Chapter 13
Kahani Literacy Project:
"Culturalized" Writing

Kalpana Mukunda Iyengar
The University of Texas at San Antonio, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on a community literacy project called the "Kahani" project, an approach to teaching diasporic Asian Indian American (AIA) children to write about and preserve their Indigenous (i.e., ethnic) Knowledge (Battiste & Youngblood, 2000). Language Arts curriculum in the US is predominantly Ameri-centric and limiting to children from minoritized communities, who come from complex and rich cultural backgrounds. The inclusive education questions the curriculum in schools for people from the non-mainstream communities. Educators who teach 'other people's children' (Delpit, 1990) have to be accountable to disrupt the established non-inclusive official pedagogical practices, especially in Language Arts. The Kahani Literacy project model hypothesizes that communal/collective writing is beneficial. Educators must create supportive learning opportunities for diasporic writers to engage in writing about their lived experiences and world view in a shared and social setting through dialogic conferencing.

CONTEXT

With few exceptions, literacy educators are mandated to follow a standardized curriculum based on the *canon*. Commonly with an over-representation of Euro-centric or Ameri-centric perspectives and experiences, texts from marginalized communities are excluded or neglected. Even when attempts are made to "multiculturize" the reading list or activities, the result is often a "single story" (Adichie, 2009) about an ethnic group or pedagogies that distance the students' of color from schooling. Research demonstrates that the experiences and epistemologies of minoritized groups are customarily excluded through more traditional approaches to Language Arts instruction (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing) (e.g., Alexander & Weekes-Bernard, 2017; Hays, 2011; Nishina, et al, 2019). The challenge to educators is the design of rigorous pedagogies that are culturally and linguistically inclusive for all learners (Kramsch, 1993; Valenzuela, 1999; Vaish, 2015).

The discussions in this chapter focus on any activity that contributes to Language Arts instruction for students who have a rich variety of cultural practices (e.g., oral traditions, religion) and linguistic proficiencies (e.g., languages, multilingualism). Because this chapter is informed by sociocultural theory, I explore literacy as it develops inside and outside of formal schooling. With the same understanding, I include those *modalities* that foreground systematized forms of communication beyond the linguistic modes (e.g., kinesic/dance [*Bharatanatyam],* visual/arts [Picture books], and tonal/music semiotic [*Carnatic*] systems) in order to facilitate culturally contextualized story writing.

It was advanced that diasporic, Asian Indian American children, through culturally mediated literacy activities, would develop deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage (Moll, 1992; Moll, et al., 1992; Moll 2019). Thematic analysis of their *Kahanis* (i.e., culturally situated narratives) revealed the incorporation of topics and experiences that highlighted and validated various aspects of Indic-centric traditions. Working within a cultural framework that privileges and ameliorates (versus disparages) the adolescents' writing manifested disinterred, deeply felt lived experiences that were absent in school curriculum. I also posit that these children, through engaging in collective, culturally mediated literacy activities, would:

1. Learn to honor their Indigenous Knowledge and
2. Develop deeper appreciation for their cultural heritage.

Thematic analysis (applying MacIntyre's Narrative Analysis) of their *Kahanis* (i.e., culturally situated narratives) revealed the incorporation of topics and experiences that highlighted and validated various aspects of *Indic* culture. The *Kahani* Project, culturally framed approach based on the NCTE Writing Workshop model (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1991; Ray, 2006), provided children with an opportunity to delve into topics they had deep first-hand knowledge about and the stories that the children wanted to share collectively in a safe space, where they were not exoticized or subjected to ridicule.

WRITING: CULTURAL BRIDGE

Educators are advised to integrate culturally efficacious literacy, especially while teaching writing. Educational institutions and school districts often make demands upon the time and topics that teachers may use in the classroom. For that reason, learners may experience writing as drudgery and "other focused." For far too many learners, writing is a solo activity to be tolerated, burdensome, and not enjoyed. Even those with the potential to be successful, creative writers may become bogged down with writing mechanics (e.g., grammar, syntax), far away topics that affirm their identities or cultures. While educators search for activities to increase their students' writing proficiencies, the same teachers are concerned with academic rigor and the dutiful preparation of the learner (Drake & Burns, 2004; Vatterott, 2015). In this chapter, I discuss a "culturalized" literacy experience designed to address the ethnic needs of diasporic Asian Indian American (AIA) children. Under the guise of the NCTE Writing Workshop model (2020), school-aged children between the ages of six and sixteen were invited to explore their lived experiences as bicultural, transnational individuals, in writing. The resulting narratives demonstrated the students' development as writers as well as efforts put forth to maintain their heritage languages and cultural practices, including religion, community values as well as cultural and performing arts. It was demonstrated that culturally-embedded writing experiences could mediate and contribute to literacy development and facilitate cultural preservation of diasporic learners.

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