

Creating Inclusive Classrooms Using Postcolonial and Culturally Relevant Literacy

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Abstract

This article provides an interesting look at how a group of South Asian Canadian young women take up issues of identity, identities, and identification as they interact with texts by racialized Canadian authors. When texts written by Canadian authors who also define themselves as belonging to ethnic minority groups (such as Dionne Brand, Wayson Choy, Joy Kogawa, Rohinton Mistry, and Shyam Selvadurai) are seen by Canadian high school students as novelty items, boring reads, or books which incite shame or embarrassment, it is critical that we as educators reconsider our role and influence on the reading experiences of students. To bring marginalized, racialized, and silenced Canadian stories into the centre of our literacy teaching demands responsible and purposeful disruption of familiar teaching methods, privileged curricula, and normalized learning structures. Through research with South Asian Canadian adolescent girls, it became evident that culturally relevant curricula and culturally responsive teaching were key to their engagement, inclusion and development of identity.

When texts written by Canadian authors who also define themselves as belonging to ethnic minority groups (such as Dionne Brand, Wayson Choy, Joy Kogawa, Rohinton Mistry, and Shyam Selvadurai) are seen by Canadian high school students as novelty items, boring reads, or books which incite shame or embarrassment, it is critical that we as educators reconsider our role and influence on the reading experiences of students. It is my understanding and conviction

through research with South Asian Canadian adolescent females in the greater Toronto area – research which is also about Canadian students and Canadian curricula – that texts produced by authors from marginalized and racialized backgrounds not be categorically and singularly labelled as multicultural or anti-racist literature. In other words, not all works produced by authors from marginalized and racialized backgrounds are multicultural or anti-racist in nature. It is not enough for the author to identify as or been seen as racialized; it is not enough for there to be brown skinned characters in the texts; that is not what makes a text culturally relevant and critical. It is essential that students begin to engage a diversity of Canadian experiences and read and hear that ‘these are our stories.’ It requires an educative stance that moves beyond novelty and specialty units on ‘others’ to reimagine itself as reflective and inclusive of a Canadian reality.

This research story begins with eighteen South Asian Canadian girls attending high school in a multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, and multifaith suburb of Toronto. These participants volunteered to be a part of an after school literacy program where we created, critiqued, and engaged a variety of literacy practices. The data show that these girls relied upon both their family literacy and school literacy in order to negotiate their identities through everyday encounters – how the everyday is experienced as a brown body, female, child of immigrants, and adolescent. Understanding one’s self in multiple ways is not fragmented, rather it highlights the complex ways meaning-making is possible at the intersections of family literacy, school literacy, and identity.

Through conversations with these students, their mothers, their English teachers and through an after school literacy club where the girls and I read and responded to a novel, short story, poetry, film, visual art, and cultural artefacts, I began to notice the empowerment and

impact of a curriculum informed by postcolonial theory, culturally relevant texts and literacies, and culturally responsive teaching strategies. Although initially there was some resistance by the girls to content that brought their familiar family literacy into the space of their school literacy, the outcome of the culturally relevant curriculum was one of enrichment, engagement, and greater sense of inclusion.

Differences between family literacy and school literacy parallel differences between family world and school world. Family literacy is an intergenerational sharing of cultural understandings in order to prepare children with social readiness. Jay (2001) writes that “family literacy refers to all the ways individual families use literacy to accomplish everyday tasks and routines as well as to maintain relationships with each other and the community” (2). Family literacy is largely shaped by family world value and belief systems, economic and employment welfare, educational levels, and health. In turn, family literacy affects these factors in the lives of individuals both within the family world and in the greater community.

School literacy is similarly about teaching and transmitting a cultural understanding for social readiness (often equated with ‘the real world’). Although the English curriculum in Ontario is designed to reflect Canadian and global diversity, it is still situated within and structured according to dominant socio-cultural traditions. Tsolidis suggests that schools are fundamental spaces for creating images and understandings of the national way, a common public domain (2). Acquiring dominant social literacy is a way of acquiring social capital – quotes that jingle in your pocket; authors and titles pressed on clean bills; themes, scenes, and symbols refracting the light. In this paper I argue that with this knowledge, we as educators must develop practices, programs and pedagogy that not only acknowledge, but also actively include

culturally relevant family literacies from the lives of racialized and marginalized students within our classrooms.

