

The Child of Italian-Immigrants: Revisiting the past and reflecting upon the present

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Abstract

The Child of Italian-Immigrants: Revisiting the past and reflecting upon the present focuses on the uprooting nature of the immigrant experience in North America during the 1960's. Pivotal moments in the child's education introduces the reader to the struggles of language acquisition (Vygotsky, 1978); of being accepted into a host culture; of living a liminal existence; of redefining one's identity and culture; of creating a "third space" (Wang, 2006). These realities unleash an array of emotions: loneliness, shame, inequality (Taba, 1962), failure, submissiveness, isolation (Friere, 1998), and alienation (Green, 1971). The narrative discusses multicultural education; foregrounds the pluridimensional experiences of the immigrant child; and gives voice to the child immigrant's negotiation of identity. In attempting to arrive at an answer to the epistemological question: How do I come to know myself? , this narrative surfaces as that which shapes my personal and professional landscapes. Three questions related to this discourse are: How can we give our students agency beyond the confines of the curriculum through their individual voices and experiences? Can we promote a lived curriculum – one that thinks about the individual, their past, and the way that past shapes their identity both in the classroom and in society? What is a culturally-responsive education?

Key terms: Epistemological question, Culturally-responsive education, Identity formation, Lived curriculum, Binaries, Liminal existence, Culture of silence, Cross-cultural identity, Self-estrangement

I stare at the large bookshelf that some 52 years ago journeyed together with my parents and grandparents as the ocean liner bid farewell to the bustling shore of Messina, Sicily and left its wake in the warm blue waters of the Mediterranean, only to battle the frigid white-capped waters of the Atlantic. After 12 days, the mighty Vulcania and my family came to rest upon the beckoning unfamiliar shore of Halifax harbour. This bookshelf was hand crafted from large majestic chestnut trees that basked along the hillsides of the Calabrian countryside under the warm, nurturing Mediterranean sun that had glistened since the beginning of time. It was a product of love and labour; carved by some Tuscan artisan with the love and precision only a master craftsman can understand; it was one of a kind.

Upon this warm chestnut bookshelf lays a mass produced icy metallic silver coin. The coin, a centennial coin that marks one hundred years of Canadian confederation, reflects winter's icy blue sunshine and beckons me to recall my early childhood years and pivotal moments in my education. The coin represents my beginnings in the Toronto public elementary school system. The coin was a gift from my Kindergarten teacher on the very first day of school. However, this coin was also a gift for my parents, who after six years in Canada remained hopeful that one day they, too, would be considered Canadian citizens and would be liberated from the label: immigrant.

I stare at the coin and think of my parents' and extended family's arduous bitter-sweet 12-day voyage, (what to me remained for many years a mysterious and mythical journey) and the new life that lay before them beyond *Pier 21*. In a short story I wrote as a graduate student, "The Attic Window", I recall the sights and sounds of old Toronto neighbourhood of the mid 1960's where, "we were foreigners on the block" (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 11).

The window in the attic is the highest window in our red-bricked house on Moutray, number 53. The trunk beneath my feet is the perfect stage to follow all the mid-morning activities in the tiny village of Brockton in west end Toronto. I stand on the Eaton's catalogue and prop myself atop the large olive-green 'baule' Americano. I look down. Shiny golden metal belts and the golden rivets wrap around the olive green trunk. Beside my right foot the white sticker with bold blue letters says May 1, 1960, Halifax, Pier 21 via Messina, Italy. After six years, the sticker is still legible.

