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Literacy in Transcultural Cosmopolitan Times: A Call for Change

“Where have we received the image of cosmopolitanism from?
And what is happening to it?
As for this citizen of the world, we do not know what the future holds in store for it.”
(Derrida, 2001)

What is meaningful pedagogy in a time of transcultural cosmopolitanism?

This is Dilobar’s story a participant in an ongoing study on language awareness conducted in a mainstream school in Calgary.

Dilobar, a grade 7 student emigrated with her family from Uzbekistan two years ago. Her family speaks Uzbek, Arabic and Russian. Her grandfather was a scholar of great repute in the region and was fluent in Uzbek, Arabic, Russian, Turkish and Persian. Her parents speak Uzbek to her and her 10 year old brother. Many of their extended family members live in Turkey and parts of Russia. Dilobar is a confident and focused student who enjoys learning languages. As part of her grade 7 language arts curriculum she was invited to participate in a dual language book reading project. The entire story is written in two languages that are juxtaposed throughout the book: Spanish on one page and English on the facing page. Each title was read three times a week. Once in Spanish and English followed by Tagalog/English and Urdu/English. During the reading the book was also projected on the smart board. After each reading, Mr. Nelson their language arts teacher, would invite the students to focus on different aspects of literacy acquisition and language awareness. These included initial perceptions about language learning and the similarities and differences between languages. Students were asked to focus on how language makes meaning and different cultures and languages intersect in the classroom.

Every year that passes, Canadian classrooms are becoming increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse: 2012 welcomed 257 000 immigrants (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2012), 82.4% from somewhere other than Europe or the US, with 19.2% 14 years or younger (Statistics Canada, 2011). These are indeed 'new times', and teachers are at the forefront supporting these students' language acquisition needs. Repeatedly, research has shown that learners benefit from culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogical practices (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995), yet teacher training programs and classroom practice have failed to keep pace. This gap comes with a very real risk to students’ identities, literacy engagement and achievement, both immediately and into the future, and fails to take advantage of the gains multilingual dispositions afford all learners. In addition to linguistic and cultural needs that these statistics signal, there are identity-shaping issues having to do with global events and political upheaval and our students’ awareness and understandings about these crucial events.
Admittedly some of these topics enter the classroom, but the forms of composition and their distributions on social media are not a part of their schooling experiences.

Even in the face of cultural differences, global conflict, war, and political upheaval, countries like Canada, the United States, and Europe continue with status quo classrooms with predominately neutral definitions of culture and religion, monomodal approaches to assignments and skills development, and, on the whole, more anachronistic frameworks.

It is at this point that the link between meaningful pedagogy and cosmopolitanism needs to be addressed. Benhabib (2006) defines cosmopolitanism as “a philosophical project of mediations, not of reductions or of totalizations.” She considers cosmopolitanism to be different from global ethic as such in that trying to categorize it through cultural attitudes and choices is insufficient. In her writings she follows the Kantian tradition of understanding cosmopolitanism the emergence of norms that ought to govern relations among individuals in a global civil society (p.20). Kant’s doctrine (1795, 1994) of cosmopolitanism recognized three interrelated but distinct levels of right in the juridical senses of the term: Domestic law, the sphere of rightful relations among nations, and lastly cosmopolitan right (which concerns relations among civil persons to each other as well as to organized political entities in a global civil society). It is time to envisage literacy education in a future that takes into account transnational migration and the idea of relations among individuals in a global society. I draw upon various theoretical perspectives. The New Literacy Studies has argued for the need to examine literacy as ideological constructions produced within social and institutional settings rather than as a universal or neutral set of skills related primarily to individual cognition (e.g., Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic’, 2000; Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Faris, 2005; Gee, 2007; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Street, 2005). According to Lam & Warriner (2012) research continues to demonstrate how within any act of reading or writing complex rhetorical styles, interpretive strategies, and semiotic systems are reflections of the beliefs, practices, and social relationships of particular social groups.