To bring marginalized, racialized, and silenced Canadian stories into the centre of our literacy teaching demands responsible and purposeful disruption of familiar teaching methods, privileged curricula, and normalized learning structures. Richardson (1991) still holds true, reminding us about the importance of questioning our familiar positions and epistemologies when she writes: “doubt that any discourse has a privileged place, any method or theory a universal and general claim to authoritative knowledge” (p. 173). By interrupting norms; posing questions to traditions; and experimenting with how, what, and who we teach in our classrooms, we as educators create spaces for broader presentation of Canadian experiences and, in turn, invite from students greater depth and diversity of personal engagement and representations. When the girls in my study read, watched, and heard about stories that were familiar to their lived experiences and unlike the dominant texts of their school literacies, they also read a freedom to respond viscerally inclusive of gendered, racialized, ethnic, sexed, and cultured aspects of their subjectivities. In other words, when the girls responded they did so using the paint brush of their lives to blur both family literacy and school literacy.

And so the girls liberate me to write more viscerally. I hear their voices here, at the beginning. Not in the shadow of pillars of a theoretical framework and methodology. They have something to say. The following comments reflect perspectives shared by student participants early in the research.¹ I had asked the girls if they had read any texts written by authors from South Asian backgrounds. One of the girls wondered if my question had something to do with South Asian Heritage Month. Another suggested that maybe I was asking a trick question

¹Data analysis and findings from the research are presented in the form of a novella. Excerpts from the novella are included in this paper.

because she knew that South Asian authors wrote “in other languages like Hindi and Urdu and stuff” but was fairly confident there “aren’t any South Asian authors who write in English.”

Jasmine, one of the central research participants,² shared that she saw a novel on display at the local public library and the author’s name sounded South Asian, to which the following responses were made:

“Ya, but miss, say I had seen that book and knew for a fact the author was Indian, I probably would have looked at the cover and maybe read the back, but that’s it. I’m not about to take it out. That’s just embarrassing,” Anjhali says.

“What makes it embarrassing?”

“People would just be like, ooh, Brown girl taking out a Brown book,” Anjhali explains.

“And it would just be more of the same preaching we get at home from our parents. Not like we need to read about it, too,” Manvir adds.

“I would probably flip through a couple of pages,” Nahla says, “but I don’t think it would be very interesting.”

Later, in the same session, Nahla added, “I think it’s important for us to have exposure to writing by Black, Asian, and Brown authors. It should be a part of what we read in high school.”

These students’ comments indicate that there is a disconnect between literacy they are exposed to in the home and school literacy. School literacy does not seem to name, include or account for texts by South Asian Canadian authors. However, data from this study and my earlier research from 2000, both found that family literacy was instrumental in how South Asian Canadian adolescents made meaning of themselves and their lives. If these understandings are

²The six central student participants are: Jasmine, Anjhali, Alia, Nahla, Manvir, and Dolly (pseudonyms).

abandoned in the classroom, then presumably students are relying on a narrower set of understandings and literacies for inclusion in school and academic setting. Moje (2000) refers to this act of separating literacy practices between academic and social contexts as “code switching” (p. 652). Moje (2000) explains that students code switch “between what they seemed to believe were acceptable topics and writing styles [at school] and what they believed were acceptable topics and writing styles [outside of school]” (p. 652). During my research when students did not feel as though they had to code switch and were instead actively bringing together both family literacy and school literacy for richer reading, writing, and interpretative events, I learned how complex, rich, and transformative their subjectivities and expressions of those subjectivities could be.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial Theory

The framework that informs this research is primarily drawn from postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory takes up, in very general terms, the relationships between the colonizers and the colonized. Spivak (1988) notes that the critique of imbalanced power relationships is not limited to the history and lasting effects of struggles between European empires and the societies they colonized, but also includes capital control and oppression of developing nations through globalization and transnationalism. Postcolonialism provides me with tools to better understand the relationship between place and racialization. The identities and literacies of South Asian Canadian girls, politicized by race, class, and gender, are absent, marginal and/or misrepresented from the dominant space of their high school. Unravelling the power and politics of classrooms and privileged literary texts, I began to hear the girls’ marginalized voices claiming a place in the middle (Barton, 1994, p. 71).

