Kahani Literacy Project: Agentive Identity Construction

This article explores the Kahani Literacy Project (KLP), a culturally framed writing opportunity for children from the diasporic Asian Indian communities in the US. A unique aspect of the KLP is that the participants construct an identity as diasporic Asian Indian American (AIA) and thereby develop their dual frame of reference (Valenzuela, 1999). Moreover, through their narratives, the diasporic AIA students validated and embraced their two different cultural worlds — Indian and American and thereby developed Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge (CRK) (Iyengar, in press). The thematic analysis of the Kahanis revealed various aspects of their Indic culture. Through their guided conversations and written assignments, writers' Indian identity was strengthened. As the youth composed essays, travelogues of visits to India, and other culturally-embedded texts, writing became a vehicle for cultural reification and agentive identity construction.

Keywords: Asian Indian American, culture, diasporic, dual frame of reference, indigenous knowledge, Kahani, identity construction, writing

Context

The aggressive neglect of cultural elements from marginalized communities in the U.S in the curriculum encouraged the researcher to organize a literacy project for AIA (Iyengar & Smith 2016; Iyengar & Smith, 2021). Although AIA bring rich and complex cultural knowledge, these children are deprived of exploring their heritage and religious practice within the official school space. In addition, because India, in reality, is multicultural and multilingual, the KLP embraces, capitalizes, honors, and incorporates the diverse modes of expression found in the various communities represented by the participants from India. By modeling linguistic inclusivity, the KLP emulates the heritage country of India, while encouraging participants to explore experiences rooted in their ethnic communities. Rather than avoidance or shame of their community language, with the KLP, the language of the elders is considered *linguistic capital* (Yosso, 2005) to be protected and preserved. The KLP model supports indigenous knowledge (Gadgil, Berkes, Folke 1993; Briggs 2005), multilingualism (Aronin, Singleton 2012; Clyne 2017; Horner & Weber 2017), translanguaging (Wei 2018; Vogel & Garcia 2017; Garcia & Wei 2014) and language brokering (Choa 2006; McQuillan & Tse 2005) enabling diasporic AIA to explore their epistemologies, world views, cultures, and religious practices.

This paper has two points of inquiry:

1. What is the relationship between *Funds of Knowledge* (FoK) and text-to-culture connections? For example, did participants read specific literatures? Were participants' memories of travels to India and cultural experiences treated as texts that were culturally mediated?

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2. Did the writers engage in discussions where they shared their experiences in ways that shaped their thinking and facilitated identity construction?

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Theoretical Framework

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Research documents the consequence of neglected or diminished cultural inclusion in education (Choe 2021; Roscigno, Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Quinn 2004). The smothering Eurocentric curriculum may impact the psychological wellbeing of marginalized children (Ali 2006; Wei-chen, 2021). Limited opportunities for cultural exploration can also be detrimental to the identity construction in children. I draw from four theoretical frameworks that support cultural exploration and its benefits on children and their personality development. In the section to follow, I expatiate on each framework and describe how the framework connects to the present study.

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(1) The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) proposed a model for encouraging children to develop relational writing experiences by giving agency to the child. The NCTE Writing Workshop model is a successful strategy or pedagogical approach to enhance children's writing activities.

22 23 24 (2) Cultural Historical "Activity [T]heory introduces the crucial distinction between collective activity systems and individual actions" (Engeström 2018, p. 63). CHAT facilitates thinking that is shaped through activities people engage in.

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(3) The Community Cultural Wealth Model theorized by Yosso (2005) emphasizes the various capitals that children bring to our classrooms. Kahani writers acknowledged their familial and linguistic capitals through their narrative writing.

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(4) The Funds of Knowledge (González, et al. 2006; Moll, et al. 2019) framework reiterates the various roles children took on, including cultural docents, archeologists, ethnographers, travel bloggers, journalists, teachers that children acquired to express their perspectives in their cultural upbringing and its preservation.

