

Critical Identity Work in Elementary Classrooms through Powerful Picture Books

by Rabia Khokhar

Background and Inquiry Question:

A few years ago, I started a Long Term teaching position as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher working with elementary school multilingual language learners in Toronto. When I first found out that I would be teaching ESL and working with Multilingual language learners, I was excited but mostly nervous. I was nervous because I remembered my own experiences as a student in an ESL program in Toronto. As I reflected on my own experiences, I remembered how the program I was part of was so removed from my identities and lived experiences as a South Asian and Muslim student. Although I was only part of the program for a few years, I felt disengaged and a sense of not belonging to my school and wider communities. I felt like the program focused a lot on the technicalities of learning the English language and reinforced a single story or idea of what it meant to be 'Canadian'. This was reinforced through the learning experiences, resources, daily conversations, classroom environment, teaching and the books that were shared.

As I reflect, what stands out is that the definition of Canada and Canadian that is so central to such programs did not include people who looked like me or had my lived experiences. If it did include my identities it was in a very tokenistic and additive way. For a long time, I did not feel proud of my intersectional identities but rather through unspoken messages that I received through schooling, I felt like I had to hide, remove or not talk about my identities. In some ways, this is how the system of schooling and specific programs function in oppressive and inequitable ways for students of various identities and lived experiences.

Therefore, when I found out that I would be teaching this program, I did a lot of reflection on my own experiences. I also researched and acknowledged the amazing things that educators across the country were doing to make this program equitable and inclusive. I was inspired by them and aware of the positional power I would have as a teacher within this program. I decided I would strive to create a change. I wanted the program to be relevant, responsive, asset based and centered around the identities and lived experiences of the students and school community I would be serving.

I decided to create an inquiry question which I used to frame my hopes and goals for the program. It also became a way to ensure that I was centering equity and inclusion in my teaching, approaches, choices and strategies. The following inquiry question guided my work: **How will I, a teacher with positional power, ensure that the ESL program is equitable and inclusive for my Multilingual language learners?** This essay will focus on my experiences as an ESL homeroom teacher as well as an ESL Itinerant teacher serving many schools in Toronto.



Equity and Inclusion in relation to the ESL program:

A central aspect of my inquiry question was to ensure that equity and inclusion was centered in the ESL program. I reflected and considered what this would actually mean and look like in this program. Firstly, I wanted to understand that although I had experienced feelings of exclusion within the classroom spaces, the classroom could also be a space of change, hope and inclusion. I centered the powerful words of bell hooks and made them part of my teaching pedagogy and practice. bell hook says “the

classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (hooks, 1994). For my multilingual language learners, I knew that through intentional choices, the classroom could be a place where they could find a sense of belonging, respect as well as see themselves and their lived experiences reflected and represented.

Secondly, I knew that if I wanted to center an equity and inclusive stance in the ESL program, I needed to center asset based pedagogy. Asset based pedagogy is really focused on recognizing that all students bring strength into the classroom community. Each student is an individual with their identities and lived experiences which adds value to the classroom. Asset based pedagogy allows us to center, honour and value the various cultural capital students bring with them. My students were new Canadians and part of making this pedagogy applicable was understanding that they were bringing intricate skills and experiences with them from the places they were coming from. Students may have been learning English but they each brought with them often one or two other languages and a vast amount of lived experiences. Paulo Freire says while reflecting on his schooling experiences, “when I arrived at...school, I was already literate” (1987). This is the way in which I strived to center and ‘see’ my students in the classroom and through this program; as complete full individuals who were here to ‘continue’ not ‘start’ their learning journey. I knew that part of ensuring that I was centering an asset based lens was to ensure that I was building bridges with students’ families. Building a relationship with families allowed me to learn more about my students’ identities and experiences authentically and on an ongoing basis.

Another aspect of bringing equity and inclusion in the ESL program and classroom was to center the idea of representation. My past experiences as a teacher-librarian were central to my thinking and practice around the importance of representation of students’ multiple and intersectional identities and lived experiences in all aspects of the program. In many ways I felt like my teacher-librarian identity was still a part of me because it was the lens through which I saw this program. In her book *Coming Home*, Tu Vuong says “Dear students... your story is the soul in each lesson” (Vuong, 2022). I wanted my students to be centered in the ways I was delivering curriculum, they were as Vuong says “the soul” and heart of the work in the classroom. They are the reason we are even

here. As well, “all students deserve a curriculum which mirrors their own experiences back to them...this validating it in the public world of the school...curriculum must also insist upon the fresh air of windows into the experiences of others” (Style, 1996). In relation to representation, I wanted my students to see themselves, their peers and our community in all aspects of the program.

Continuing to learn about ‘who’ my students were was important because that is how I could ensure that what students were seeing and learning was responsive, meaningful and reflective for them. My own experiences made me feel like I was not represented authentically within the program and so I know firsthand that “what children do not see in the classroom teaches children as much as what they do see” (Derman-Sparks et.al. (2009). Therefore, ‘who’ and ‘what’ students see in their schooling program sends an official message of who and what matters. The identities and experiences that students do not see or learn about also sends a message that this is not ‘that important’.