For me, postcolonialism orients itself to an enquiry of power where power is defined as “the possibility people have to fulfil their goals in spite of potential or actual opposition from people” (Isajiw, 1999, p. 110). Postcolonial critiques raise important questions about unequal distribution of power found in relations of colonization and globalization; patriarchy and class; economics and politics; society and culture (Bannerji, 2000, p. 4; Devereux, 2003, p. 179; Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, p. 38). The relationship between unequals, colonizer/dominant/majority and colonized/ marginalized/ minority, is shaped by historical and contemporary power structures; the dominant group determines the qualitative and quantitative participation of oppressed peoples (James, 1999, p. 197; Razack, 1998, p. 3). Unpacking assumptions about power and authority add a critical dimension to understanding lived experiences and expressions amongst the study participants.

Bhabha (1995) suggests the intervention of a “third space” as position, process, and/ or practice to disrupt the hierarchy, hegemony, and fixity of social and cultural structures (p. 208). The South Asian Canadian girls invited to participate in this research project could be thought to be occupying this third space – an inbetween space where they are not obligated to one culture or the other, one literacy or the other; rather, the girls are able to imagine and create more complex subjectivities. Bhabha (1995) identifies third space as a metaphor for discursive possibilities and the articulation of cultural difference (p. 208). It is an imagined meeting place of colonizer and colonized, where the space belongs to neither, and through communication new understandings and meanings are created (Leggatt, 2003, p. 115). Childs and Williams (1997) understand the third space to be constantly reinterpreting itself and “therefore ensures that cultural signs are not fixed but can be appropriated, rehistoricized, translated, and reread” (p. 142). The third space is constantly being redefined as associated cultures and relationships change and representation,

use, and interpretation of symbols shifts. Which words are chosen to communicate, what is heard, and how a statement is understood, illuminate the subjective of third space.

Literacy and Literacies

Kelder (1996) describes literacy as a way of thinking and engaging in different contexts, as opposed to a set of skills (p. 5). Kelder (1996) further elaborates that literacy is “a ‘culturally specific phenomenon’ [...which] cannot be separated from the social contexts and purposes in which it is practiced” (p. 5). Kirby and McKenna (1989) also argue that “without analysis of the social context, [...] literacy remains merely functional, enabling people to function within the status quo rather than allowing them to interact with and change society” (p. 16). Similarly, Wan (2000) writes, “what literacy is and how it is learned and used depend on many cultural factors” (p. 398). In other words, literacy is more than just the ability to read and write, produce and decipher a script; it is a purposeful activity of taking up the appropriate interpretation for each social and cultural context. Barton (1994) explains that normalized or accepted ways of interpreting and understanding texts/events in one culture may be unacceptable in a different situation or with a different group of people (p. 3). Different contexts, societies, and relationships will require different literacy practices for effective communication.

Considering literacy as social phenomenon substantiates the perspective that texts are culturally and contextually embedded and informed. Thus, when I speak of culturally relevant literacy it is with the intention of accounting for cultural positions in the meaning making, interpretation, and communication process. Meaning making that stands to be most relevant from one cultural awareness may be considerably different from another cultural position. Tapping into that which is relevant and central to the cultural positions of our students has the possibility of disrupting conventional literacy practices for greater engagement.

Street (1997) explains that new literacy studies introduced ‘social literacies’ to emphasize different social contexts and ways in which literacy is constructed (p. 47). If each context varies in terms of cultural norms, then as a social practice the literacy in each case would also be different, hence literacies. Barton (1994) writes that “how people use literacy is tied up with particular details of the situation, and that literacy events are particular to a specific community at a specific point in history” (p. 2). Therefore, family literacy and school literacy may be quite different, making it necessary for a person to take up multiple literacies, each corresponding to a specific social context. In this study, I looked specifically at school literacy and family literacy.

Literacy theorists and researchers such as Gee (1989), Gilbert (1992), and Street (1997) suggest that literacy impacts the construction of identity and presentation of self. How a person interacts in a situation as well as how that person interprets the situation, text, and self depend in part on the literacy she has internalized as socially, culturally, and historically appropriate (Gee, 1989, p. 19). Identity in this sense is constantly shifting, evolving, and becoming. Each person is a site of a complex identity and multiple literacies. Different ways of existing, communicating, and interpreting in different social and cultural situations is central to my inquiry of the relationship between literacy and identity.

Methods

The study took place in a high school in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse suburb in the Greater Toronto Area over a four month period in 2002-2003. Through presentations in English classrooms, I invited girls in senior grades (ten, eleven, twelve, and OAC³) to participate. Eighteen, adolescent girls who self-identified as second generation South

³OAC is an acronym for *Ontario Academic Course*. OAC was a part of the Ontario high school curriculum. OAC was also commonly referred to as grade 13. High school students could

Asian Canadian female students – or ‘Brown girls’ as they referred to themselves – volunteered to participate in the study.