Meaningful pedagogy in a time of transcultural cosmopolitanism must take into account narratives of war, turmoil, violence and a cultural concept of the world (Smits & Naqvi 2015). Today we live in a time when public education seems to avoid the hard societal issues and educators are often forced to operate within a bubble. Although there is much discussion around citizenship, there is a dearth of discussion around identity and ideas about transnationalism and cosmopolitanism must interact with ideas about identity and citizenship. In their discussions of immigrant identities, Stuart Hall and Pnina Werbner both make the point that identities may start with the past—with the way that people give an account of who they are—but what happens to them in the future is equally important as what happened in the past. The reality of today’s classrooms, which are indeed cosmopolitan in terms of children’s backgrounds lives in the very fabric of our society. Placing integrated learning structures that incorporate information about new cultures into a curriculum for example is one way of informing students about immigrant cultures, how they take new forms and ultimately connects to customs and traditions in mainstream society. In order to counteract the pervasive generalizations of social, journalistic and critical media, it is necessary that people are provided from a young age, with knowledge that can allow for the growth of understanding and relating to
others as well as certain kinds of competencies that will allow them to make educated decisions about how they will react to new and ever changing cultural dynamics within their own country.

Schools can be safe places, to meet others and to learn about different people and share experiences. Similarly, innovative curriculum can be the catalyst to help break down barriers between cultures and promote a sense of unity that extends into the community. If a school is united a community can become more united. With a shared future vision and sense of belonging, there will be a focus on what new and existing Canadian communities have in common, and a recognition of the value of diversity as well as the cultivation of strong and positive relationships between people from different backgrounds.

Hence, the task for education is to celebrate not a bland diversity, but a resistant hybridity and originality in each child. (Davies, 2008). Our society has shared responsibility for living in difference, for being responsible, not only for ourselves but for the ethics that sustain such a relationship (Chambers, 1990:115). This line of reasoning has important implications for community empowerment, especially within multiethnic and multiracial societies. Educators need to engage practically with innovative practices underpinned by coherent philosophical ideas will enable rejuvenated approaches to intercultural understanding and learning. The importance of achieving this has been summarized by Giroux (1992) who advises, “Educating for difference, democracy, and ethical responsibility is not about creating passive citizens. It is about providing students with the knowledge, capacities, and opportunities to be noisy, irreverent, and vibrant. Central to this concern is the need for students to understand how cultural, ethnic, racial, and ideological differences enhance the possibility for dialogue, trust, and solidarity (p. 8)” In essence, what Giroux is advocating is that today’s students need not be subjected to a totalized view of culture, literacy and citizenship; they deserve ideas which prepare them to become more capable citizens, nurturing their intellect while at the same time providing them the ability to have a reflexive relationship with society and what it demands of people in terms of cosmopolitanism.

How can we reimagine literacy pedagogies to include notions of transcultural practices, multimodal epistemologies, and multilingual forms of communication?

A journey from multiculturalism to transnationalism, opens the horizons and could eventually lead to a cosmopolitan citizenship, encouraging us to envision the world through a cultural prism. There are however global and societal challenges that this would entail including the need for a new set of focal objects in the study and practice of literacy education. According to (Luke & Dooley, 2011) this would involve examining the full potential, the possibilities and the limits of community based literacies and how they can be used for development and hegemony alike. Cucciollata (2002) states,”Transculturalism is not a total objective reality, there has to be a conscious subjective component which must express itself in the public space, in a democratic fashion without political interference.” With the integration of Europe and the Americas, many researchers have been lead to question the validity of globalization on a human and cultural scale. Nevertheless, what remains absent from globalization discourse is a lack of what Cucciollata calls “a cultural concept of the world”. There exists an economic concept and a political concept. However, Cucciollata iterates that the most important concept in our global
village is missing: “The question of multiple identities without barriers, based on the movement and flow of peoples and of society”.

I have spent the last ten years conducting research in highly ethnically diverse schools in Canada, during which I have been disturbed by the strong dichotomies that are embedded in social norms around the good and the bad, the right and wrong and the progressive West and the Others. These discourses have been made apparent through impoverished versions of culture where questioning such realities is a sign of not belonging (Naqvi 2015; Jardine & Naqvi 2008). My work has been contextualized in the notion of difference and how it is lived in schools and often goes unnoticed. Through my work I have sought to create collaborative, inspirational and critical learning opportunities (Naqvi & Pfitscher 2011) that can engage teachers and students alike in working towards a collective notion of being. Schools and, more broadly, teacher educators need to be made aware of their global, plural and often inter-cultural identities. It is only through systemic awareness and intentional work that we can move away from phobic reactions to specific communities and ethnicities. Despite the fact that the twenty first century is young, we face a complex and serious situation that needs to be attended to in various ways. Conceptualizing cosmopolitanism is a viable ideological goal in literacy education.

