

# A Multicultural Approach to Teaching English Language Arts: Starting with the Personal and Connecting to the Global

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It is important to consider students' own understanding of themselves and of others when incorporating a culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum in the classroom. As young children begin to recognize others who are different from themselves and as they attempt to form their identities, gender and ethnic stereotypes can influence their process of self-conceptualization. To support diverse students' identities within any curriculum program, teachers need to be equipped with a diverse range of culturally appropriate pedagogies (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Diverse students can better navigate the multiple worlds of home, school, and community when teachers' pedagogical strategies engage their personal experiences and identities (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1991). Culturally relevant pedagogy may create opportunities for students—and teachers—to engage with their multiple identities and to draw on their diverse lived experiences and perspectives to interpret and respond to particular issues (Nieto, 1992).

Children become aware of their own ethnicity and begin to discover the differences between cultures at a young age. A number of researchers have argued that many children have this knowledge by the age of 4 or 5 (e.g., Derman-Sparks, 2006; Hyun, 2007; Kendall, 1983; Wolpert, 2006). Biles (1994) therefore argued that cultural identity must be taught at a young age in order for children to “develop positive feelings about their racial and cultural identity” (p. 1). Lo Coco, Inguglia, and Pace (2005) pointed out: “This knowledge is, above all, about children's ability to

choose a correct label for themselves, to identify themselves with their own group, and to adopt the specific habits and behaviours of that ethnic group” (p. 224).

An important component of multicultural education is a “commitment to broadening children’s awareness of and natural acceptance of diverse cultural heritages” (Kendall, 1983, p. 31). When children grow up in diverse neighbourhoods, they tend to become more cognizant and aware of race and racial differences at an earlier age than children who live in monoracial settings (Ramsey, 2006; Ramsey & Myers, 1990). When students have a strong self-concept and think positively about themselves, they are better able to accept the cultural differences around them (Kendall, 1983). Educators play a vital role in helping students develop their sense of self.

Engaging students in a research project in which they explore their cultural heritage may help them become more aware of their cultural identities within the Canadian context and assist them in creating a positive self-concept and a greater acceptance of others. This article examines one such project and indicates how projects like these can help students make sense of and better understand their cultural identities.

### **Methodology**

In a Grade 4 classroom with 29 students representing 23 ethnicities, the language arts program became a crucial space for implementing culturally relevant pedagogies that stimulated the students’ understanding and perception of diverse social and cultural histories. This 4–week study was conducted at a culturally diverse urban school in Southern Ontario to examine how children conceptualize their cultural identities. It explored how students could further broaden these conceptions by learning about their cultural heritage and gaining a better understanding of themselves and their family’s history. The way in which children understand their own cultural heritage is undoubtedly subjective, and may be ambiguous. For this reason, the study explored how students’ self-concept and perception of others might be altered as they investigated their own cultural and ethnic backgrounds and situated their familial history within the multicultural city in which they lived.

The students conducted online research, interviewed relatives, and created family trees. Their conceptions, findings, and wonderings were recorded using pre- and post-test questionnaires and reflective journal entries. Many students expressed strong positive feelings about the process of exploring their own familial history and learning about the cultures of their classmates. The students’ perceptions of self and of others were seen to develop.

In order to examine how curricular activities can influence Grade 4 students' perceptions of their cultural identities, I facilitated a cultural heritage unit that was implemented and connected to the Grade 4 English Language Arts program in Ontario. This curricular program included four stages: (a) an online student research project; (b) creation of a family tree; (c) interview of a grandparent/relative; and (d) mounting of a cultural fair, where students shared their findings and presented their research. After each stage in the unit, students wrote a reflective journal entry.

### **Participants**

The study took place at the fictionally named Walton Primary School in an ethnoculturally diverse city in Southern Ontario. At Walton, 47 percent of the student body was female and 53 percent was male; 26 percent of the students had a primary language other than English, 1 percent of students have lived in Canada for 2 years or less, and 3 percent have lived in Canada for 3 to 5 years. The classroom selected for this study consisted of 29 Grade 4 students, approximately half of whom were second- and third-generation immigrants. Among the 29 students, 23 ethnic backgrounds were represented. Many students had European ancestry, and others had Sri Lankan, Guyanese, Jamaican, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Korean ancestry. Except for one student, all students were born in Canada.