In order to manage the number of students interested in participating, the girls were divided into two small groups – a Monday group and a Tuesday group. The students who agreed to participate would meet in after school group discussions. These students read and responded to a variety of texts written and created by South Asian authors and artists living in North America. During these group meetings, we would experiment with various writing practices, read literature, review films, look at art, listen to music, and engage in conversations that emerged out of these texts. By inviting the girls to collectively explore texts – poems, short stories, novels, movies – that query race, ethnicity, socio-cultural contexts, and places of participation, I was able to examine the impact of different literacies upon the interpretation that each participant was making of the text, self, and other. In addition to group discussions, each student participant was interviewed individually by me on three separate occasions. These individual interviews were opportunities to further discuss some of the issues that emerged during group discussions. Individual interviews were also an opportunity to speak more personally and candidly about family literacy and school literacy.

Two additional groups of participants were also involved in the study: (a) English teachers from the same high school as the girls who participated were invited to discuss the development of their school literacy programs, and (b) the female caregivers (mothers) of the girls who participated. Six English teachers participated and each teacher was interviewed once for approximately 45 minutes. Six mothers participated and each mother was interviewed once

graduate with a diploma after completing grade 12, but to pursue university studies in Ontario students were required to complete OAC. OAC curriculum no longer exists. 2002-2003 was the last academic year in which OAC was offered. That same year produced a “double-cohort” whereby grade 12 and OAC students graduated from high school at the same time.

for approximately 1 hour. From each I learned about literacy priorities at school and home, respectively. Finally, artefacts from my personal writing and reflective practices (such as journal entries, creative writing, and reader responses to texts) provided additional details and depth to the research process and findings.

Postcolonial and Culturally Relevant Literacy

Data analysis involved engaging in multiple readings of various texts that were used, created, or transcribed during data collection. This included transcripts from discussions, written responses, and notes from observations. Through discourse analysis I was able to analyze and interpret the texts not only in terms of the actual words written on the page, but to apply my knowledge of the literacies that surround the participants' lives and to read in between the lines of the text. Discourse analysis allowed me to bring in the meanings that participants gave to their texts and to search for additional meanings at the limits of their words and in the spaces where participants struggled (Patton, 2002, p. 116).

When reading Aujla (2000), I read of a third space; a context and text different from parents and different still from norms at school. Interrupting and wondering about the power and the space they occupy, the author invokes a postcolonial and culturally relevant reading of the text. With the girls participating in the study, I took up the following excerpt from Aujla (2000):

Angela: *What was your life like while you were growing up in an Indian family?*

Meena: There were no overnight trips, no sports participation, no entertainment, no movies, walks downtown, bowling. Things like ski trips were foreign to us. We were afraid to try such a thing. There was no career encouragement from our parents. The unwritten rules were there from day one. So many times we didn't even ask if we could participate in events or activities. I always felt as an outsider because of traditional ways - felt unloved because we were treated as prisoners, although today we understand it as traditional love, meaning that we were looked after very well in a traditional sense. (p.290)

Although sitting together, the girls read the above except independently, and quietly responded with flow writing – a practice of writing continuously for five minutes, capturing ideas that come to you in the moment. Six samples follow.

Dolly:

I always said to people who asked me what I wanted to be, "I will be an interior designer or an artist." One day my uncle sat me down and he said do you yourself with a future in the arts. He asked if I could make a living in the arts. I nodded no. This crushed my spirit, but also opened my eyes to the fact that in my culture a real job is one that involves being a doctor, engineer or accountant.

Anjali:

It gets confusing between the two worlds I live in. I'm growing up in Canada, but with a family and by people who have Sri Lankan values and beliefs. Our culture is vastly different from that of the one we live in. Sometimes it gets confusing on how I'm supposed to act. Sometimes it's hard to find the right balance. ~

Alia:

What is with everyone taking all the BS? Why doesn't anybody question anything? Everything in the South Asian culture is decided "is that's the way it stays. And the funniest part is, no one even knows, most of the times, why it is the way it is.

Jasmine:

Meena and her family reminded me of my family. Meena's parents told her and her siblings, do whatever you want after marriage, it's the same thing with my parents. My mom always lectures me about doing everything after marriage. For example she says, you can do, your eyebrows, cut your hair, wear make-up, all after marriage. I don't think my parents are wrong, but if they look at it from our view, they would see that being strict over these little things isn't right. I don't blame them, but all I ask is for a little freedom.

