

Cultural Literacy in Asian Indian American Students

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Abstract

The cultivation of ‘cultural literacy’ in students from multicultural backgrounds may occur outside schooling practices in the US due to curricular framing and a lack of interest in integrating cultural education at schools. ‘Cultural literacy’ warrants student participation and requires a conducive learning environment where multiethnic students can seek inspiration through exploration. The San Antonio Writing Project organizes literacy project called the *Kahani* Project, and it fosters creativeness and facilitates authentic expression of cultural funds of knowledge of Indian American students. Performing arts including dance and music engage Indian students and enable them to learn about their culture, heritage, and religion. The *Kahani* Project is culturally contextualized writing activity, where Asian Indian American students write about their generational practices that may not addressed in schools in the US. This qualitative study explores two narratives written for the *Kahani* Project. The study utilized Leiblich *et al.*, holistic content analysis to arrive at themes, categories, and meta categories. The findings revealed Indian students’ willingness to preserve their culture through writing about Indian dance and music. The second inference of this study was that Indian students’ heritage is neglected and excluded in US curriculum.

Key words : Asian Indian Students, Cultural literacy, Kahani Project, Dance and Music.

According to Hirsch (1987), cultural literacy is the capacity to comprehend and share confidently in a prearranged culture. The second-generation Indian students bring unique cultural background from their parents who are from India.

It is important to explore experiences that are inspiring to students who come from cultures that are different from the mainstream society in the US. The San Antonio Writing Project’s, *Kahani* Project is a platform for students of Asian Indian origin living in the US to learn to compose culturally framed narratives while negotiating their bicultural identities. Writing may seem constraining to diverse students who are required to write on topics that are not culturally relevant to them.

The *Kahani* project also teaches students from multicultural backgrounds to write narratives using the writing workshop model (Atwell, 1987). The founder of the *Kahani* Project with the help of the director of the San Antonio Writing Project

designed the curriculum for such the writers to learn to express about their culture, heritage, and religion through Indian performing art forms such as dance and music called *Bharatanatyam* and *Carnatic* music respectively. Many Asian Indian American students in the US practice these art forms for cultural expression and preservation (Iyengar, 2014). In addition, the content of these art forms is fitting to teach ‘cultural literacy’ and the *Kahani* Project is an opportunity for these students to write and share about their heritage practices without embarrassment.

Many of our students come from cultures that rely on oral story telling and sharing and have the schema to decode stories in different modalities (Ong, 2000). The *Kahani* Project assignment is created to help students from the Asian Indian background to tell their individual and community stories and thereby negotiates and constructs their bilingual identities. The narratives may be based on traveling to ancestral village,

crossing water bodies, catching animals, attending a traditional wedding, *arangetram* (dance debut), or celebrating festivals.

Students create stories based on their own experiences or based on what they have been told by family members. Such story writing has several benefits. Some of the advantages are - First, such a recreation in a story format activates the child's prior knowledge about their culture and heritage. Second, this activity enables the child to talk about the 'funds of knowledge' that the child may bring to our classroom. Moll *et al.*, (2001) defines funds of knowledge as "...historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p.133). Third, this assignment may motivate the child to use culture specific vocabulary and the child may take pride in reading the story to peers. Fourth, such a writing activity promotes teaching tolerance by bringing awareness about other cultures that may not be addressed in our schools in the US.

In addition, story telling is an enjoyable activity for children and it can be used as a valuable cultural literacy-teaching tool. Along with cultural expression, students also learn to negotiate their bicultural identities in a society that marginalizes diverse students due to 'curriculum framing' and American-centric curricular practices (Iyengar, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on sociocultural learning propounded by Vygotsk (1978). Socio-cultural learning is nested in the constructivist paradigm, where people believe that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.88). Orellana (2009) argues about the socio-cultural principle by referring to culture as a performative act, where people exhibit or demonstrate instead of just showing things they possess. Culture is also

the community experiences people carry with the children. Multicultural children bring their funds of knowledge (Moll *et al.*, 1992), and it is important that educators provide them with opportunities to create meaning using the experiences that they are familiar and comfortable using. The child needs appropriate and situated learning opportunities to scaffold to its zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978).

