

Ethical Readings of Student Texts: Attending to Process and the Production of Identity in Classroom-Based Literacy Research

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Abstract

This paper highlights multimodal literacy activities that invited the social re/positioning of learners as creators of meaning and experience rather than passive readers of text. Elaborating two cases, the paper describes the ways in which newcomer students' identities were negotiated and enacted during the project, and how their identities were read and constructed by teachers in the classroom. The paper recommends an analytic approach to literacy studies research that accounts for the ways in which literate identities are materialized in classrooms, and the value in documenting both the product and process of students' literacy work.

The present context of language and literacy teaching in Canada is changing in many ways. Classrooms are increasingly multilingual and multicultural, which is enriching teaching and learning with students' diversity of knowledge and experience. Teachers are also incorporating information and communication technologies (ICTs) into literacy activities, which is opening up new potentials for literacy learning. These changes are re/shaping literacy practices in schools, including the ways in which languages and literacies are used, and the forms of literacy that are constituted as valuable and appropriate for academic purposes. Many recent studies have explored school-based literacy practices, focusing on articulating strategies for promoting the language and literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse learners. Much of this research draws connections from a range of perspectives about the relationship between literacy practices and identity (e.g. Bartlett, 2007; Leander, 2002; Marshall & Toohey, 2010; Rowsell & Pahl, 2007). Of particular interest is how researchers conceptualize this relationship, and the school and classroom contexts that contribute to understandings of identity.

Exploring the relationship between school-based literacy practices and learners' identities, this paper presents insights arising from a literacy project creating digital dual-language books with multilingual children at the elementary level. Highlighting multimodal literacy activities that invited the social re/positioning of learners as creators of meaning and experience, the study reported here considered how students' literacy practices were shaped by the classroom context and the materialization of meanings and students' literate identities in school. Elaborating two cases, this paper describes the ways in which students' identities were negotiated and enacted during the project, and how their identities were read and constructed by teachers in the classroom. The findings suggest that multimodal literacy activities that drew upon the full range of students' cultural and linguistic experience opened a space to re/construct the students' literate identities in school. However, the classroom context both enabled and constrained the representational form of students' identities in their texts. I draw upon these findings to suggest an "ethical reading" of student texts as part of the research process in New

Literacy Studies, a reading which attends to the ways in which classroom literacy practices shape the production and representation of students' identities in school.

Research in the field of New Literacy Studies takes a socially situated perspective of literacy and literacy development which locates literacy in particular social, cultural, political, and historical contexts such as the home, community, or institutions (Barton, 2007; Cazden, 2001; Gee, 2008; Street, 2003). This approach conceives of literacy as a social practice: an activity or process that takes place in the interactions between people, rather than a skill or ability that is fixed and unchanging. A methodological implication of this perspective is the importance of gathering not only artifacts and products of students' literacy activities, but also socio-cultural, observational and/or ethnographic data to elaborate the context within which these artifacts were produced. Analytically, adding an ethical reading to this data builds in self-criticality: acknowledging that understandings and outcomes arising from the research process are partial, incomplete, shaped by the research site, context, relationships, and histories of participation (Lather, 2007).

An ethical reading of student texts extends beyond representation of meaning to dialogic understanding of meaning based on our response to and engagement with the content of students' texts. This approach to analysis connects to a social and socially situated understanding of experience; it also raises questions about the production of identities within accepted and dominant narratives of experience. In an ethical reading, students' identities and resources might be understood not as fixed, but in relation to the pedagogical space. Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) articulates the pedagogical space as a site of passage, movement, and potentiality (p. 159). She writes that teachers, through their practice, gesture toward the coordinates of this passage and open a space for students to move into. For both researchers and practitioners, this space is a site for relating to understandings not as certain or guaranteed, but as emergent qualities and movements that are shaped by our own sociocultural experience and limited by the room we have to maneuver. Knowledge about these issues has great importance for teachers and researchers in their work to understand and support the literacy development of culturally and linguistically diverse children.

