

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 Kahani 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?

- 1 2. Did the writers engage in discussions where they shared their experiences
2 in ways that shaped their thinking and facilitated identity construction?
3
4

5 **Theoretical Framework**

6
7 Research documents the consequence of neglected or diminished cultural
8 inclusion in education (Choe 2021; Roscigno, Ainsworth-Darnell 1999; Quinn
9 2004). The smothering Eurocentric curriculum may impact the psychological well-
10 being of marginalized children (Ali 2006; Wei-chen, 2021). Limited opportunities
11 for cultural exploration can also be detrimental to the identity construction in
12 children. I draw from four theoretical frameworks that support cultural exploration
13 and its benefits on children and their personality development. In the section to
14 follow, I expatiate on each framework and describe how the framework connects
15 to the present study.
16

- 17 (1) The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) proposed a model
18 for encouraging children to develop relational writing experiences by
19 giving agency to the child. The NCTE Writing Workshop model is a
20 successful strategy or pedagogical approach to enhance children’s writing
21 activities.
22 (2) Cultural Historical “Activity [T]heory introduces the crucial distinction
23 between collective activity systems and individual actions” (Engeström
24 2018, p. 63). CHAT facilitates thinking that is shaped through activities
25 people engage in.
26 (3) The Community Cultural Wealth Model theorized by Yosso (2005)
27 emphasizes the various capitals that children bring to our classrooms.
28 *Kahani* writers acknowledged their familial and linguistic capitals through
29 their narrative writing.
30 (4) The Funds of Knowledge (González, et al, 2006; Moll, et al. 2019)
31 framework reiterates the various roles children took on, including cultural
32 docents, archeologists, ethnographers, travel bloggers, journalists,
33 teachers that children acquired to express their perspectives in their
34 cultural upbringing and its preservation.
35
36

37 **Methodology**

38 **Participants**

39
40
41 Participants were recruited through a multilingual flyer (see appendix A) that
42 was distributed through various music and dance schools in a major multicultural
43 city in the US. The children represented different linguistic, religious, and cultural
44 backgrounds. They all were enrolled in a chartered school in town that emphasized
45 Science Technology Engineering Mathematics (STEM) education. A participant
46 survey revealed the parents’ educational background as college graduates with

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

3 4 **Procedure**

5
6 The principal investigator engaged the participants in the NCTE writing
7 workshop pedagogical strategy that enables students to brainstorm their topic
8 choice, confer, request a mini lesson, share, and publish their craft. As students
9 explored and negotiated meaning, they participated in a process called *dialogic*
10 *conferencing* (Iyengar, *in press*), where two entities (e.g., teacher to small group,
11 peer to peer, group to class) interacted and engaged around a common idea. For a
12 school setting, the teacher could divide the class into small groups of four to five
13 students. Each team receives a portion of a student generated text. Using colored
14 construction paper, teams must recreate their own texts based on the mentor text
15 (Sudhoff, 2019) provided. At the conclusion of the activity, students assemble the
16 various narratives and review how closely the multiple groups recreated the story.
17 Following this scaffolding, students are assigned with an independent, story
18 writing task.

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

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

38 Final stage involved the collection of texts for analyses.

39 40 41 **Data Analysis**

42
43 Data (i.e., stories) were analyzed applying thematic analysis supported by
44 Braun and Clarke (2006). I identified, analyzed, and interpreted patterns of
45 meaning, called themes, within the *Kahani* texts. For the purposes of this article, I
46 will be expatiating on major themes (e.g., identity construction). The fourteen

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

7 Findings and Discussion

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

18 Representation of *CRK*

20 The *Kahani* texts, as corroborated by the exemplars presented below,
 21 revealed compelling evidence of *CRK*. The writers described their involvement in
 22 traditional activities (e.g., *kumara bhojanam*), cultural observances (e.g., *Holi*),
 23 and socially constructed perspectives (e.g., *dual frame of reference*). A *CRK*
 24 framework privileges Indic-centric (versus Eurocentric) beliefs (e.g., morning
 25 *Pooja*) and world views (e.g., *We also place a baby Krishna in a cradle...*[SY
 26 0026]). As a demonstration of the effectiveness of *CRK*, the *Kahani* writers were
 27 able to define or explain various cultural practices much like cultural
 28 anthropologists (e.g., *Naandi means...*). When children have a healthy ethnic
 29 identity, they are better shielded from threats of cultural erasure or atrophy. For
 30 children who possess positive associations with their heritage culture, research
 31 shows greater likelihood of academic success (Cistigan & Dokis, 2006; Ong,
 32 Phinney, Dennis, 2006). Further, Iyengar (2022) argues:

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

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

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

7
8 With the help of these sources [sic] I am able to balance the life here and yet keep the
9 strong [Asian] Indian roots and I feel like I perfectly fit just right in (AK 010).