I see the neighbourhood. The big white oak tree on the corner of Brock Avenue casts dark shadows on Mr. Facciolo's front lawn. Squirrels scurry along telephone wires and disappear behind the blackened chimneystacks that line Moutray Street. The pewter green spire of St. Helen's Catholic Church rises beyond the yellow diamond shaped sign of Orpen Lane. Pigeons take flight and I hear the church bells clang. It's 9:00am. I look toward Dufferin Street. Joe Carlascio's two-toned 1958 Buick with the shiny chromed grill and sleek white-walled tires stands out among the other vehicles. Mr. Remington's delivery truck is parked directly in front of J.J. Lang's Onion Factory. . Mrs. Witherfield and her two sons walk toward College Street to catch the 506 streetcar to Augusta Street. They buy their groceries in Kensington Market. Further up the road the Silverwoods Dairies Milk Truck stops in front of Sheridan Jug City Convenience. Smiling, the milkman walks up and down Moutray Street delivering milk to every household. I have always wanted to ask him if I could put on his uniform hat with Silverwoods Dairies stitched across the front, but I never have. He carries a metal basket with 12 one-litre glass bottles. He deposits one bottle of fresh milk on the front stoop of each house. Carefully, he refills his basket with the empty milk bottles left for him. In each empty bottle is a ticket, payment for the milk. Jimmy Olivieri, the shoemaker's son, weaves in and out of parked cars delivering the newspaper. Jimmy, much older than me, attends high school. On Sunday afternoons Jimmy collects money for THE TELEGRAM.

I was raised in an old Victorian semi-detached red-bricked house in Toronto's Little Italy with 6 adults, 8 children, and 4 male boarders. Only my paternal grandmother remained with me at home. All the adults were off to work, and the other children (my aunts and uncles) were in school attempting to learn a new language and a new way of life. I am reminded of my uncle's and aunt's stories of trying to mask the sweet acrid smell of onions - a smell that my aunts and uncles carried with them for many years: this was the result of the 35 cents each of them earned daily immediately after school, as a bushel of pearl onions to be peeled awaited each of them on the front stoop of our house. The money earned by the "smelly group of seven" as we affectionately refer to them today (I was child number eight) and the \$9 per week the four borders paid, bought the family groceries and allowed for memorable visits to Honest Ed's Department Store and opportunities to navigate the city by streetcar along its screeching railways tracks, often ending in the noisy, bustling neighbourhood of Kensington Market where we met other immigrants attempting to make ends meet in this new foreign city called Toronto.

My parents quickly learned that the streets were not paved with gold, that the streets were not paved at all and that they were expected to pave them. Work in the 60's was a daily ritual. The shrill sound of the alarm clock beckoned my parents and grandparents in the early hours of the morning to wake and faithfully fulfill their parental obligations and duties, remains fixed in my memory. The clatter of coffee cups, the whistle of the stovetop espresso pot and the soft whispers of mom, dad, 'nonno' and 'nonna' seemed to be perfectly orchestrated. The drone of the car's engine, the crunching of the frozen tires and the final clanking of the screen door announced, as the lark announces the coming of morn, my family had once again left me behind with 'nonna' and they were off to earn a living.

Work was the driving force of the Italian immigrant. It permeated my parents' being. This intense preoccupation seemed, as if by osmosis, to be transferred to me as naturally as parental love. For the longest time, I failed to realize that there were other immigrants who, unlike my parents, were here because they had been forcibly displaced because of their political beliefs or religion: political refugees. My parents and grandparents were economic refugees: people in search of work. I can identify with Richard Rodriguez as he recounts his father's experience as a Mexican immigrant in America and how he too was victimized because of his social and linguistic barriers: "The gringos kept him digging all day, doing the dirtiest jobs. And they would pay him next to nothing. Sometimes they promised him one salary and paid him less when he finished. But what could he do? Report them? We weren't citizens then. He didn't even know English. ...What chances could he have?" (Rodriguez, 1982, p.127) All conversations in my home began with "It's a good job, it's difficult, but thank God I have a job." Only after the conversation of work ended, did anyone bother to speak of anything else.

Accounts of other Italian immigrants' struggle to adapt to this new land, and stories from the homeland where a chain of migration was emptying entire villages were secondary topics of discussion. Rarely did my parents and grandparents engage in any conversation about themselves as immigrants in a new land or about the children and their day at school. Work consumed them both physically and mentally. It was as if they were afraid of entering into any other conversation for the fear of losing something, especially after they had stepped foot on their *terra firma*, however, where did I fit into this melting pot of Canadian-Italian identity?