Manvir:

I feel that the entire boy is good and girl is bad belief is very stupid. My parents have always wanted a boy, too. I don't understand why because neither of my sisters or I have caused them any pain. I know that it's all about respect and "EIGIAT" but can't a boy bring dishonour to the family as well.

Nahla:

When a child is born, he is like unmodelled clay. As he grows up, parents mould the clay with values, beliefs and tradition. A person's habits, interest, attitude towards life, way of living is highly influenced by parental guidance. The fact always amazes me - that I am so strange, so different.

This introduction to reading South Asian Canadian literature written by Aujla and an invitation to respond while in a school space that normally excluded the voices of Angela and Meena (Aujla 2000) opened passionate, personal, and connected writing from actively engaged students. The writing then led to the equally impassioned discussion below:

"I don't have any brothers and people always look like they feel bad for our family. Stupid women at the Gurudwara [Sikh place of worship] always come up to my mom like they are mourning or something [...]," Manvir shared.

Dolly said, “My mom’s strict with some things, but she’s not that extreme about marriage. My parent’s big thing is that I go to university and become a professional – doctor, lawyer – that kind of thing. They want me to first get a degree and then they’ll think about marriage. I know they want the best for me and I don’t want to disappoint. You know, they make so many sacrifices for us.”

“You know the part about feeling like an outsider, that’s how I sometimes feel. Not just an outsider to Sri Lankan culture, but also an outsider to western culture,” Anjhali explained.

Nahla shared, “Our parents spend so much time teaching us what they believe and how we should behave. Also, just by example, we learn how girls are supposed to act and what guys are supposed to do. There are these expectations and assumptions that we’ll do things the exact same way, repeat the same pattern. I’m not saying that I won’t, but sometimes things feel so foreign to me. [...] I keep coming back to this story that my grandmother tells. Basically, if you try to put your feet on two boats, you will drown and never get across the river. So either stick with one or the other.”

“Shaping my eyebrows, cutting my hair and wearing make-up, my mom says that I have to wait until I’m married. Then I’m free to do what I want. I understand that my parents are just looking out for me and want me to be respectful, so I don’t say too much back to them,” Jasmine said.

Alia countered. “That’s what I just don’t get. My parents have told me that I’m not allowed to date, but that would never stop me. I’ve only been in Canada for four years and I stand up for myself. I don’t get it why people who have been here their entire lives walk around with their eyes closed.”

When the girls were asked what they thought about the Aujla (2000) except their verbal responses are informed, attentive and rich. They are keenly aware of the power they ought to, want to, and deserve to have. Yet, they are simultaneously aware of attempts to bind and muzzle that power. Negotiating a third space from which to speak that honours their complex existence is evident in the way they describe being misunderstood and not understanding those around them. We had this conversation collectively where the girls' words blurred and bumped into one another. This collective conversation created the safety of a third space where identities could be tested and articulated.

It may have been the case, once upon a time, when the social and cultural milieu of homes resembled the dominant social and cultural teachings and texts of school. With a more diverse Canadian population, this is no longer holistically true of Canadian society (Statistics Canada, 2006). Wan (2000) states that "the demographic shifts in today's schools require that teachers be prepared to teach children who are racially, culturally, and linguistically different from themselves" (p. 399). Barton (1994) states that curricula should be informed by what happens in communities and teachers need to be prepared "to change school practices where necessary" (p. 212). Pre-service and active teachers alike need to be taught how to reimagine teaching so that "cultural differences are recognized, legitimized, and bridged [so that] students may develop cross-cultural knowledge and ways of acting, feeling, valuing, and thinking" (Bloome, 1985, as cited in Wan, 2000, p. 399). The writings and conversations from the girls illustrate how stories critical to their being have been checked at classroom doorways. In the earlier excerpt from the girls' conversation, we heard "stupid women," "feeling like an outsider," "how we should behave," "you will drown," and "I'm free." In those words I hear excitement,

wonder, craze, and frustration— emotional fuel for rich and complex stories that emerge out of the landscape of their lives.

Li (2002) adds:

to build a cultural continuity between students' home and school learning experiences requires teachers not only to know who students are and how they live but also to bring their cultures to the classroom, that is, to involve students' families and their cultural communities in students' learning in school. (p. 177)

What Li describes is not a way of teaching *ethnic/ visible minority children*; it is a way of educating *Canadian children* to exist in a Canadian and global society. So for the girls in this study, race matters, ethnicity and culture matter, language matters, being Canadian matters. Purposefully including and taking up that which matters in the lives of students is being attuned to culturally relevant literacy. Erickson (1986) reminds us that teaching is only one aspect of creating an inclusive learning space (p. 120). The content of texts, social and cultural school environment, school mandate and ideology, and the extent to which families are welcomed into schools are amongst factors that would contribute to greater inclusivity in education.