Production of Learners' Literate Identities

Texts are material forms which instantiate learners' identities. A multimodal social semiotic approach suggests that texts bear traces of the socio-cultural dimension of the classroom, where learners' identities are negotiated and constructed (Stein, 2008). Rowsell and Pahl (2007) suggest that the identities of learners are "sedimented" into the texts they produce. However, students' texts are not a blank slate; they are not neutral sites upon which students imprint their identities. Sociocultural and ideological contexts underlie and contribute to the production of identity in and by texts. In schools, learners' texts are interpreted according to dominant constructions of what constitutes appropriate, legitimate literacies: their identities rendered within teachers' ideas of who the immigrant student is and what role their first language and literacy, prior experience, and knowledge has in language and literacy learning activities.

This theoretical perspective sheds light on the ethics and materiality of representational forms of students' literate identities for literacy research. Considering not only text but also context, I consider how social spaces, such as schools, are constituted by particular structures, practices, and relations which organize students' experiences and activities and index what counts as powerful knowledge and/or literacies. Contesting and disrupting "what counts" means

grounding activities in the social, cultural, and political contexts of students' lives and the collective life they are sharing in school (Leander, 2002, p. 245). Attending to these issues invites researchers to consider new ways of documenting and analyzing the actualities of students' experience in literacy research.

Recently, Elizabeth Moje and Allan Luke (2009) raised questions about the "identity turn" in literacy studies, asking how particular views of identity shape how researchers think about literacy, and, in turn, how researchers' views of literacy shape meanings made about identity (p. 420). Considering identity as formed in and through the activities of social relations, wherein we experience our being through others (Fanon, 1967), the approach to identity adopted in this study makes visible the role of social interactions in identity construction. In classrooms, these social interactions are marked by participation, although not all students are participating in similar ways (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Students' opportunities to participate are shaped by their identity investments in the learning process and specific interactions, and by discourses and ideologies in schooling which connect the self within broader socio-political realities (Lee & Anderson, 2009; Norton, 2000). From this perspective, identities are not static or pre-existing, but formed in and through linguistic performances that are shaped by context. Classrooms can thus be described as "figured worlds" (Holland, Skinner, Lachiotte, & Cain, 1998), in which "particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52).

These perspectives on identity have implications for the methodology by which "literate identities" are recognized and operationalized in research. Conceiving of language use and textual production as an act of identity, the ways in which learners enact their identities in school, and the ways in which their identities are sedimented into their texts, are connected to issues of power and agency relating to not only broader social realities but also interactions in the classroom. Further, the extent to which learners' identities can be known for research is partial and incomplete – the identities we find in students' texts are meanings which we as teachers or researchers decide to settle upon in our analyses (Gallagher, 2008; Lather, 2007).

Research Design

The fieldwork for the project is based upon Cummins' (2011) Literacy Engagement framework, which conceives of literacy engagement as not just a factor in literacy attainment, but an outcome. As such, the Literacy Engagement framework is pedagogical; it articulates both what engagement-supporting instructional practice might look like, and how instructional practice creates a context for producing engagement as an outcome of learning. The framework suggests that in order to teach emergent bilingual students effectively, teachers need to maximize students' opportunities to become actively engaged with reading and writing, as noted in a recent elaboration of the framework:

Literacy engagement will be enhanced when students' ability to understand and use academic language is supported through specific instructional strategies, their prior experience and current knowledge are activated, their identities are affirmed, and their knowledge of, and control over, language is extended across the curriculum. (Cummins, Early, & Stille, 2011, p. 35)

These instructional dimensions are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