Further, researchers posit that understanding is "an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.1); guided participation (Rogoff, 1991, p. 8); and, "is developed through continued, situated use" (Brown *et al.*, 1991, p. 8; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000, p.229). Hence socio-cultural learning enables children to acquire knowledge using the tools that they are familiar with and are inclined to use without constraints.

The Present Study

The following studies provide us with an understanding of how societal and cultural influences help participants form new knowledge with regard to self-development (Bakhtin, 1981). These studies provide information about cross cultural comparisons and the importance of storytelling in such comparisons. Amour (2003) examined the relationship between children's stories and children's literature and how these two texts can be used to construct multiculturalism. This can be achieved by exploring the socio-cultural aspect of the participants. Teachers can facilitate socio-cultural learning "by taking a class into a community, [and] ... showing the community positive social action and developing a good role model for others to follow" (p.49). Another finding of Amour (2003) study was that students could develop social action skills by doing projects and engaging in activities in the community.

Mittapalli (2009) examines an Asian Indian American identity using narrative inquiry.

The participant learns about her roots (India) through interactions in her university community, Hindi movies, and through her close affinity with the African American students in the university. Suman learns to reveal her sub-culture and identity through socio-cultural interactions. Georgakopoulou (2000) studied 10-year-old boys and their communication growth through out of school activities. The oral narratives implied that ‘small stories’ (not the conventional narrative writing) were initiated through socio-cultural experiences like emails and text messaging or other modes of transmission. In addition, according to Smith & Riojas-Cortez (2010), “Literacy comprehension therefore depends upon a shared understanding of signs, symbols, and rules for their uses” (p.126).

The *Kahani* participants are endowed with cultural products, festivals, religious practices, and performing arts related activities. Asian Indian parents use these activities to teach their children Asian Indian history, culture, heritage (including languages), and religion. Participants incidentally learn social, literacy, and academic proficiency through their expression of experiences. However, diverse students need extensive exposure, friendly environment, and collaborative writing approach in order for them to write freely. The writing workshop may be an appropriate method to provide an opportunity to the *Kahani* writers so they can explore their experiences in writing. According to Delpit (1998) students grow if we can, “provide students with the exposure to an alternate form, and allow them the opportunity to practice in contexts which are non-threatening, have a real purpose, and are intrinsically enjoyable” (p.253). The *Kahani* project enables Asian Indian students to write and share their chosen topics.

Review of Literature

There is a dearth in the literature about the Asian Indian students’ cultural practices because Asian Indians are a minority in the US and their ‘funds of knowledge’ may not be addressed in US schools. However, these students maintain their culture utilizing out-of-school activities including dance and music. Asian Indian parents encourage their children to become culturally competent that may not be possible with restricted school curricula. According to Hirsch (1985):

Cultural literacy is a vital concept, which requires greater prominence in educational debate. For anyone to progress in today's world, he claims, they must be culturally literate: i.e. they must possess certain basic knowledge, which provides the framework to grasp or interact with any further information that they encounter (p.145).

Indian American students may not be provided with opportunities to become culturally literate in schools and hence rely on performing arts for ‘cultural literacy’.

For example, Scokoff (1990) reiterates that in the US, Eastern literature is not addressed and it is not surprising for American graduates not to know writers such as Kalidasa, Lu Xun, Chinua Achebe, R. K. Narayan, Jhumpa Lahari, Bharathi Mukarjee, or Murasaki Shikib. It is important to provide these students with an opportunity to express their thoughts in writing through a culturally framed writer’s workshop project, where diverse students can transfer knowledge from one domain (dance and music) to another (writing). ‘Cultural literacy’also promotes integrative learning which “encompasses a broad range of connections: between different classes, over time, and among curricular and co-curricular activities” (Nowacek, 2011, p.2).