Without purposeful consideration and inclusion of culturally relevant texts, students consciously and subconsciously exclude from their schooling experiences ways of knowing and understanding learned through family literacies. Barton (1994) also contends that “children tend to feel excluded when their own literacy practices are not valued by the school. Schools should investigate which community practices should be legitimated by integrating them into the classroom” (p. 212). Intentional or unintentional exclusion of a broad range of interpretative practices has the effect of narrowing and limiting possibilities for knowing the world and imposing a constructed hierarchy of knowledge.

When I continued to introduce to my participants texts written by Canadian authors who also identified as belonging to ethnic minority groups, their responses ranged from disbelief that such writings existed to discomfort that they would be seen reading a book that resembled their ‘otherness.’ For example, as we engaged more intimately with one such text, the novel *Tamarind Mem*,⁴ and read additional writings by similarly marginalized authors, the disbelief and discomfort were replaced with wonder and possibility – wonder about what other books existed that similarly discussed South Asian Canadian experiences that they had lived but had never before read; possibility that they too might be able to imagine their lives otherwise or be able to write their experiences and be heard or contribute their family literacy in a meaningful way inside the classroom. Textual awe, engagement and possibility are best illustrated with one of the participant’s own words. Manvir states: “Never before have I read a piece of writing by a South Asian author. I have almost read 40 pages of *Tamarind Mem* and I really like the story. I feel very proud reading this book. I like to read the little ‘South Asian’ words present in the story. I am so looking forward to completing the story and finding out more about the characters.”

Creating Inclusive Classrooms

I am intentional with my specificity for stating that teachings and classroom texts ought to take their cues from communities in which they are situated. In other words, the curriculum which is urgent and imperative for the girls in this study living in a suburb of Toronto with a strong South Asian Canadian population may not resemble either the same curricular concerns as a rural northern Ontario community or an Aboriginal community in eastern Ontario. It is vital

⁴*Tamarind Mem*, a novel written by Anita Rau Badami (1996), was selected for seminal use in the study because it is a young adult novel mindful of a South Asian audience, written by a South Asian Canadian woman, incorporates the positions and experiences of characters who move back and forth between South Asian and non-South Asian cultural spaces.

that Canadian students learn of their own, local, national, and global stories in a way that is multipronged and not hierarchical. We need to read that our stories matter and understand how they fit into the matrix of diverse realities.

Greene (1994) explains:

we know now that there are multiple realities, each contingent on distinctive modes of looking on and thinking about the natural and commonsense world. The consciousness of multiplicity also accompanies the discovery of what is called ‘multiculturalism’ or the heterogeneity of voices and backgrounds and heritages now confronting us in our own society. For one thing, this recognition has made it ever more difficult to assume the priority of a universalist, generalized, patriarchal world view. It has certainly made increasing numbers of people sensitive to alternatives in the worlds of aesthetics and the arts. (p. 504)

With a postcolonial lens, it is possible to imagine curriculum as a tool for exploring a diversity of voices through individual subjectivities, local literacies, and global knowledge. Erickson (1986) similarly writes that “effective teaching is seen not as a set of generalized attributes of a teacher or of students. Rather, effective teaching is seen as occurring in the particular and concrete circumstances of the practices of a specific teacher with a specific set of students ‘this year,’ ‘this day,’ and ‘this moment’ ” (p. 130). This approach of culturally responsive teaching implores dynamic and imaginative teaching that disrupts/interrupts conventions and power to take up the realities of students’ lives. So, although I argue for specificity in teaching, I do offer strategies for including marginalized groups and consciously considering subjectivity within high school English curricula. The strategies I suggest will neither be effective in every high school English classroom nor should they be seen as universally applicable in communities like the one at the

centre of my research; the strategies are meant to be hopeful and provocative in the analysis, development, and delivery of curricula.