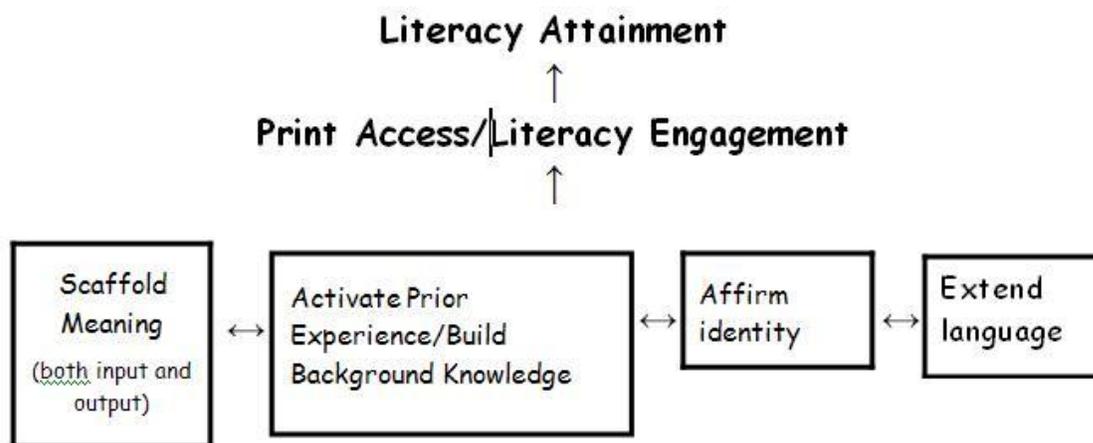


Figure 1. Literacy Engagement Framework.

Note. Diagram copyright 2011 (Cummins, J.) Reprinted with permission.

The Literacy Engagement framework provokes a critical analysis of conventional ideas for second language literacy pedagogy because engagement with age- and grade-appropriate texts and literacy activities is often delayed until learners achieve a minimum level of English language proficiency. Implicit in this approach is the assumption that the first language linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge that multilingual students possess have little instructional relevance to English-medium classrooms, and literacy abilities in languages other than English should be ignored. As the basis for the fieldwork involved in this project, the Literacy Engagement framework guided the teachers and I in selecting instructional strategies that emphasized the value of learners' cultural and linguistic knowledge, and that supported the learners' developing biliteracy.

Working with the two teachers and the students as collaborators, this project used ethnographic and action research to document classroom literacy practices and their meaning in the school context (Anyon, 2009; Gallagher, 2008; Heath & Street, 2008; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). The project incorporated qualities of participatory approaches by collaborating with the teachers in the research design, data collection, and analysis. A participatory approach to research is more than just a research method; it is an epistemology and ethic (Tuck, 2009) that underscores the inter-subjective, negotiated, and collective nature of knowledge production. As an interpretive approach, participatory research affords the opportunity to inquire into roles and relationships, and how these roles and relationships merge with discourses of understanding (Lather, 2007). Participatory research approaches help to foreground the ways in which histories of participation and power influence the production and construction of knowledge. Adopting this approach required me to take a reflexive stance toward the discursively constructed roles and relationships in the classroom, including my role as a university-based researcher. Although the teachers and researcher all worked toward the goal of supporting the students' language and literacy development, and affirming the value of their cultural and linguistic abilities, dominant values and histories of participation affected agency, subjectivity, and knowledge generated from this research.

Classroom Context and Fieldwork

The setting for this project¹ was an elementary school in a large Canadian city. The school serves 2000 students from kindergarten to grade five. Ninety-five percent of the students speak a language other than English at home, and the majority of families have arrived in Canada within the past five years. This project took place in a half day English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) class for grade five students; the students were integrated into their mainstream classes for the other half of the day. All the students were newcomers to Canada, having arrived within the past six months. There were eleven students in the class, four from Afghanistan, five from Pakistan, one from Mexico, and one from Bulgaria.

Class activities focused on language, literacy, and numeracy development. For the purposes of the project fieldwork we used digital technology tools, including laptop computers for each student, to assist them in creating “identity texts” as part of their language and literacy activities. Identity texts are defined as “the products of students’ creative work or performances carried out within the pedagogical space orchestrated by the classroom teacher...[which] hold a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light” (Cummins, Bismilla, Chow, Cohen, Giampapa, et al, 2005, p. 5). The research team began working with the class by introducing the students to an expanded range of children’s literature, including dual-language storybooks. Many of these books addressed issues that the students were dealing with in their own lives, including migration, learning a new language, and difficulties making new friends. We also introduced the students to digital technology tools, including Google Earth, PowerPoint, and Desktop Author storytelling software. Based on these new resources, the teachers decided to do language experience stories with the students, using the digital storytelling software. For the activity, students chose topics to write about themselves, such as *All about me* or *My journey to Canada*. My role was to work with the teachers and students to support this activity, and to gather data for research. The teachers and I encouraged students to use the full range of their linguistic resources, working with parents or same-language peers to write their stories in their first language as well as English. We scaffolded their writing process using pre-writing strategies, drafting, and revision, and the students presented their stories to parents, administrators, and other students in the school library at the end of the project.