METHODOLOGY

Design

This study used holistic content analysis proposed by Lieblich *et al.*, (1998). Holistic content analysis examines the narratives entirely so the essence in the text is not lost. Holistic content analysis was chosen (instead of form or categorical analysis) because it generates the major themes from the texts (Lieblich *et al.*, 1998). For conducting holistic content analysis, Lieblich *et al.*, (1998) suggest that the researchers (1) read the texts multiple times until a pattern emerge (2) document the initial overall impression (3) note down the foci or themes of the text (4) color code the themes and (5) keep a record of the themes as they occur in the text. After reading the children's narratives many times, a pattern became apparent. Within the dataset, individual paragraphs were read and the intuitive thoughts were noted down first before writing down the overall impression of the narratives. Next, the central focus of the narrative based on the themes addressed was documented. Later, the initial themes were identified by repeatedly reading the materials. Finally, the initial themes were collapsed into dominant themes. The following flowchart illustrates the thematic analysis conducted.

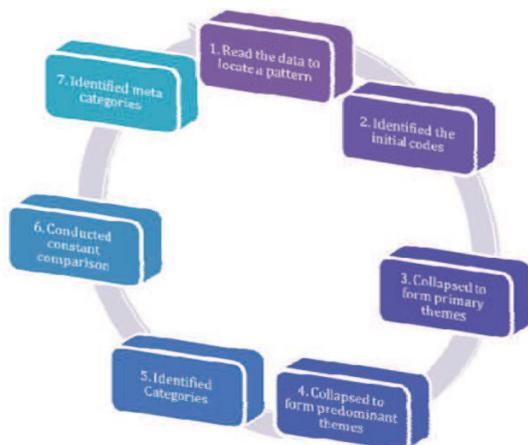


Figure (1): Flow Chart of Thematic Analysis conducted

Participants

Menaka is a fifteen-year-old tenth grader from the state of Gujarat. She learns Bharatnatyam at the Arathi School of Indian dance, and she just completed her dance debut or *arangetram*. She speaks Gujarati and her parents are both professionals. This writer is in health careers high school, a magnet school for students interested in pursuing health or related field. She participates in the Gujarati Samaj cultural events, attends *Swadyaya*, and volunteers at the Swaminarayna Mandir.

Tyagaraja is fourteen years old and is from the state of Andhra Pradesh. This writer attends a private school for academically advanced children. He learns Carnatic music at Kalalaya and his sister also learns music and Bharatnatyam at Kalalaya. The writer's parents are both professionals who are active in the lives of their children's academic and cultural activities. The mother learns Carnatic music and sings with her children. This particular writer focused on 'testimonial text' that discussed consciousness raising plot points in his narrative.

Data

For the purpose of this article, I've chosen two samples out of the original data set of twenty-seven stories collected because the following data deals with dance and music. The data was collected as part of the *Kahani* project writer's workshop after obtaining the institutional review board approval from the University of Texas at San Antonio in a major city in the south west of the US. The participants were briefed about the writer's workshop format and they were allowed to choose a topic of their own interest. Data was collected for three weeks in the summer of 2014. The sources were narrative, researcher's memo notes, and external reader's feedback. The following is a narrative on dance ('mi' indicates coding done by the researcher).

Bharatanatyam:

I still remember the very first time I went to a Bharatanatyam dance class [mi1]. I remember sitting behind my mom as I watched six girls, friends of mine, begin the session. And I remember the teacher looking at me and asking me whether I wanted to join. How could I not [mi2]? It was so beautiful and intriguing to my little six year old brain and it still is now. Recently I've completed my Arangetram [mi3] which is the graduation for Bharatanatyam dancers. The journey was, of course, long and hard but in a way most people wouldn't understand [mi4]. There were the sacrifices. I had to miss out on movies, parties and much more. When I told my friends I had to go to dance class, their first question was what kind. Instead of ballet, hip-hop, or jazz, they got classical Indian dance [mi5]. It was weird for them and for me, but I had a whole battalion of girls in dance that went through the same thing I did and that really helped me. There was the cultural connection [mi6]. I grew up reading Amar Chitra Katha [mi7]; my whole idea of culture was based on cartoon drawings of Indian Gods. When I went to dance class, it was so much more in depth and honestly, it was overwhelming. My teachers did sit down with me and explain every story and concept but it was still really hard [mi8]. I grew up an American girl and I consider myself an almost full American [mi9]. Connecting to a very small Indian part of me was difficult [mi10] [mi11]. I do pride myself in being that Indian though, however small [mi12] [mi13]. I have to admit Indians go all out during festivals [mi14]. My favorites, Diwali and Navarathri [mi15] include, you guessed it, dance. When the month of October rolls around I know to get my dandias ready, because the best season is here. Ever since I was a little girl, I've loved garba [mi16]. I don't know what it is about the sound of my heartbeat, my feet pounding rhythmically against the ground, and my hand sweeping side to side that gives me a rush. Learning about sages like Valmiki and watching the dances based on them is enjoyable for me. Next, Garba is the talk of the town for me. Even my white,