### **Procedure and Materials**

I began the cultural heritage unit by having students conduct online research. They used an online research note-taking sheet to record bibliographic data and assist in their note-taking. They created a family tree and then conducted an interview assignment in which they interviewed a parent, grandparent, or older adult who had originally come from their cultural homeland. Interview prompts were given to students in the form of a paper handout, to help guide their interactions. At the conclusion of the unit students presented their research at our class cultural fair, displaying their work on a Bristol board. During the cultural fair students used a cultural fair fact-gathering sheet to record information they learned when visiting their peers' exhibits. At the end of each activity students wrote a reflective journal entry, which charted what they had experienced from participating in the unit.

### **Analysis**

Data collected included a pretest and a posttest, five journal entries, samples of student work, and researcher observation and field notes. The quantitative data for

this study included student responses to pre and post questionnaires, and was analyzed statistically for content and quality of students' responses. The qualitative data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach, in which observational data are permitted to influence the coding and evaluation, and a list of potential themes is identified and then revised using emergent themes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The journal-writing produced by the students over the course of this cultural heritage unit was analyzed using qualitative analysis methodology to discover themes among the students' journal entries. All the students' journal entries were read, emergent themes were identified, and the data were categorized under these themes.

### **Qualitative Journal Entry Findings**

The students' journal entries were an important part of the research data. Journalling provided the students with a space where they could communicate their learnings, wonderings, and questions about themselves and others during the cultural heritage unit. Journal entries also provided a glimpse into the students' thought processes and their independent thoughts and feelings; "through the process of developing reflective and clarified cultural identifications, students will hopefully acquire more positive attitudes toward their neighbourhoods and communities" (Banks, 1997, p. 127).

Using a grounded theory analysis of these reflective journal entries, several themes emerged over the unit's 4-week duration:

1. Children develop a sense of self and others through collaborating and sharing.
2. Children develop a positive self-concept and confidence about cultural identity.
3. Children's language and religion are important hallmarks of their cultural identity.
4. Children welcome opportunities to bridge home/school/cultural divides.
5. Children develop a sense of intergenerational understanding.

#### **1. Children Develop a Sense of Self and Others Through Collaborating and Sharing**

Students engaged in "sharing time" after they conducted online research, after the making of their family tree, and after their grandparent interview. Sharing time was special for the students, and peer influence among the students was clearly evident. For example, Andra reflected on what she learned throughout the unit:

I like the unit because I never ever knew a lot about other peoples' cultures like Pakistan, India, Romania, Somalia and many others. It was fun to do this unit. I wish we could do this project again.

The students taught and learned from one another, and constructed a greater

sense of their own cultural identities as a result. In the end, relationships between peers were strengthened as students expressed excitement and appreciation for what they accomplished and shared together. Therefore, while it was important for students to engage in deep reflection and learn about themselves, journal entries also revealed that communicating and sharing with their peers helped intensify students' understanding of themselves—their own identity conception—in relation to others. Banks (1997) noted that in helping students to develop an understanding of their own culture, it is important to help students “view their culture through the lenses of other cultures” (p. 127).

## **2. Children Develop a Positive Self-Concept and Confidence About Cultural Identity**

The students exhibited changes in attitude and confidence as they progressed through the unit. At the beginning some students were clearly reluctant to delve deeply into the project. However, apprehensive at first, many later became enthusiastic. As students made new discoveries about themselves and learned about their cultural heritage and the history of their families, they became more confident of themselves. Surinder shared his new knowledge:

I never knew that my country is well known for spices. They make lots of spices. For example, they make curry, columbo, red pepper, etc. One day in 2004, in late December, they had an awful hurricane called the tsunami. It ruined lots of houses and people were crying for their valuables.