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Methodology

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Participants

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Participants were recruited through a multilingual flyer (see appendix A) that was distributed through various music and dance schools in a major multicultural city in the US. The children represented different linguistic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. They all were enrolled in a charted school in town that emphasized Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) education. A participant survey revealed the parents' educational background as college graduates with

communicative competence in English language skills. The writers belonged to middle class families and they all spoke at least one heritage language.

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Procedure

 The principal investigator engaged the participants in the NCTE writing workshop pedagogical strategy that enables students to brainstorm their topic choice, confer, request a mini lesson, share, and publish their craft. As students explored and negotiated meaning, they participated in a process called *dialogic conferencing* (Iyengar, *in press*), where two entities (e.g., teacher to small group, peer to peer, group to class) interacted and engaged around a common idea. For a school setting, the teacher could divide the class into small groups of four to five students. Each team receives a portion of a student generated text. Using colored construction paper, teams must recreate their own texts based on the mentor text (Sudhoff, 2019) provided. At the conclusion of the activity, students assemble the various narratives and review how closely the multiple groups recreated the story. Following this scaffolding, students are assigned with an independent, story writing task.

In keeping with culturally embedded writing instruction, the participants, following their dialogue session, received more individualized *mini lesson* for five to ten minutes based on their writing needs (e.g., topic choice, grammar, transitional expressions). To stimulate their thoughts and memories, students were offered a variety of Indic-centric materials (e.g., stories, multimedia, live performances) (see appendices B & C). The next step was sustained silent writing time of 35-45 minutes. It was during this phase that students would draft, plan,

reread, revise, and proofread their texts, later to share with their peers.

In contrast to the environment in which many students are educated, the KLP does not oblige students to hide, disguise, or dismiss their cultural roots. For that reason, the final phase, *share time* is the cause for celebration. Here, writers are afforded the time and space to publicize, i.e., go public, with their literary creations. In this culturally safe and welcoming environment, the writers and audience appreciate the experiences and perspectives of the *Kahani* writers. The opportunity to increase one's literacy skills while expatiating on one's cultural roots instills and fortifies cultural pride and facilitate healthy ethnic identity construction (Hashtapuri, et al., 2021). Sadly, culturally affirming literacy approaches, like the KLP, are typically not a part of the school curriculum, but appear as an extracurricular activity mainly due to parental involvement.

Final stage involved the collection of texts for analyses.

Data Analysis

Data (i.e., stories) were analyzed applying thematic analysis supported by Braun and Clarke (2006). I identified, analyzed, and interpreted patterns of meaning, called themes, within the *Kahani* texts. For the purposes of this article, I will be expatiating on major themes (e.g., identity construction). The fourteen

chosen texts were colour coded for themes and the process was repeated with multiple texts. The constant comparative process (Corbin & Strauss 2014) confirmed recurrence of themes in several *Kahanis*. The themes were then aggregated into categories (e.g., CRK, Vernacular Language, and Literacy).

Findings and Discussion

Throughout the *Kahani* Literacy Project, at each workshop series, participants read literature validating their cultural background. They were shown multimedia, or moving texts, that reinforced heritage cultural practices. In addition, through their *Kahani* participation, they attended live performances (e.g., *Bharatanatyam* dance, *Carnatic* music) and engaged in thoughtful explorations (e.g., dialogic conferencing) of their culture. Through these *Kahani* activities, whether as a performer or a legitimate peripheral participant (Wenger & Lave, 2022), they increased their veneration for their culture and advanced their *CRK*.