In what ways can research theory and methods align with reimagining pedagogies?

Transcultural pedagogies and literacy development should involve a multilingual approach, enabling pedagogues to build on learners’ “funds of knowledge”. Linguistic and textual practices provide ways for young people to explore and incorporate various aspects of their lives across cultural and geographical borders. Students draw on multilingual repertoires and dual frames of reference, in creative and subversive ways, to participate in and make meaning out of their experiences of migration, transnationalism, and literacy practices. A number of studies (Tetrault 2009; Bruna 2007; Rubinstein-Avila 2007) particularly examined how young people’s use of language and engagement with texts are related to their social and cultural connections to people and practices across countries. As a result, the development of reading skills is one reason for taking a multilingual approach to reading education, literacy engagement (Cummins, 2011) and empowerment of minority students and their families and communities (Sneddon, 2009; Naqvi, McKeough, Thorne & Pfitscher, 2012).

As the fourth-most common destination for Canada’s annual influx of over 250,000 immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2011), Calgary is undeniably diverse. Calgary’s North East is a particularly rich multilingual and multicultural sector of the community, with several schools reporting more than 50% ELLS (English Language Learners) (Cowley & Easton, 2013). Currently, after English, the most common home languages spoken are Chinese (Cantonese & Mandarin), Punjabi, Tagalog, Spanish and Urdu (Statistics Canada, 2011). The challenges faced daily by students and teachers working in these classrooms is hard to underestimate. Multilingual students can potentially thrive in an environment where there are affirmative actions taken to validate their home languages and affirm their identities. Research has documented the important role home languages can play in empowering minorities in multilingual settings (Taylor, Bernhard, Garg & Cummins, 2008). There is general agreement (Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, Leoni, et al. 2005; Helot & Young, 2006) in the larger scholarly and practitioner
communities that languages are valuable, and that working with students to honour their cultural, economic and existential realities is important pedagogically. Cummins’ (2011) Framework of Literacy Engagement has made the connection between identity and literacy engagement clear. There is extensive research highlighting the potential of bilingualism to enhance children’s metalinguistic awareness. (Armand & Dagenais, 2012; Bialystok, 1997; Cummins, 2001) There is also consensus among researchers that transfer of knowledge and skills takes place across languages (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 1979; Cummins, 2005; O’Duibhir & Cummins, 2012; Garcia & Sylvan, 2011). However, strategic and explicit instructional focus on pedagogies/practices that enhance metalinguistic awareness will enable children to make crosslingual connections and develop their critical awareness of how language works more effectively than if the process remains implicit and haphazard (O’Duibhir & Cummins, 2012).

The linguistic diversity in our society provides plenty of opportunity for “twisting the traditional pedagogy” of literacy education. In these settings students may bring a dozen or more languages to the one classroom, creating a rich and unique research platform of language awareness (Helot & Young, 2006). One such research initiative has been the incorporation of dual language books into the multilingual classroom. (Gregory, 2008; Sneddon, 2009; Gillanders, Castro & Franco, 2014). My most recent research has focussed on the use of dual language books within a literacy program aimed particularly at Grade 5 and Grade 7 students in a mainstream, transcultural setting. Initial results demonstrate the power of reimagining pedagogy and showcases how transculturalism can be used to reimagine pedagogy. Following are some quotes from grade 7 students:

**Share one thing you have learned about language:**

*They have different accents; the different writing is beautiful; a lot of languages have the same letter as English; some languages read right to left; some words with the same meaning can be written almost the same way; I learned that grane means big; 21 words in Spanish; it is not always in the same order; it’s fun but challenging*

**Share one thing you have learned about cultures:**

*Urdu, what they celebrate; Dates of Pakistan; They say it different; All cultures are different; Language is a big part of describing culture; They are all different; They can be weird; They don’t have words we have; Urdu people wear hijab; They all different and the same; -Cultures can be vast.*

**What do you wonder about regarding languages?**

*Why are they so worried? ; They have different kind of sounds; -Why are they different?; -How people come up with them?; How hard is it to learn?; -How people know them fast; -Why are some languages easy to learn and some not; How did we develop languages?*
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