Sources of data for analysis included transcriptions of interviews with the students and teacher, observational data from the classroom, field notes, digital images and video recordings of activities in the classroom taken by the teacher, students, and myself, and artifacts of the students’ work. These data were thematically coded. Taking into consideration students’ texts and images, as well as roles, relationships, and interactions among the students and teachers, we organized the data into six broad categories. The teachers were involved in identifying these categories through our preparation for two professional development conferences during which we co-presented the results of our project. The categories included:

1. Use of first language in teaching and learning activities
2. Role of technology in teaching and learning activities
3. Language awareness and language learning

¹ This case study took place in the context of a broader project entitled *Engaging Literacies* which was financially supported by a Canada Research Chair awarded to Dr. Jim Cummins of OISE, University of Toronto.

4. Literacy engagement
5. Parent and family involvement
6. Home and family literacy practices

In this paper I present two illustrative student stories that focus on the use of first language in teaching and learning activities, which are presented below. The description of the students' stories is concerned with the materialization of students' literate identities through both the multimodal text and its production. The two stories illuminated not only strategies for engaging learners' cultural and linguistic knowledge during literacy activities, but also pedagogical challenges that the activity sparked. Incorporating the full range of learners' cultural and linguistic resources opened the class to deeper issues than the teachers and I had planned. We engaged with students' authentic social realities, including issues of war and conflict that were new topics to this classroom. Analysis of these cases suggests the need for further research and theorization relating to methodological and representational practices in the field.

Learner's Stories: Khadija and Asad

Khadija

Khadija came to the school halfway through this project from Kabul, Afghanistan. Khadija spoke Dari and Afghani Pashto languages when she came to the school, and was silent during all (English-medium) whole-class activities. One other student in the class spoke the Dari language, and Khadija stuck close to this new friend. During small group or individual work, her new friend translated instructions into Dari and helped Khadija to understand what was happening in the class. Including Khadija in our story-writing activities, I asked the class what we should do to get Khadija started. Eagerly, the students suggested that she write her story entirely in Pashto, and they said that they were willing to explain to Khadija what to do. So, Khadija set about making her story, working hard to catch up to her classmates who were already two weeks ahead of her. In just two days, her draft and illustrations were nearly complete. With detailed drawings and neat Dari script, Khadija soon filled ten pages of her storybook. Figure 2 is a sample page from Khadija's story about her home country, showing her father praying before a special family meal.

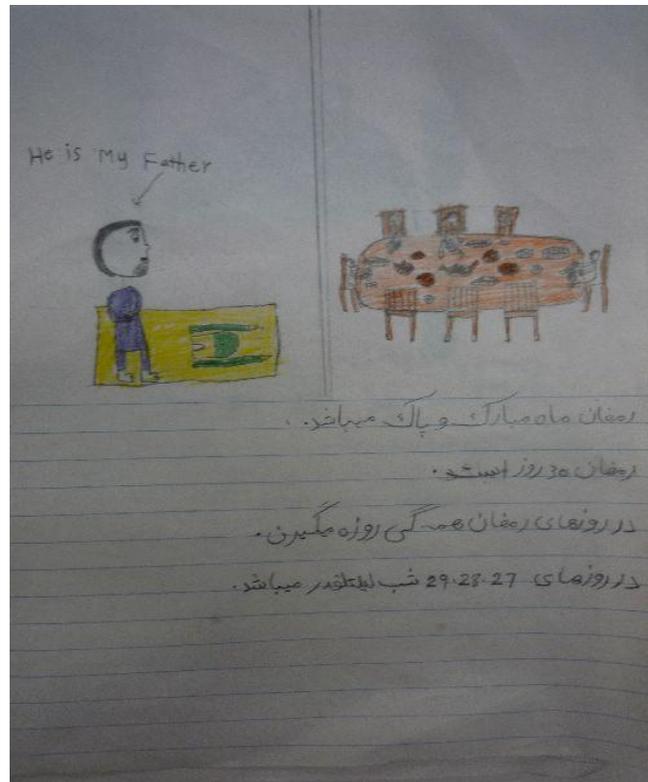


Figure 2. Sample from Khadija's story.