Role of Picture books:

As a former teacher-librarian and one always in the heart, I knew that if I wanted my students to feel represented and a sense of belonging in their program and learning space, then picture books would be one of the first places to do this work. Through picture books I could ‘show’ and ‘tell’ my students that I saw them, they mattered to me and I would commit to learning more about them. I know that picture books are a tangible and accessible first step to creating spaces of belonging and ensuring equity and inclusion. I wholeheartedly believe that there is “no tool is more powerful than the picture book” (McCarthy, 2020). As well, I knew that I would have many students from various backgrounds, identities, lived experiences and I knew that one of the first ways I could strive to connect with them would be through books.

Picture books were such an integral part of the program that I used Professor Rudine Sims Bishop’s metaphor of mirrors, windows and sliding glass doors as a framework. Professor Bishop says

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (1990).

Using Professor Bishop's metaphor as a framework, books became a way to affirm (mirror) the identities and lived experiences of my students, to expand (window) their worldviews and help them learn about those different from them and to build respect, understanding and foster relationships (sliding glass door). Books also helped students understand deeply what fair and unfair meant in relation to experiences connected to identity.



Importance of Identity

Books were central to identity development in our program. Oftentimes, schooling is seen as a neutral space where we should only focus on teaching specific academic subjects. But, in order to build equitable and inclusive communities we need to teach

about identity. Students need to be able to talk about their own multiple and intersectional identities as well as listen and learn about those of others. This builds cultural competence and can help us collectively work towards social justice. Teaching about identity will look different based on the age group but this work is just as important as any other learning that happens in a school.

Students come to school to see themselves and their lives represented. This creates a sense of belonging and engagement. Sometimes we may try very hard to not focus on identity because it can bring conversations that are a bit 'messy' but that is the reality and how these things are supposed to be. It is important that we help our students make sense of their experiences and the world. Identity or how our identities are seen and read is often translated into fair or unfair experiences we have in the world. Through conversations with my students, this is what they were telling me as well.

Throughout the year, my students were sharing some of their own experiences with me and I wanted to be able to use the curriculum as a way for them to make meaning as well as to give them tools on how to advocate for themselves and others. All of the activities that we did were embedded within the curriculum and this ensured that our work was not additive or tokenistic. By listening to the stories and centering the voices of my students, I knew that identity literacy; being able to talk about our identities and those of others was an important theme that I needed to include into everything I did in the classroom. Here are some of the conversations and stories my students were sharing in our class (I have removed all names of students to ensure confidentiality).

"My name is so hard. I want more of an English name"

"Can you call me this nickname, it's easier?"

"I know I am the brown crayon, but I want to use the peach instead to color myself in for this picture"

"I want to learn English quickly. Only English is good"

"Some kids in my class say, that my lunch is smelly and ask why I eat with my hands"

“On the playground, they pushed me and told me to go back to my country”

“The kids keep coming up to me and asking me where I am from”

“The kid keeps pointing to my hijab”

“A student told me that your name is not from this country, you don't belong here”

Picture books became a way for us to affirm our own experiences, learn about each other and build ways for students to stand up and advocate for themselves and others. Books were our “co-teachers” (McCarthy, 2020) because they helped us do this work. We displayed the books in our learning space but what really made a difference was “how” (McCarthy, 2020) we used the books and embedded them within the curriculum and program. The books brought a lot of conversations to the forefront because they helped us practice our reading, writing, vocabulary development, speaking, listening skills, they connected to art, social studies, math and so much more.



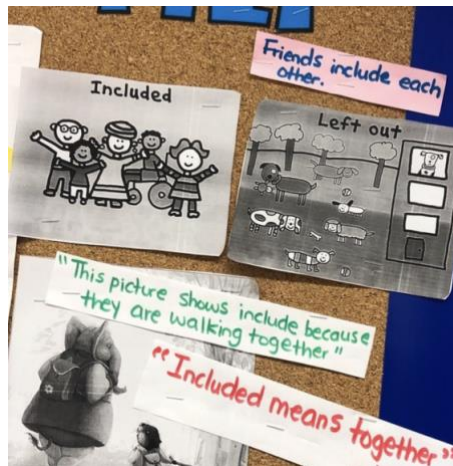
Our Work:

Below are some of the inquiry questions that became springboards for further learning in our classroom throughout the year. Each of the questions was brought to life through various picture books and became a way for us to have many different conversations and engage in multifaceted learning experiences. The picture books helped students articulate, understand, make sense of their own experiences and those of others.

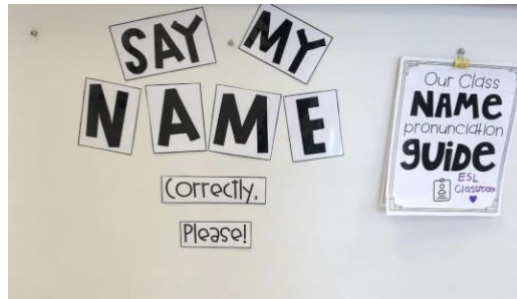
1. How are you smart? What are your goals this year?