Representation of CRK

The *Kahani* texts, as corroborated by the exemplars presented below, revealed compelling evidence of *CRK*. The writers described their involvement in traditional activities (e.g., *kumara bhojanam*), cultural observances (e.g., *Holi*), and socially constructed perspectives (e.g., *dual frame of reference*). A *CRK* framework privileges Indic-centric (versus Eurocentric) beliefs (e.g., morning *Pooja*) and world views (e.g., *We also place a baby Krishna in a cradle...*[SY 0026]). As a demonstration of the effectiveness of *CRK*, the *Kahani* writers were able to define or explain various cultural practices much like cultural anthropologists (e.g., *Naandi means...*). When children have a healthy ethnic identity, they are better shielded from threats of cultural erasure or atrophy. For children who possess positive associations with their heritage culture, research shows greater likelihood of academic success (Cistigan & Dokis, 2006; Ong, Phinney, Dennis, 2006). Further, Iyengar (2022) argues:

The process of Teaching for Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge (TCRK) is the amalgamation of pedagogy, culture, and stylistics...Additionally, TCRK interweaves culturally authentic expression...Cultural Rhetorical Knowledge (CRK) describes naturalistic instruction (Snyder, et al., 2015). The *Kahani* project, as a literacy exemplar, offers reading and writing activities that explore the semantics, pragmatics, and the semiotics that share an iconic quality to the cultures of India (Sarwatay, 2020; Singh & Sharma, 2009). Through a variety of literacy activities in the *Kahani* Project, writers become more knowledgeable about their cultural group. These kinds of literacy experiences or pedagogies have the potential to promote a healthy ethnic identity (p. 45).

To experience cultural preservation and to combat the threats against cultural atrophy or erasure, *CRK* is a promising intervention. To shelter the bicultural youth from *anomie*, I proffer *CRK* as a conduit to *synonymie*. Because diasporic

and bicultural youth contend with the demands of more-than-one-cultural-world, it would seem logical, if not imperative, that they receive instruction to better negotiate the different cultural spaces. Was there evidence in the *Kahani* data to indicate an awareness of any emotional proximity to Indian ethos? The excerpts from the data pool provide several affirmations of *CRK* through the *Kahani Literacy Project*:

With the help of these sources [sic] I am able to balance the life here and yet keep the strong [Asian] Indian roots and I feel like I perfectly fit just right in (AK 010).

I was born in America and I have grown up in America, but I have always had a tie back to India (AP 0018)

Every couple of years I am able to go and visit India to see the sights and remember that I am still and [sic] Indian(AR 0017).

As described by Adler (1995) and Adler and Zynap (2018), when bicultural individuals are channeled toward the norms, beliefs, epistemologies, values, world views, and behaviors of their cultural worlds, they are more likely to experience *Synonymie*.

CRK, Vernacular Language, and Literacy

 As the data were analyzed, the use of language varieties became evident. Unrecognized by cultural outsiders, India is a mosaic of many cultures and languages that are geographically bound (Mohanty, et al., 2010; Singh & Sharma, 2009). As the *Kahani* writers acquired deeper understandings of the regions of their cultural heritage (e.g., Jammu Kashmir, Telangana), they also adopted the words or modes of expression commonly used within their specific heritage community (e.g., *Diwali/Deepavali*; *Puja/Pooja*; *Ram/Rama*, *Ravan/Ravana*). The linguistic differences include stylistics, orthography, morphology, and syntax (cf. Henderson, 1965; Ramanujan & Masica, 2016; Sailaja, 2012). As the writers select linguistic variants, they simultaneously reveal cultural influences from the distinct regions of India. In the following excerpt, Yosso's (2005) *Familial* and *Linguistic Capitals*, the *Kahani* writer indicates the contribution of family to their literacy development:

I know a lot of things about Indian culture and traditions through my parents. My mother is my inspiration, she taught me how to read and write our Indian language – Telugu.

Opportunities for writing development were also noted by the various lengthy description of epochs and historic events within Indian culture:

Once there was a demon by the name of Hiranyakashapu. Hiranyakashapu was an arrogant demon, and he hated Lord Vishnu because Lord Vishnu killed Hiranyaksha who was Hiranyakashapu's brother. Hiranyaksha was the

ruler of the Asuras. Hiranyaksha claimed that no one can defeat him. Hiranyaksha took Mother Earth, and drowned her. Lord Vishnu took form of a hog, and saved Mother Earth. When Lord Vishnu put Mother Earth back the hog broke Hiranyaksha's weapon and killed him. When Hiranyakshapu knew that Hiranyaksha died he was furious with Lord Vishnu...