Throughout this activity, Khadija's teachers provided encouragement for her progress, showing their expectation that she could do the work, and supporting her same-language peers in helping her. The teachers used Khadija's story to scaffold her English language acquisition, assisting her to add labels to her illustrations in English such as "He is my father" which can be seen in Figure 2. The content of Khadija's text described religious traditions important to Khadija's family. Because Khadija spoke no English when she made this story, her teachers were unable to communicate with her about what to include in her story. Instead, the activity and expectations were interpreted and translated to Khadija through her peers who had also come from Afghanistan. In explaining that Khadija should write a story called *All about me*, the students provided her with suggestions and examples of what to write and draw. Khadija's story contained many cultural and religious symbols, far more than other students in the class. Semiotically, these signs can be read as reflecting the students' conceptualization of what constitutes appropriate content for a text of this topic, which appeared to be a broad and culturally-relevant conception.

Writing a story almost entirely in Pashto, Khadija's story was obviously quantitatively longer than it would have been in English but more importantly, it was qualitatively much richer and representative of her experience than text she could write in English at this time. The teachers reflected that encouraging Khadija to write her story in her first language promoted her literacy engagement and participation in the classroom, and increased her parents' involvement in the school. In an interview at the end of the project, one of the teachers described that the activity helped Khadija's mother "make some connection to the school...when she came and she listened [to the presentation in the library] I know she understood even if she didn't understand

anyone else's story." The teachers also decided that they were able to assess this activity as part of their understanding of Khadija's literacy development, although this was contrary to their initial expectations of the activity, in which students were to write a dual language (L1 + English) version of their text.

Asad

Another student in the class, Asad, wrote a story called "My journey to Canada". Working with Asad, his story was initially very short, including a single sentence or phrase under each picture that he had drawn. Knowing that Asad usually contributed far more in oral class discussions, I sat with Asad to help him extend his story, asking questions about each picture and encouraging him to write out the long answers he gave me. For instance, he had drawn pictures of his family wearing shalwar kameez, and I invited him to provide a written explanation of this picture and where the clothes came from. One of Asad's pictures illustrated a number of weapons, including an AK-47 and a grenade. These illustrations were very detailed, in contrast to other pictures in his story such as the picture of his apartment building where he did not even draw a door. Figure 3 shows Asad's picture of weapons, which can be compared with the picture of his apartment building, in Figure 4.