Hispanic, etc. friends know when I've been to dance. Another thing I can't miss is Diwali. Performing, eating, dancing the night away with friends is so much fun [mi17]. You see, these things I'm not ashamed of. I can't say I haven't been bullied about my passion for all these types of Indian dance, because that would be lying [mi18]. It used to be a burden, my Indian culture [mi19]. Back in sixth grade I would be harassed every day because I was different [mi20]. I think every Indian kid has gone through this at least once. It's sad, but I mean, tough luck [mi21]. I hope that, like me, they have all been able to open their eyes one day and realize it doesn't matter what others say [mi22]. I like to say that my Arangetram has changed me a lot. Before I used to hate being an Indian and I couldn't wait to shed that culture off [mi23]. Now, it's a part of me [mi24] [mi25]. Yeah, it is very hard [mi26]. Singing Katy Perry one moment, singing for a pooja another [mi27]. Dancing the Harlem shake one minute, practicing Bharatanatyam another. Dance has really helped me reconcile with myself [mi28]. It's helped me deal with the demands of an American and Indian society [mi29]. It's been a gateway to a culture that belongs to me on the other side of the world [mi30]. It's also been my passion and my source of strength to get through the crazy life of an Indian kid [mi31] [mi32] (Participant 2, 2014).

Based on reading of this narrative several times, researcher has identified the following codes (please refer to Appendix A and B for the codes and constant comparison of the above data). Researcher clustered codes to form themes. The following section includes a few themes that emerged by grouping themes.

Themes

Theme (1): Integrative Learning (Nowacek, 2011). According to the author, "Students connect learning from one domain with learning in another domain" and this writer has successfully transferred her knowledge of festivals (diwali, navarathri, etc) to understand her culture. She also

uses classical and region specific cultural dance to reflect on her identity negotiation. In addition, she uses *Bharatanatyam* to create her own space after submitting to an unpleasant compromise (*I grew up an American girl and I consider myself an almost full American. Connecting to a very small Indian part of me was difficult*” and “*Arangetram has changed me a lot. Before I used to hate being an Indian and I couldn’t wait to shed that culture off. Now, it’s a part of me*).

Theme (2): Critical Literacy and Multicultural Education (Henkin, 2005). The author invites teachers to consider topics such as bullying through literacy activities. For this student writer, dance is a critical literacy tool that helped her cope with bullying (*Back in sixth grade I would be harassed every day because I was different. I think every Indian kid has gone through this at least once. It’s sad, but I mean, tough luck. I hope that, like me, they have all been able to open their eyes one day and realize it doesn’t matter what others say. I like to say that my Arangetram has changed me a lot*).

Theme (3): Trishanku world. The student writer created her own niche and found performing art and festivals to help her in identity formation. She negotiates with space she is living in by coming to a compromise about how her ‘cultural capital’ is fulfilling in the end (*I do pride myself in being that Indian though, however small. I have to admit Indians go all out during festivals. My favorites, Diwali and Navarathri include, you guessed it, dance. When the month of October rolls around I know to get my dandias ready, because the best season is here. Ever since I was a little girl, I’ve loved garba*).

Theme (4): Self and Community. The student writer compares herself with other cultural groups such as white and Mexican and her own kind, and after negotiating her identity comes to a

conclusion that her Asian Indian culture is rewarding.