Family literacy, in the cases of the student participants, always included a home language that was different than the English language spoken at school. These home languages were Tamil, Urdu, Hindi, or Punjabi. However, the home languages were not limited to strict usage of these four discourses, but instead became a blurring of one of these languages with English. Also incorporated into the conversations were slang, acronyms and expressions from electronic correspondences, and terms borrowed from another marginal language. Multiple ways of speaking and defining the world provide greater interpretive experiences for the speaker. Inviting key phrases and concepts from these additional literacies into English classrooms is an effective literary strategy. For example, when Jasmine's mother hurls her anger at Jasmine, it is the combination of languages that gives the full impact of her rage: "Thoo paida hotey hi mar kyon nahin gayee? Better still, Jasmine, yeh din dekhney ke pehle main mar kyon nahin gayee?' But you survived your birth and I am still alive to see this wickedness you have brought before my eyes."

Patton (2002) points out that "language organizes our world for us by shaping what we see, perceive, and pay attention to. The things for which people have special words tell others what is important to that culture" (p. 289). The "special vocabulary" of families, organizations, and communities emphasizes that which is considered important to a particular group (Patton, 2002, p. 458). The special languages of the participants in my study were evident in their situation-specific speech and writing, for example, code switching between MSN chat, talk amongst peers, and conversations with parents and teachers. For example, a text message that Alia received said "Mujhe tumse mohabbat hai. C U @ work." To which she responds:

“♡ U 2.” Context plays a determining role in the nature of literacy and language the girls took up because, as Eisner (1998) reminds us, language shapes meaning and “transforms our experience” (p. 28).

Beyond accepting different words, phrases, definitions, and interpretations in writing practices with my participants, such as list poetry, I made it a requirement of the assignment that these ‘other’ ways of speaking be actively included in the writing I would collect as part of my study data. This invitation gave the students licence to privilege the marginalized ways they speak themselves into the world and freedom to bring censored understandings into the centre of our school literacy (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000, p. 213). Infusing multiple languages into the English classroom was also achieved through selection and recommendation of readings – poetry, short stories, novels, responses to visual art and music – where the authors of published works embedded meaningful phrases from other languages that they spoke into their English writing. An example from Badami (1996) eloquently captures this infusion: “Make *puri*, make *aloo-dum!* And all in ten minutes if you please!” (48). Exploring the phenomena of language diversity, purpose, and use meets many expectations from the Ontario grade ten academic English curriculum. One expectation from this document is: “use knowledge of vocabulary and language conventions to speak, write, and read competently and effectively for a variety of purposes and audiences, using a level of language appropriate to the context.”

When there was purposeful focus on language diversity (e.g. Hindi and English in the same piece), the student participants began to query aloud and through their writing words that could be felt and understood in one of their languages, but not in another. For example, *bheendi* and *peeps* were best felt in these terms and seemed to lose essence and depth through translation (approximately, *okra* and *friends*). The girls also became curious about their given names (all of

South Asian ancestry) and the pseudonyms (all common Anglicized names) they had selected for themselves⁵. Reflecting on what they called ‘normal names’ (referring to Anglicized pseudonyms) and coming to their own interpretations of how hearing those names as ‘normal’ might actually be the part of a privileged discourse, illustrates some of the thoughtful and provocative discussions possible in an English classroom.

Another strategy I incorporated into the literacy work with students was to explore archetypes, storytelling, and myths across cultures and through time. I wanted the girls to recognize how cultures, literacies, and people were connected by often very similar storylines. Although the language, environment, and characters may be different from one regional story to another, the interpersonal challenges and intrapersonal conflicts were often woven with common threads. Searching through folk tales had the added emergent benefit of connecting students with parents and grandparents. When participants went in search of family and community stories, they turned to their elders and listened to their memories. These moments of listening and sharing gave voice to silent stories, privilege to different forms of knowing and learning, and let caregivers know that their teachings were valuable and held an important place in their child’s classroom.

Through popular stories, such as *Romeo and Juliet* (an English tragic love story) or *Heera Ranjha* (an Indian tragic love story), we were able to look at archetypes and emotions. We imagined what it might be like to feel the way Heera did, compared our will to that of Juliet, and discussed patterns between popular narratives. For example, characteristics of both Heera and Juliet could be read as weakness or determination, stupidity or strength, simple or resolute. We explored what in our experiences and readings lead us to interpret the characters as such. As

⁵Pseudonyms that the participants selected are different than the ones used in this paper.

well, we compared these traditional stories and characters to contemporary Bollywood and Hollywood films. The possibility for consistency, connection, and evolution in the lives and storylines of fictional characters provided material and orientation for discussions and assignments that investigated similar themes in the lives of students. Rather than include a long list of specific expectations from university preparation English curriculum documents which could be met by exercises on folktales, storylines, and archetypes, I will instead point out in summary form that the expectations call for an understanding of texts from different periods, expression of different perspectives and social values, and critical comparison with the reader's own values and ideas (Ministry of Education, 2000, pp. 13-21).