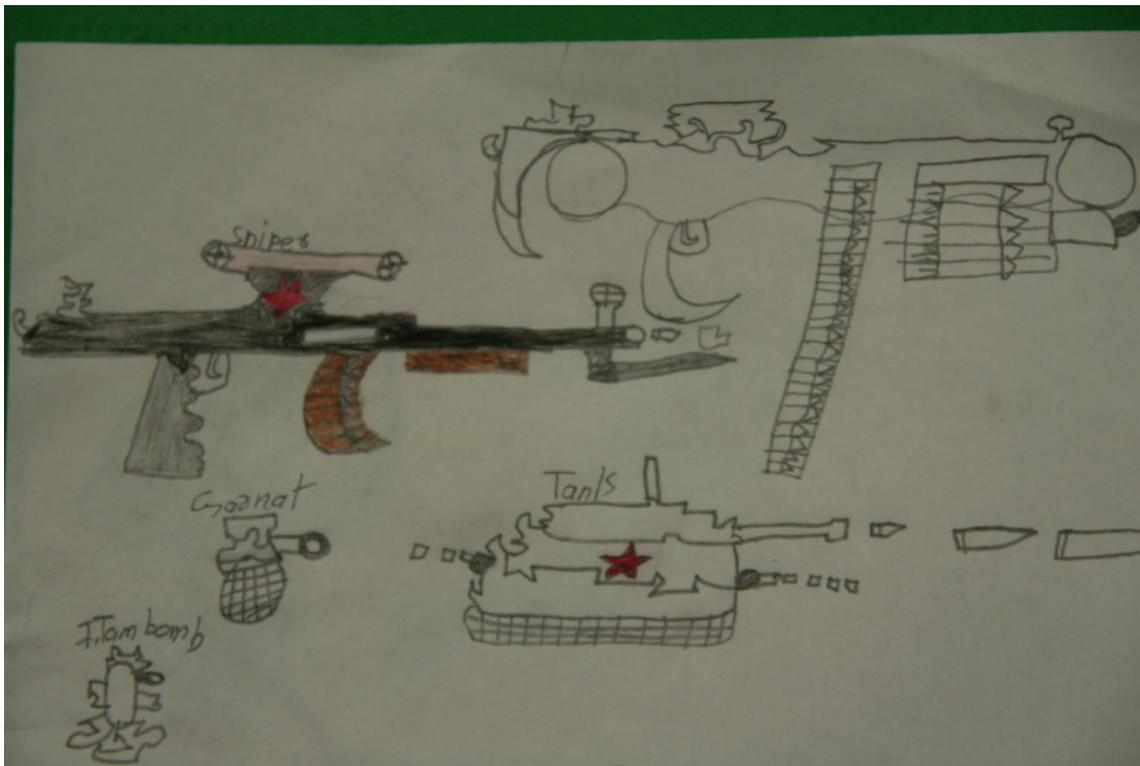


Figure 3. Sample from Asad's story.



Figure 4. Sample picture from Asad's story.

When his teachers first saw the weapon picture, they reacted with hesitation and anger. To share quotes from this interaction recorded in my field notes, one teacher asked, "What are you doing drawing pictures of weapons? You're supposed to be working on your story!" Asad replied that this picture was part of his story, and he wished to illustrate the lack of safety in his home country Pakistan. He explained that this was the reason his family decided to leave Pakistan. The teacher probed further, asking "Whose idea was it to draw this? Who told you that you could do this?" Asad said that the picture was his idea.

In my field notes, I noted that I felt the teachers held me responsible for the picture since I had been working with Asad on his written text. I suggested that the teachers read what Asad had written to accompany this picture (see Figure 5).