10
11 *I was born in America and I have grown up in America, but I have always had a tie*
12 *back to India* (AP 0018)

13
14 *Every couple of years I am able to go and visit India to see the sights and remember*
15 *that I am still and [sic] Indian*(AR 0017).

16
17 As described by Adler (1995) and Adler and Zynap (2018), when bicultural
18 individuals are channeled toward the norms, beliefs, epistemologies, values, world
19 views, and behaviors of their cultural worlds, they are more likely to experience
20 *Synonymie*.

21 22 ***CRK, Vernacular Language, and Literacy***

23
24 As the data were analyzed, the use of language varieties became evident.
25 Unrecognized by cultural outsiders, India is a mosaic of many cultures and
26 languages that are geographically bound (Mohanty, et al., 2010; Singh & Sharma,
27 2009). As the *Kahani* writers acquired deeper understandings of the regions of
28 their cultural heritage (e.g., Jammu Kashmir, Telangana), they also adopted the
29 words or modes of expression commonly used within their specific heritage
30 community (e.g., *Diwali/Deepavali; Puja/Pooja; Ram/Rama, Ravan/Ravana*). The
31 linguistic differences include stylistics, orthography, morphology, and syntax (cf.
32 Henderson, 1965; Ramanujan & Masica, 2016; Sailaja, 2012). As the writers
33 select linguistic variants, they simultaneously reveal cultural influences from the
34 distinct regions of India. In the following excerpt, Yosso's (2005) *Familial* and
35 *Linguistic Capitals*, the *Kahani* writer indicates the contribution of family to their
36 literacy development:

37
38 *I know a lot of things about Indian culture and traditions through my parents. My*
39 *mother is my inspiration, she taught me how to read and write our Indian language –*
40 *Telugu.*

41
42 Opportunities for writing development were also noted by the various lengthy
43 description of epochs and historic events within Indian culture:

44
45 *Once there was a demon by the name of Hiranyakashapu. Hiranyakashapu*
46 *was an arrogant demon, and he hated Lord Vishnu because Lord Vishnu*
47 *killed Hiranyaksha who was Hiranyakashapu's brother. Hiranyaksha was the*

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

6
7 From this written excerpt, we can see the *Kahani* writer's engagement with
8 Indian history and the literacies (i.e., morphology, discourse). The writer's ability
9 to retell the story from one of Hindu epics must be noted here.

10 11 **Culture and Socialization**

12
13 The writers narrated multiple situations in which they interacted with elder
14 members of the Asian Indian community in culturally-bound activities (e.g.,
15 celebrations, *Funds of Knowledge*, religion, spirituality). The *Kahani* narratives
16 evidenced *CRK* as the young writers engaged in social interaction with cultural
17 insiders (i.e., cultural socialization) (Romero, et al., 2000). The following quote
18 demonstrates how the *Kahani* writers benefited (i.e., learned) from the process of
19 *CRK*:

20
21 *During these festivals it is customary for people to invite others to their houses for*
22 *'vetthalaipak'... It is considered auspicious. I remember how my mom used to invite*
23 *our neighbors and relatives to our house and how we used to accompany her to*
24 *other peoples' houses. It was a lot of fun, especially because of the yummy Prasad we*
25 *used to get! (SY 0026).*

26
27 In the foregoing exemplar, we witness *CRK* through social interaction (e.g.,
28 "invite... neighbors and relatives to our house"), communication of values (e.g.,
29 "It is considered auspicious") and instruction on routines, and traditions, (e.g.,
30 "how we used to accompany her to other peoples' houses").

31 32 **Appreciating Difference**

33
34 Throughout the *Kahani Literacy Project*, it became evident that *CRK* could
35 be accomplished through the language arts (i.e., listening, speaking, reading,
36 writing). All of the communicative modalities (e.g., oral traditions, visual and
37 performing arts) contributed to and reinforced *Cultural Preservation* (Iyengar &
38 Smith, 2016). While acknowledging the lack of certain conveniences (e.g., air
39 conditioning, Wi-Fi, paved roads), the *Kahani* writers portrayed their experiences
40 within the heritage country as rewarding:

41
42 *We also went to sugar cane fields and the roads were all dirt, which made them*
43 *inaccessible by car so we had to go by a tractor/motorcycle... Everyone was really*
44 *happy that we had gotten sugar cane because we don't get much sugar cane in*
45 *America (AP 0019).*