2. What does it mean to build a classroom community that is welcoming and includes others? What does it feel like to be excluded?



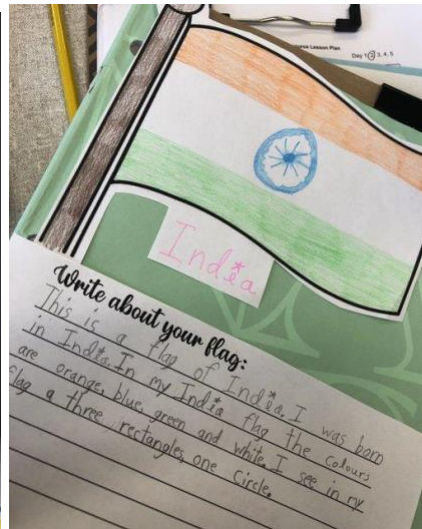
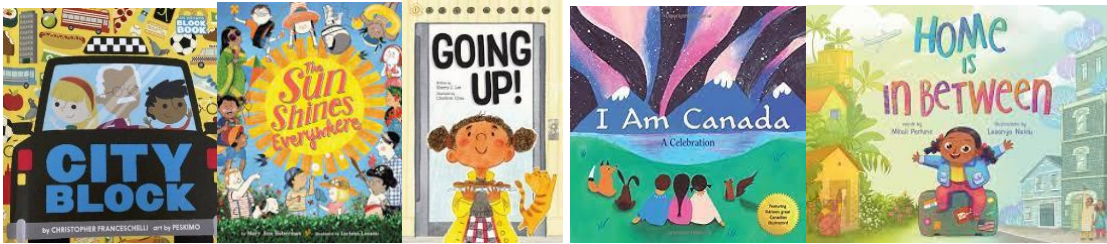
3. Our names are so important. What is the story of your name? Why do you love your name?



4. There are lots of different types of families. Who are the people who you love and those that care about you?

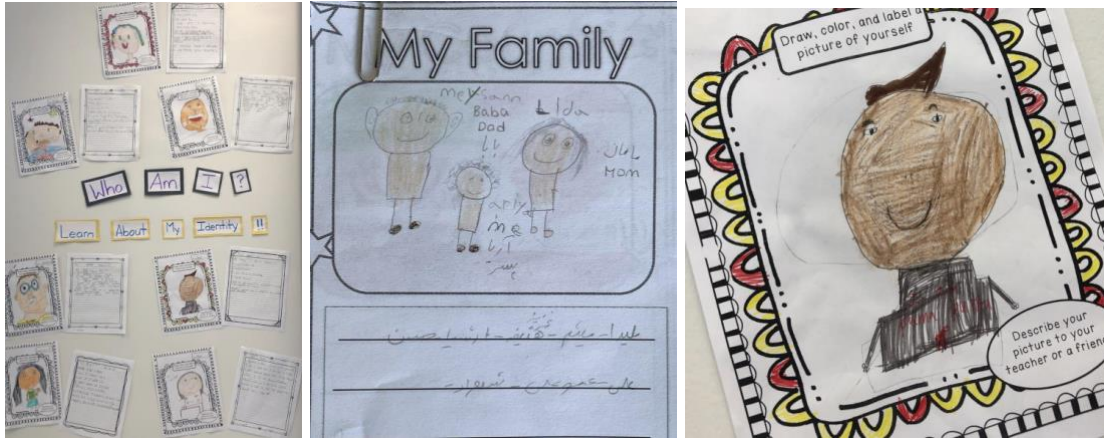


5. What are the places (countries and spaces) that are important for you?



6. How are you similar and different from your classmates?





7. What is a community? What are different roles and responsibilities that people have in a community?



8. How can you continue to make a difference and make things more fair for all people?



Hopeful Impact:

Picture books helped us center the identities of our students in the classroom in a responsive and contextual way. They also helped us learn about others in authentic

ways. Picture books were powerful because they helped us build cultural competency, interconnectedness as well as helped us consider how to make things fair for all people. Picture books helped us make these important topics tangible and accessible for our students throughout the entire school year. Overtime, I felt like students were continuing to become proud of their identities as well as learning the language of how to be in community with each other. I hope that my students knew that I ‘saw’ them and that I was trying my best to center them in our classroom and the learning experiences through powerful picture books. I was grateful for the opportunity to work with so many amazing students and learn so much from them! Below are some of the hopeful conversations, stories and comments that students continued to share:

“Oh ya, I am the brown skin tone crayon”

“I live in an apartment building and some people in my class live on my floor”

“My favourite part of the book is that it has Chinese characters. It makes me happy because I am Chinese”

“Wow this book is in Spanish!”

“Can we read the book that says everyone matters”



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