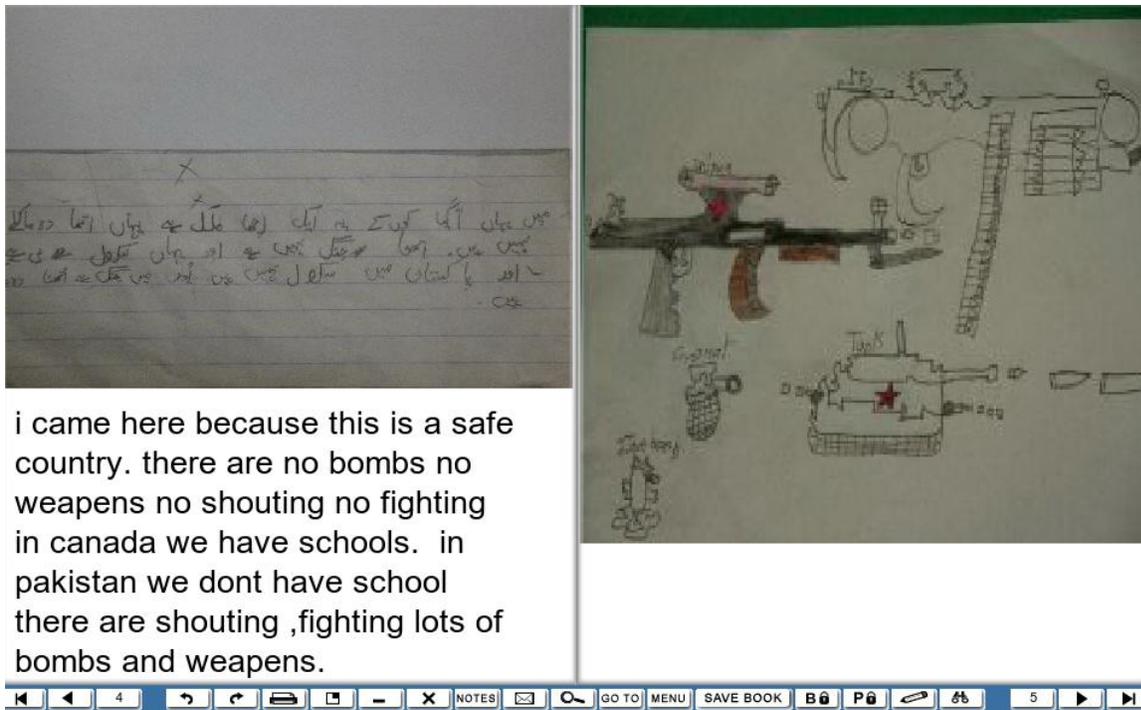


Figure 5. Text from Asad’s story.

After reading and discussing Asad’s story together, the teachers decided to allow him to include the picture of the weapons in his story. However, they asked him to rename his story “My home country”, and had him move the picture to the second page of his story, appearing after the page about his family wearing shalwar kameez. He also had a picture with the Canadian flag, and they asked him to move this picture to the last page of his story. These changes added distance and separation between Asad’s experiences in Pakistan and his experiences in Canada, and the new title remade his narrative into a story about Pakistan, not a story about Asad’s journey to Canada as he had initially planned. Asad’s work demonstrated his nuanced understanding of the context of his immigration to Canada, and showed that he was capable of strategic meaning making and writing persuasively, including articulating main ideas and adding supporting details to his writing when encouraged by someone or engaged by the subject matter.

In the class, Asad’s story prompted further discussion about issues of war and conflict, particularly during whole-class discussions during which we shared the students’ stories and talked about them. Several of the students had come to Canada from countries affected by war. These circumstances had affected the students in different ways, for instance interrupting their schooling or causing their families to move to a different home or refugee camp. Reflecting upon these discussions during an interview a month after the project was over, one of the teachers shared how she felt dealing with issues of war and conflict in the classroom: “It really [was] a good discussion. We unfortunately haven’t gone back to those discussions, I don’t know if I would delve into that topic area, it’s huge and the questions and responses...[were] overwhelming.” Reflecting upon the students’ ideas and opinions about war and conflict, the teacher said, “they come from countries where they have specific views that are probably not

their own, but brought forward by their parents. I think the important thing is telling them about equality and fairness in their new country and how people are together.”

Discussion

Each step in the creation and transformation of these dual-language stories represented both a performance and expansion of students’ identities. Classrooms have the potential to become transformative sites in which students’ cultural and linguistic resources can be used, however the extent to which this is possible depends upon the negotiation of students’ identities in the classroom (Cummins, 2009). The implications of this understanding are that the teacher, the relationships in the classroom, and the positioning of students’ prior knowledge and linguistic resources play an important role in the literacy accomplishments of students in school.

Ethics and Materiality in Representing Students’ Literacy Activities

The extent to which students could materialize their identities in the classroom was both enabled and constrained by the teacher actions and the literacy activity documented here. Like many conventional English-medium classrooms, students’ first language linguistic abilities and cultural knowledge were not drawn upon as scaffolds for literacy teaching and learning activities in this classroom prior to the beginning of this project. The teachers began to incorporate more of students’ background knowledge and prior experience into their instructional activities over the course of the project. The teachers made these choices without school leadership and support for developing the professional knowledge needed for implementing these instructional strategies, and they experimented with strategies for doing this on their own, with only me for support. Opening a space to challenge and expand dominant values for what constitutes appropriate forms of literacy practice in school is more readily accomplished with the support of policy, curriculum, leadership, and professional development. Without this support, teachers may be inclined to revert to what the school constitutes as legitimate literacy teaching and learning.