From this written excerpt, we can see the *Kahani* writer's engagement with Indian history and the literacies (i.e., morphology, discourse). The writer's ability to retell the story from one of Hindu epics must be noted here.

Culture and Socialization

The writers narrated multiple situations in which they interacted with elder members of the Asian Indian community in culturally-bound activities (e.g., celebrations, *Funds of Knowledge*, religion, spirituality). The *Kahani* narratives evidenced *CRK* as the young writers engaged in social interaction with cultural insiders (i.e., cultural socialization) (Romero, et al., 2000). The following quote demonstrates how the *Kahani* writers benefited (i.e., learned) from the process of *CRK*:

During these festivals it is customary for people to invite others to their houses for 'vetthalaipak'... It is considered auspicious. I remember how my mom used to invite our neighbors and relatives to our house and how we used to accompany her to other peoples' houses. It was a lot of fun, especially because of the yummy Prasad we used to get! (SY 0026).

In the foregoing exemplar, we witness *CRK* through social interaction (e.g., "invite... neighbors and relatives to our house"), communication of values (e.g., "It is considered auspicious") and instruction on routines, and traditions, (e.g., "how we used to accompany her to other peoples' houses").

Appreciating Difference

Throughout the *Kahani Literacy Project*, it became evident that *CRK* could be accomplished through the language arts (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing). All of the communicative modalities (e.g., oral traditions, visual and performing arts) contributed to and reinforced *Cultural Preservation* (Iyengar & Smith, 2016). While acknowledging the lack of certain conveniences (e.g., air conditioning, Wi-Fi, paved roads), the *Kahani* writers portrayed their experiences within the heritage country as rewarding:

We also went to sugar cane fields and the roads were all dirt, which made them inaccessible by car so we had to go by a tractor/motorcycle... Everyone was really happy that we had gotten sugar cane because we don't get much sugar cane in America (AP 0019).

In their *Kahanis*, the students presented the advantages as more worthwhile than the disadvantages. The naturalistic learning process is another key revelation to the AIA children.

Assimilated Cultural Knowledge

 Frequently, the *Kahani* writers offered explanations and descriptions reminiscent of docents, historians, and other "cultural brokers." The primary function of all these three roles or vocations is to record and explain heritage and history to others. Through the *Kahani* narratives, the young writers shared their understandings of different aspects of Indic culture with their iconicity and semiotics. In the text below, the writer offers definitions, clarification, and cultural/historical significance to the Asian Indian people:

I remember that we went to India during the time of Diwali. This is the "festival of light." Diwali celebrates the victory of good over evil. This is where Ram defeated Ravan. During Diwali we also perform the "Laxmi Pooja." This day marks the New Year for many places in India. There is a festival called Holi, which is the "festival of colors" (AP 0018).

We observe through the discourse how the student projects confidence over her acquired cultural knowledge and readily shares what she has learned about her culture.

When we encountered such passages, we would note how the discourse was more "instructive" often with a more didactic tone. Here, the *Kahani* writer shares their understanding of a sacred religious practice for young men:

I want to share with you my experience in my brothers [sic] Upanayanam. Upanayanam is an Indian event which signifies the transition from a child to a young man. Tomorrow is the day of my brothers [sic] Upanayanam (AP 0018).

A gender specific (for boys only), culture-bound observance is captured by the above writer.

 Through the phrasing, "Upanayanam is an Indian event which signifies the transition from a child to a young man," the Kahani writer unequivocally establishes the meaning of the term, some of its characteristics and their significance (i.e., CRK).

Gratitude and Heritage

With their descriptions, the *Kahani* writers revealed events that provided opportunities to develop deeper understandings and appreciation for their heritage culture. While at times implicit, as this exemplar reveals, the writers made explicit their appreciation for elements of their heritage culture:

During my visit to the Thousand Pillar Temple, I was amazed at the majesty and elegance of the temple and its architecture. I was expecting it to be a boring old

temple, but it was very interesting. It showed me a lot about my heritage, and made me proud of it (JG 003).