The following description is on *Carnatic* music (mi indicates coding done by the researcher)

Why I learn Carnatic Music? In a rapidly changing society [mi1], people begin to lose contact with their native culture and begin to acquaint themselves with the new[mi2] ideas and traditions in the society that they belong to[mi3] [mi4]. This [mi5] holds true for the new generation of children born of Indian descent in the Western world [mi6]. These [mi7] children find themselves increasingly drawn away [mi8] from the traditions that their parents have taught them all their lives and turn to the American way of life that includes activities that do not support [mi9] what they have been taught all their life [mi10] [mi11]. This [mi12] is one of the reasons why that I learn Indian Classical music. Without music, I [mi13] would have a limited connection with Indian culture [mi14] [mi15]. Learning Indian Classical music helps me understand my culture [mi16] and also helps me better understand the values and traditions [mi17] of my extended family [mi18] in India[mi19] [mi20]. Music is a focal point of my discussions with my grandparents [mi21], and aids me in talking to them and to understand my culture [mi22]. Music also takes me places where I [mi23] meet new people in my community who are also interested in learning about their origins [mi24]. Music expresses my [mi25] devotion to God and brings me closer to God [mi26]. Also, music helps me appreciate my culture more than if I were not learning music, and allows me to interact with the Indian Classical music artists that tour the United States and India. Finally, music urges me [mi27] understand my language and find the meaning of the songs that I sing [mi28], and allows me to continue a tradition that has lasted for several millennia and keep me connected to my roots [mi29] (Participant 5, 2014)

Based on reading of this material several times, researcher has listed all of the codes that emerged here. Then researcher combined the

codes to form themes. Some of the themes are - commitment, Passion for the arts, relational connection to cultural capital, anomie, negotiation, testimonial text, fine arts, communal life, etc.

Next, researcher clustered the themes to form categories. The various categories that emerged through data reduction of narrative on *Bharatanatyam and Why I Learn Carnatic Music* were – (1) Contradictory Identity (Caughey, 2006), (2) Transfer and Transformative Literacy (Nowacek, 2011), (3) Character Education (Henkin, 2005), and (4) Value system, and (5) Advocacy (see appendix B for themes and categories). Finally, researcher applied the same procedure for the data on music to arrive at additional categories.

Findings

Asian Indian students utilized dance and music as cultural tools to express how they learned ‘cultural competence’. They used writing to express their willingness to preserve their culture and thereby negotiated their bicultural identities. The analysis also revealed how Asian American students tried and avoids the phenomenon of cultural dissonance (Torres, 2011) by becoming culturally competent through out-of-school performing arts. To that end, dance and music can be used for literacy advancement in diverse students’ (e.g. Asian American Students) in societies where such students’ ‘funds of knowledge’ is not recognized at school.

The analysis also indicated that Asian Indian American students’ ‘funds of knowledge’ are neglected, excluded, trivialized and hence these students rely on out-of-school cultural performing arts (dance and music) to become culturally competent and thereby preserve their culture. This act of preserving culture happens through relationship building, heritage engagement, and creative writing. The following figure illustrates the two steps (see figure: 2 below).

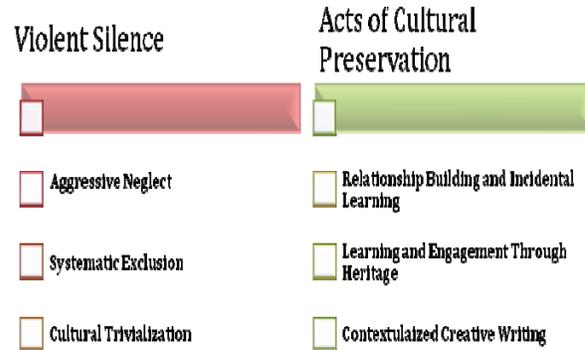


Figure (2): Findings

Implications

The data here suggests that curriculum in American schools may be ameri-centric and that needs to change if all students must feel integrated. It becomes the teachers, parents, and the curriculum designers’ obligations to build an inclusive pedagogical model so all students are valued in schools in the US. Further research is needed in the area of learning styles and the significance of Asian Indian dance and music because Asia Indian dance and music also encourage learning in students with different learning styles. According to Gardner (1999):

We are all able to know the world through language, logical-mathematical analysis, spatial representation, musical thinking, the use of the body to solve problems or to make things, an understanding of other individuals, and an understanding of ourselves...and in the ways in which such intelligences are invoked and combined to carry out different tasks, solve diverse problems, and progress in various domains (p.1).

Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music are cultural semiotics that engage children utilizing story telling through expression and bodily movements and other auditory channel. Dance and music also index the generational aspects and these art forms are framed as activities for learning about the Asian Indian languages, culture, history, religion, and legacy using the ‘different intelligences’.

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Appendix: A

Dance :

- [mi1]Narrative diachronicity, Bruner
- [mi2]Willingness to participate
- [mi3]Stepping stone in a dancer’s career and archetypal practice of Asian Indian Art (Jung)
- [mi4]Particularity
- [mi5]Culture specific practice
- [mi6]Referentiality, Bruner
- [mi7]Culturally relevant text
- [mi8]Schema for story telling and listening
- [mi9]What is an American?
- [Mi10]Marginalization
- [mi11]Irony?
- [mi12]Expressionism
- [mi13]Litotes or Meiosis or Paradox
- [mi14]Socio-cultural
- [mi15]Cultural capital
- [mi16]A typical *Gujarathi* dance style
- [mi17]Intentional state entailment, Bruner
- [mi18]Critical Literacy
- [mi19]Satire
- [mi20]Bullying
- [mi21]Cultural alienation
- [mi22]Anomie
- [mi23]Oppression and marginalization. This is almost like a confessional text or testimonial text?
- [mi24]Self-realization
- [mi25]Expressionism
- [mi26]Identity negotiation
- [mi27]Cultural diffusion
- [mi28]Self-actualization
- [mi29]Trishanku Complex
- [mi30]
- [mi31]Anomie
- [mi32]Denouement/resolution of uncertainty

Music:

- [mi1]Negotiated space; the writer is aware of the flux in society
- [mi2]Anomie
- [mi3]Social constructionist Perspective
- [mi4]
- [mi5]Transition/Cataphoric reference
- [mi6]Products of bi and multi cultural children
- [mi7]Transition/Cataphoric
- [mi8]Testimonial text/consciousness raising and a call for cultural assimilation?
- [mi9]Negotiated space and anomie
- [mi10]Recognizes the loss of cultural capital in children born and raised in a western country
- [mi11]Alieanation and reReRelaCulturaRelativism
- [mi12]Transition/Both cataphoric and anaphoric references
- [mi13]Relational
- [mi14]Bruner’s referentiality
- [mi15]Generalized others
- [mi16]Self-actualization
- [mi17]Cultural Relativism
- [mi18]Communal life style
- [mi19]Values and wants to be connected with his roots
- [mi20]Need for connection and communal ?
- [mi21]Gemeinschaft
- [mi22]Relational, Intentional State Entailment
- [mi23]Relational
- [mi24]Anticipatory socialization
- [mi25]Relational
- [mi26]Cultural relativism and Humanistic perspective
- [mi27]Relational
- [mi28]Sapir-whorf hypothesis
- [mi29]Trishanku Complex

Appendix B: Constant Comparison

1. Contradictory Identity* [*Adapted from Caughey (2006)]	2. Transfer* and Transformative Literacy [*Adapted from Nowacek (2011)]	3. Character Education * [*Adapted from (Henkin, 2005)]	4. Value System	5. Advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sacrifice and Dedication • Negotiated Space • Reconciliation • Shame and separation • Remoteness • Loss and Cultural Legacy • Estrangement and Alienation • Call for Culture Retention • Separation and Loss • Loss of Cultural Legacy and Heritage Languages • Estrangement and Alienation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Relativism • Culture, Tradition, and Religion • Cultural Pride and Identity • Belonging and Cultural Connection • Cultural Practices • Religious and Cultural Legacy • Belonging and Cultural Pride • Relationship Building • Heritage Literacy and Cultural Legacy • Empirical Learning and Cultural Pride 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum Framing • Critical Literacy/Bullying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Festivals • Foods • Socio-cultural Learning • Empirical Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for Culture Retention • Loss of Cultural Legacy and Call for Identity Formation