Student identities and experiences can be normalized and read in highly constrained terms, particularly when attention is focused upon only the products of students’ literacy work. Asad’s interactions with the teachers suggest that certain types of stories are allowed in school while others are constituted as unimaginable. These interactions also suggested students such as Asad have to negotiate which (parts) of their stories are considered legitimate for school-based literacy activities. Products, students’ final texts, mask the ways in which these texts produce representations. The processes of the students’ writing – drafting, conferencing with peers and/or teachers, editing, and translating – shaped and framed students’ stories in particular ways (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). Indeed, as my role in this project demonstrates, outsiders in the classroom can also introduce pedagogical openings or pivots that alter accepted and normalized discourses of teaching and learning. Research practices might also undermine transformative possibilities by re-inscribing normative notions of pedagogy and institutionalized forms of gaze (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010). Teachers may or may not feel confident or prepared to deal with such change. They are also influenced by district guidelines associated with anti-terrorism and school safety, which prescribe teachers’ responses to displays of weaponry (such as Asad’s drawing), which can prompt an elevation to risk assessment or other interventions. Analysis of the teachers’ responses thus needs to account for the slippage that can occur in the interstice among risk, discomfort, and desire for doing things differently.

Attending to context and the relational dimensions of students' literacy practices elaborates the production of students' literate identities in school. For instance, the process of Asad's story writing reveals what happens when we only read teacher-sanctioned or -sanitized versions of student stories. These "safe tellings" instantiate what representations of students are made possible in school, provoking the question of how students' literate identities and their representations should be rendered for research. Similarly, Khadija's story reflects what happens when the activity is interpreted and refracted by students, inviting an expanded interpretation of what kinds of stories are allowed in the classroom. As an activity, the production of this text demonstrated to Khadija that she was a legitimate member of the class from the first day of her arrival. It sent a positive message to Khadija and the class about her first-language literacy and her cultural background, and their value to learning.

To make visible the ways in which the students' experiences, and the roles and relationships manifest in the classroom map onto students' literacy activities, students' texts cannot be read as transparent. The cases elaborated here suggest that students' identities can be configured in particular ways in schools and classrooms. Extending analysis of textual products to include the process and production of texts can elaborate the meanings that texts have to students, and the relevance of these literacy activities to the social and material aspects of students' lives in school. Literacy activities must be read, methodologically, for the circulation of forms of identity that might be normalized through schools and even through literacy research. I am inspired to move toward what Patti Lather (2007) calls "incompetent readings" of students' literacy practices and their literate identities: working within and against categorization because students' identities both create and are created by the materiality of their experience at school.

An analytic approach to literacy studies research that accounts for the ways in which literate identities are materialized in classrooms needs to document the process as well as the product of students' literacy work. This can include taking up a reflexive, analytical approach to the roles, relationships, and histories of participation that underlie what happens in the classroom and how this shapes what students create. An ethical reading of student texts therefore requires attention to methodological and representational practices in the field of literacy studies. By attending to the product *and* process of students' literacy activities, literacy researchers might see differently what understandings were afforded or closed off through the literacy activities and research process.

Conclusion

In schools, texts produced by students are interpreted according to dominant constructions of what constitutes appropriate, legitimate literacy work; their identities rendered within teachers' ideas of who the immigrant student is and what role their first language and literacy, prior experience, and knowledge has in language and literacy learning activities. The findings presented here suggest ways in which learners and their texts can be rendered differently; not within teachers' fixed categories of understanding, but read instead as *in process*, or *becoming*. Research that highlights students' self-determination in crafting their narratives is aligned with a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) that documents and articulates the wisdom and hope of students, rather than only the essentialized elements of social realities. Literacy research and pedagogy, particularly with newcomer students, needs to reflect the complexity of lived lives and communities, the stories that are "the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*" (p. 417, emphasis in original)

The activities described here drew upon the full range of students' representational resources to position students as intellectuals and authors in classroom-based literacy activities; however, students' identity constructions also related to interactions in the classroom. From this perspective, literacy practices are dynamic and unfolding, constituted by relationships, and un/burdened from the limits of textual production. By attending to the *process*, as well as the products of students' literacy practices in school, participants' identities can be rendered more ethically, their meanings created as events unfold. Language, literacy, and meaning are contested and constituted through encounters with another, able to be re/made through more ethical, empowering relations, and literacy work in particular. This project provided an opportunity to inquire into representational and methodological practices in the field, suggesting an expanded approach to the interpretation of students' texts and their production.

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