In this quote, we noted how the adolescent writer had predicted boredom, but candidly admitted (to the contrary) that he was engaged by what he experienced.

Through extra-mural instruction (De Winstanley, 2018; Grasha, 1990) proffered by the *Kahani Literacy Project* model, the diasporic youth developed a deeper understanding of their heritage and explored new modes of "performance" of culture (Awadh & Alyahya, 2013; Waterton & Watson, 2010). Foods and celebrations were frequent referents:

Next the priest did Kumarabhojanam which is when my brother and his five friends were served a feast with no flavor. My brother and my mom had shared a plate together [which is called matrubhoajanam], is when my mom and brother share a plate to signify that that [sic] is the last meal he will have with my mom as a child (AP. 0018).

This abstract from the *Kahani* writer reveals multiple layers of *CRK* including, the preparation of foods (flavorful) and the significance of the meal (passage to manhood) (AP 0014). While the aesthetic aspects of Indian culture are often referenced, there are aspects of culture that exist and interplay at a deeper level. Most of the cultural experiences are made possible through socialization.

In the following exemplar, we witness a diasporic AIA writer reflect on the process of cultural identity development. The phrase, "I was forced to check myself...." discloses the internal, psychological struggle of bicultural children.

At the end of the day, India is too many words for me to put into one story...I can say how amazing my trips to it have been, though... India's so unique, something that's under- appreciated and understated. Here in the US, many people take things for granted, myself included. In India, I was forced to check myself, to truly appreciate things I hadn't even noticed before (MV 0018).

Unlike monocultural individuals, who may become culturally myopic, bicultural individuals, i.e., the diasporic AIA children, must review, contemplate, evaluate, and select elements from their two cultures. Though unseen, this process entails affect, cognition, pragmatics, and values.

Individuals are presented with facets of their culture in explicit and implicit ways (Jeong & Frye, 2018; Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, & Garcia, 2009). One may ask, what is 'our' customary way of thinking? How do 'our people' feel about this event? What position in society do our people hold? Grappling with the construction of an ethnic identity, individuals are scribed a metaphoric space for the purpose.

 As teachers and students engage in *CRK*, what appears is the metaphoric space of *Trishanku World* (Bhat, 2019; Parameshwaran. R, 1984; Parameshwaran. U, 2008). Similar to *Nepantla* (Anzaldua, 1993) for Mexican-Americans, bicultural individuals analyze the various facets of their cultures (i.e., heritage practices) and consider the amount of effort necessary to preserve them. The list

includes language, religious beliefs, world view, social hierarchies, as well as more aesthetic aspects of culture (e.g., clothing, foods, celebrations). Again, a bicultural individual selects those elements from both their cultures and weaves a unique ethnic identity.

Conclusion and Implications

Opportunities to explore heritage knowledge in schooling is important. Children must be provided with opportunities to appreciate their community knowledge and culture for self-affirmation and validation. The possible negative consequences when *CRK* is omitted from curriculum may include, self-hate, low self-esteem, assimilation, *cultural erasure* (Ruser, 2020), *cultural cringe* (Phillips, 1950) or *cultural alienation* (Vo, 2021). Literacy projects such as the *KLP* may help disrupt the lack of opportunities for children to engage in activities that deepen their understanding of their roots and thereby construct a healthy identity as Asian Indians.

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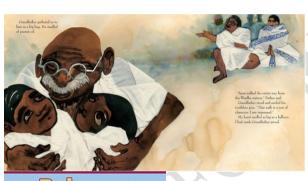
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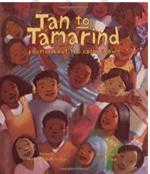
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Appendix A: Publicity Flier

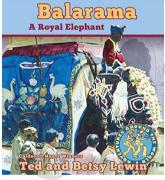


Appendix B: Culturally Efficacious Picture books





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