The students also expressed enthusiasm and excitement about the cultural heritage fair. Throughout Andra's journal entries, she appeared excited about learning more about Somalia, her ethno-cultural homeland. She also wrote about the conversations that she had with her family while she conducted her research project. Andra acknowledged that Somalia is not at all what she had originally thought it was. In her fourth journal entry she compared Somalia to Canada to illustrate that Somalia is not a poor country in Africa:

I learned a lot about my country. I learned that Somalia was one of the African kind of country. At first I thought that Somalia was a poor country, but then my Dad told me more information that it wasn't that poor. They had buildings like Canada too. Then I asked my dad if I can do more...It was fun.

Andra's journal entry shows how important and exciting it was for her to learn more about Somalia. Her father was a source of information for her, and she wanted to “do more” since “it was fun.” Speaking about Somalia she seemed confident, and proud that the country her parents had come from was not as poor as she had thought it was.

Andra's experience demonstrates how home and school connections can be fostered through research projects, such as the cultural heritage unit, that ask students to communicate with their families and return to the school community with what they have learned.

### **3. Children's Language and Religion are Important Hallmarks of Their Cultural Identity**

Several journal entries revealed that students identified language and religion as important factors in connecting to their culture. Some students spoke their another language at home, while others only spoke English at home. Both groups generally felt that it was important to know the language of other cultural groups. Some were proud to learn new words in the language that their parents or grandparents spoke, and others attempted to learn how to write their names in another language. Language was an important link for Monica in identifying with her ethno-cultural background. She was excited to learn about India and felt that knowing the language was an integral part of this learning process. She noted, "I know how to say my name in another language." In her next entry she wrote that she learned "some very cool facts about India, like there are over 200 languages in India and lots of different religions." Similarly, Alexandra reflected on what she learned about Macedonia: "I learned about the religions and languages they speak in Macedonia."

In many of the students' journal entries, being cognizant of religion, as part of their cultural identification, was given similar importance. Vanesh, for example, reported that "...our god is the Buddha." Students also questioned the customs and norms of society and thought critically about different issues around the world. As students researched their cultural heritage they often incorporated religion to classify people in the country of their ancestors, their family, or themselves. For instance, Zarine's articulation of her religious values progressed in her journal entries and the importance of her religious beliefs continued to be prevalent in her writing:

Pakistan has the biggest mosque where you go and pray, Muslims wear Shulwar Kamiz and a Dubuta to cover our heads. Sometimes we wear a Dubuta to cover our face from men. Muslims go to the mosque to pray around Allah's home.

While, the emergence of strong religious and moral values was not evident in all of students' writing, there were many references to the religions people practice within the countries the students researched. For instance, Jaden noted, "most of Jamaicans are Christians."

Students who only spoke English, still placed value on the importance of knowing about the different languages spoken throughout the world. What was also interesting was that students who spoke another language and English still felt equally connected to being part of and sharing in Canadian culture. Vanesh, who spoke both Singhalese and English, pointed out that he had a “Canadian and Sri Lankan mixed voice.” As students researched their cultural heritage, many went through a process of defining and connecting religion and language with culture, showing that they felt this was an important component of one’s cultural heritage. It also presents an illustration of the different facets students may choose to explore when learning about their own culture and those of others; language and religion were obviously important aspects to students’ identities that they were comfortable sharing and exploring within this context.

#### **4. Children Welcome Opportunities to Bridge Home/School/Cultural Divides**

The project provided students with the opportunity to research a country that was personally significant to them. The homework they brought home with them required they speak to their family in order to gain insights into their ancestry. Students then returned with their information to school to share with their classmates. As a result, there was a strong sense of strengthening connections between the home and the school. Students’ interest in the study and their desire to share with their friends at school what their family valued and did at home were expressed. For example, Surinder wrote:

I felt proud of myself at the fair because I showed everybody my work. I experienced that everybody has their own culture, which means that in everybody’s culture they do different things. I shared my project by first showing them the tea culture and then I showed them the other stuff. I liked the cultural unit very much because I got to show everybody what my family did.

Surinder’s journal entries demonstrated that not only was he proud of himself and what he had accomplished, but more importantly, he was able to share information about what his family did at home with his peers at school. The enthusiasm that students exhibited with regards to bringing their home cultures into the classroom provided a glimpse into students’ perspectives. Surinder was one of many students who excitingly shared that he “got to show everybody what my family did.” Clearly, the project provided a welcome invitation for students to bring their cultural communities into the classroom, subsequently affirming their identities and bridging the home and school cultural divide.