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

4 5 **Assimilated Cultural Knowledge**

6
7 Frequently, the *Kahani* writers offered explanations and descriptions
8 reminiscent of docents, historians, and other “cultural brokers.” The primary
9 function of all these three roles or vocations is to record and explain heritage and
10 history to others. Through the *Kahani* narratives, the young writers shared their
11 understandings of different aspects of Indic culture with their iconicity and
12 semiotics. In the text below, the writer offers definitions, clarification, and cultural/
13 historical significance to the Asian Indian people:

14
15 *I remember that we went to India during the time of Diwali. This is the “festival of*
16 *light.” Diwali celebrates the victory of good over evil. This is where Ram defeated*
17 *Ravan. During Diwali we also perform the “Laxmi Pooja.” This day marks the New*
18 *Year for many places in India. There is a festival called Holi, which is the “festival of*
19 *colors” (AP 0018).*

20
21 We observe through the discourse how the student projects confidence over
22 her acquired cultural knowledge and readily shares what she has learned about her
23 culture.

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

27
28 *I want to share with you my experience in my brothers [sic] Upanayanam.*
29 *Upanayanam is an Indian event which signifies the transition from a child to a young*
30 *man. Tomorrow is the day of my brothers [sic] Upanayanam (AP 0018).*

31
32 A gender specific (for boys only), culture-bound observance is captured by the
33 above writer.

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

38 39 **Gratitude and Heritage**

40
41 With their descriptions, the *Kahani* writers revealed events that provided
42 opportunities to develop deeper understandings and appreciation for their heritage
43 culture. While at times implicit, as this exemplar reveals, the writers made explicit
44 their appreciation for elements of their heritage culture:

45
46 *During my visit to the Thousand Pillar Temple, I was amazed at the majesty and*
47 *elegance of the temple and its architecture. I was expecting it to be a boring old*

1 *temple, but it was very interesting. It showed me a lot about my heritage, and made*
2 *me proud of it (JG 003).*
3

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

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

11
12 *Next the priest did Kumarabhojanam which is when my brother and his five friends*
13 *were served a feast with no flavor. My brother and my mom had shared a plate*
14 *together [which is called matrubhojanam], is when my mom and brother share a*
15 *plate to signify that that [sic] is the last meal he will have with my mom as a child*
16 *(AP. 0018).*
17

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

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

26
27 *At the end of the day, India is too many words for me to put into one story...I can say*
28 *how amazing my trips to it have been, though... India's so unique, something that's*
29 *under- appreciated and understated. Here in the US, many people take things for*
30 *granted, myself included. In India, I was forced to check myself, to truly appreciate*
31 *things I hadn't even noticed before (MV 0018).*
32

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

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

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

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

7 **Conclusion and Implications**

9 Opportunities to explore heritage knowledge in schooling is important.
10 Children must be provided with opportunities to appreciate their community
11 knowledge and culture for self-affirmation and validation. The possible negative
12 consequences when *CRK* is omitted from curriculum may include, self-hate, low
13 self-esteem, assimilation, *cultural erasure* (Ruser, 2020), *cultural cringe* (Phillips,
14 1950) or *cultural alienation* (Vo, 2021). Literacy projects such as the *KLP* may
15 help disrupt the lack of opportunities for children to engage in activities that
16 deepen their understanding of their roots and thereby construct a healthy identity
17 as Asian Indians.

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Appendix A: Publicity Flier

KAHANI PROJECT

Come and celebrate Indian culture through stories, dance, festivals, and foods!

ಭಾರತೀಯ ಮಕ್ಕಳು ಮತ್ತು ಅವರ ಕುಟುಂಬಗಳು ಸಂಸ್ಕೃತಿಯ ಸಂಪತ್ತನ್ನು ಹೊಂದಿದ್ದು ಇದನ್ನು ಶಾಲಾ ಸಮಯದಲ್ಲಿ ವಿರಳವಾಗಿ ಆನಂದಿಸಲಾಗುತ್ತದೆ. ನೀವು ಯಾರೆಂದು ಆಚರಿಸಲು ಬನ್ನಿ!




Schedule

Mon Introduction
*People and Project
*What makes your culture unique and special?

Tues Oral traditions
*Guest poet from the Indian community of San Antonio

Wed Expression: From literary to kinesthetic
*Bharatanatyam dance school from San Antonio

Thurs Telling our stories:
*From Pin to Tamarind;
*Balarama
*Writing Workshop

Fri Writing Workshop

Sat Exhibit Open
Time to Celebrate Authorship, Family, Food, and Community!

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Appendix B: Culturally Efficacious Picture books



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Appendix C: Multimodal Materials



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ONLY FOR REVIEW