Another teaching strategy which I included with the students was devoting individual time and assigning independent writing projects to each of the girls. A personal relationship with each of the students allowed me to hear the dominant issues in their lives and suggest writing practices that would encourage deeper enquiry. Critical, personal, and independent study occurred primarily through reader response journals. Many of the discussions surrounding the group novel study of *Tamarind Mem* by Badami (1996) sparked individual journal writing where the girls struggled, clarified, reconsidered, or reiterated their perspectives.

As well, giving students texts to engage in small groups where their personal opinions were welcomed made the learning space more inclusive and thick with multiple voices. The medley of issues and opinions that arose during that time of talk left lingering ideas that were then expressed in response journals.

Furthermore, nonverbal communication – for example, where a girl chose to be silent or stared as if in disinterest or looked with trepidation – was also valued. Often that nonverbal communication was explained within a response journal. After a quiet, yet thoughtful, group

meeting, Anjali wrote briefly in her journal: “Sadness. Heartbreak. Happiness. My mother.” In those five words is a gripping story. The response journals, shared only between the writer and researcher, became spaces where the discussion continued. Each girl’s writing brought in meaning from her own lived experiences and family literacy. Some writings from response journals made their way into pieces that were developed and shared with peers also participating in the study. I would liken these shared pieces to works that could have been submitted for evaluation in formal English classroom settings. Again, I will not list specific curriculum expectations that could be met with this teaching strategy, but the abilities to work independently and critically and to develop communication skills are strongly stressed in university preparation English curriculum expectations (Ministry of Education, 2000, pp. 40-48)

The three previous samples of literacy strategies (inviting multiple languages into English classrooms and activities; exploring archetypes, storytelling, and myths across cultures and through time; and independent writing in the form of response journals) aided in students being able to experiment with language, voice, emotion, form, fiction and non-fiction. By interrupting normative patterns of teaching and learning and disrupting the myth of ‘who writes,’ together the girls and I created a curriculum that was most meaningful to their lives. Cajete (1994) supports the need for reciprocal and creative curricula, stating “teachers constantly adjust their models to fit their students and the changing realities of educating” (17).

Conclusion

One of the outcomes of my research is to offer suggestions as to how educators might reconceptualize their own definitions of English curricula and how curriculum documents might be interpreted and addressed in culturally relevant ways to meet the needs of students. High school English curriculum expectations currently offer flexibility to select and develop materials

which are student and community specific. Classrooms are not innocent, apolitical spaces with neutral books, discussions, and pedagogies; classrooms are affected by racial and ethnic constructions, gender and sex socialization, economic and class barriers, and home literacies of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476). These influences are part of the content of the hidden curriculum in our classrooms and schools. By deliberately taking up and unpacking the hidden curriculum content, places are transformed – reimagined – into spaces that swell and speak stories previously checked at the doorways of our privileged school rooms. Barton (1994) gives hope that “if teachers value marginalized literacies and literacy practices outside the educational domain, they will understand more about those children who reject school literacy” (p. 212). Questioning dominant discourses in our teaching practices and with our students leads to conversations, readings, and writings that have the potential to critically engage relevant and meaningful cultural content of the community in which schools are situated.

It is possible that when students feel as though they are able to voice marginalized ways of knowing in the classrooms, their voiced experiences would perhaps make for better communication within the classroom, greater understanding between the teacher and student, stronger dialogue between school and home, and better informed cross-cultural conversations. In an inclusive environment such as this, taking up postcolonial theory and culturally relevant literacy as part of critical and engaged discussions with students would be a salient and necessary part of the curriculum.

The written and verbal words of the girls in study attest to the fact that culturally relevant literacy and culturally responsive teaching have the potential to be valuable tools for educators in helping to empower marginalized learners; in providing educators with strategies for diversifying their curricula for greater inclusion; threading more marginalized stories into our emerging and

changing Canadian narrative; and demonstrating the political power of literacy in the lives of adolescent learners. Curricula, pedagogy, and educational practices that take up language and literacies most relevant to the lives of the learners, has the possibility for deeper engagement at school and at home. For many second generation South Asian Canadian adolescent students, reading and writing their family literacies within a school context provides the space to consider, critique, and creatively represent the stories that matter most.

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