## 5. Children Develop a Sense of Intergenerational Understanding

As students conducted interviews with grandparents and other relatives, they gained a greater sense of change in societal and cultural values through the generations. Even though some students interviewed a relative that was only two or three generations back, they acquired a strong sense of cultural change. They expressed concern, anxiety, surprise, and pleasure about the cost of merchandise, the duties of males and females, and historical events that were all very much connected to their immediate family. By asking their mothers, fathers, and grandparents what the norms of society or proper behaviour were like during their time (such as what they did for recreation and what the rules of the house were), students engaged in deep cultural learning. Jaden expressed concern over the punishment that his grandmother would have received if she did not do her homework:

I learned so many interesting facts about Jamaica. I visit every winter, it is burning hot there. They don't have a good war team. In Jamaica if you come to school late, be bad, or don't do your homework you get hit with a belt and your parents can't do anything about it.

Jaden wrote this after he interviewed his grandmother. He instantly compared her life to his and was clearly struck by the idea of such a severe punishment.

The grandparent interview had a definite effect on students' journal entries, and in their fourth and fifth entries, many students were in awe after learning about their family's history. Nalini was surprised by the fact that, in her ethno-cultural homeland, at a young age children were expected to look after farm animals. She wrote about that in three of her journal entries. Nalini also spent time sharing stories with Hannah, and in her fourth journal entry she wrote:

I learned that my mom was not allowed to have make-up or bags in the house. Anna's grandpa was stuck in a room with billions of people. He had to live there.

Nalini's journal entry showed that students not only benefited from learning about their own family's history, but also gained valuable insights into the histories of their peers.

The grandparent interview also affected students' understanding of a sense of the "other" in history. Students tended to define themselves in comparison to what they believed to be the norm. For instance, Surinder wrote:

In Sri Lanka, I learned that they drank well water. I also learned that they speak two languages, Tamil and Sinhalese. I also learned that in the olden days there was only one school in every community. The schools had all Grades 1 to 12 and kindergarten.

John found it surprising that during his grandfather's time society was different in terms of music and gender roles:

I learned that my Nana wore bobby socks and listened to rock and roll. Also that dads worked and mothers stayed home.

Many students learned about war times and challenging situations their family members had experienced. In many ways, students learned about alternative histories and stories from a variety of perspectives. Overall, students' development of intergenerational understanding was most evident by the final journal entry. The interview was an important component of the cultural heritage unit as it provided students with an in-depth understanding of their families' histories.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The cultural heritage unit provided students with an opportunity to understand the various cultures and ethnicities that were a part of their classroom. They explored and learned about others and themselves and achieved many positive (re)affirmations about themselves and others. The process and outcome of this project shows how important it is to acknowledge, discuss, and teach children to appreciate their culture and those of others at a young age.

Many themes emerged in the analysis of the students' journal entries. Overall, the students demonstrated excitement about their personal research project and welcomed the opportunity to bring their home life into the school. Students' perceptions of self changed as they learned about their family's history; they explored who and what defined them and how these definitions came to be. Students went through a process of questioning "Who am I?", "What do I represent?", and "What does my family represent?" Their wonderings were evident in the questions they raised through journaling. Their desire to know more about their culture and become a part of their own special history was evident. Overall, students in this research sample were quite diverse in ethnicity, familial experiences, and length of time in Canada. All the students showed an increase in participation, enthusiasm, and connection to their cultural backgrounds. Results from quantitative and qualitative measures indicated that all the students benefited from participating in the project. Their understanding of self and of others deepened, along with their knowledge about their familial history.

### **Limitations of Research**

Limitations included the sample size (only 29 participants), and the study's length

of time (4 weeks). Future studies that included a larger sample size and a longer amount of time spent working with the participants might find more significant results in terms of impact on students' learning and identity development. Some students were faced with challenges involving language barriers and access to relatives whose first language was not English or who did not speak English at all.

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