competition, Bourdieu connects both in their theory. They explain that there are constant competition for capitals causing power imbalances which allow legitimacy to some while others get less. Foucault also explains that knowledge and the way of speech are important, but these are connected to cultural capital, which is capital from knowledge and language. Bourdieu builds off of all of these theories, allowing all four of the theories to be intertwined with each other. His framework is the most clear and effective in viewing this, as it shows all the parts of the power dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This literature review has shown that the differing power dynamics shaped by cultural capital, legitimacy, and hierarchy shape which version of the self is shown during group work in an international high school classroom. According to Bourdieu, Foucault, Weber, conflict theory, and in-group/out-group power

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dynamics, students align their identity to the dominant culture and status while suppressing identities that prevent or misalign with it. Students whose identities are reinforced with power as legitimate are able to express their identities with less self moderation and adjustment in behavior. However, out-group members are forced to strategically suppress their identities in order to maintain their position without consequences from the rest of the group. However, not all parts of the identity are visible or suppressed, only parts that fit the group's context. Some parts that were suppressed could be more expressed in different groups since the dominant culture and language depend on the group members. International schools that pride themselves on their multicultural identities may be unintentionally suppressing the ethnic identities and pressure structurally to align with the dominant culture.

Some limitations are that international schools vary and have various dominant cultures, making experiences highly different. Although the mechanism would be the same the context could be different. For example, English could be the ethnic majority in one place, while the other has a completely different language as the dominant culture. Also, there is much empirical data on high school and higher education, but lacking for international schools. Furthermore, as this paper is a literature review, it lacks primary sources that may be crucial in proving the hypothesis.

Based on the findings, a hypothesis for future research would be that, in international high school group work, students with greater amounts of cultural capital will participate more, have leadership roles, and express ideas more easily during group work, while students with less capital will suppress participation due to imbalances caused by language, culture, and hierarchy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mentor Lawrenzo Howell for all of his support throughout the research paper.

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