A threatening event in mid June of 1967 stripped me away from the safety of my home, my language, and my grandmother. My Kindergarten teacher came to visit me at home and after a rather embarrassing encounter, it concludes with a note addressed to my parents in English instructing them that I was to begin kindergarten at the local public school in September:

Young and pretty, she has a brown leather briefcase in her left hand. She wears shiny black shoes, and her flowered dress with a large white belt around her waist has a big silver buckle. She stops and speaks to Mrs. Coxhead who waters her rose bushes. She places her brown leather briefcase on the ground, hugs Mrs. Coxhead, our 92-year old neighbour, and turns and faces our house. She walks up the four steps onto our front stoop and stands at the front door.

I climb off the trunk, step onto the Eaton's catalogue, and place my bare feet onto the warm, creaky hardwood floor. I open the door of the attic and listen. I hear the faint footsteps of my Nonna Filomena in the kitchen. I smell the sweet scent of onions and basil. I hear the muffled voices chatter on from the new black and white television set. I anticipate the stranger's knock. I wait. No knock. The stranger in the flowered dress has realized that 53 Moutray is the wrong address? No such luck.

A knock echoes through the house. The attic door closed with a thud. I scurry down the first flight of stairs. "Otto, nove, dieci... One more flight... otto, nove, dieci..." A sharp knock. Another. I crouch and look down the stairs along the narrow hallway leading to the front door. I go down one step at a time. "...diciotto, diciannove, venti...finalmente!" The young woman with the briefcase knocks once again. I scurry to the door and call out to my grandmother "Nonna, c'e' qualcuno alla porta. Vieni, nonna!"

Nonna, 78, arrives to meet the stranger. Nonna wears a powder blue zip-up dress with tiny red and orange flowers and holds a wooden ladle in her right hand. A green apron hangs over her dress. She smiles at me and with a simple nod instructs me to open the door. The hinges creak as I open the front door.

"Hello, there. Are you Rocco?"

"Si'... I mean, yes, I'm Rocco ... ciao." I turn and point to my grandmother. "And this is my nonna. She doesn't understand Americano."

"I understand." the young woman says. She looks straight at my Nonna, but she speaks to me. She smiles at my grandmother. Nonna places the wooden ladle in the large pouch of her green apron and smiles back.

"May I come in, Rocco? I'll just be a minute. Is your mother or father home?" "Si' ... I mean, no. Yes, come in. No, mamma and papa are not home. They're at work at the onion factory." My face feels hot. Nonna's hand rests on my shoulder. My eyes follow the young lady as she places her briefcase down on the faded parquet floor next to the cracked board of my Snakes and Ladder game. She extends her hand to me.

"Would you like to shake hands, Rocco? My name is Miss Work. Are you enjoying the summer? You'll be in my Kindergarten class next month.

I wipe my sweaty hands on my pajamas, and shake hands with my new teacher. I stare at her big shiny belt buckle. I look up into her deep dark eyes and nod.

"Well then, this is terrific! I'm going to ask you to do me a big favour, Rocco. Will you print your name for me on this?" She leans over and pulls out a square sheet of white paper from her briefcase. She places her hand in one of her dress pockets and pulls out a bright orange crayon. I recognize the word Crayola. It's the same word on the box of crayons that Jimmy Olivieri's mother gave me last year on my fifth birthday. I take the orange crayon and print my name: r—o—c—c—o. Miss Work smiles and nods. She places the paper in her brown briefcase. "Excuse me Signora, who taught Rocco how to write?" she asks Nonna.

There is no answer, just a simple smile. I stare at Miss Work and then at my grandmother. I hear the muffled voices from the television set. I feel embarrassed, nervous, and ashamed.

"My nonna does not understand Americano. Commander Tom, Casper, and Fred Flintstone from the T.V. taught me to speak and write." I say in a trembling voice.

"Very good, Rocco. That's terrific."

Miss Work hands me an envelope and pats me on the top of my head. She crouches and looks into my eyes. "It's been a pleasure meeting you and your grandmother. Please give this to your parents. I'll see you in September."

She stands, nods, and smiles at Nonna. Miss Work leans over, picks up her briefcase, and leaves.

I stare at the big brown envelope and hand it over to Nonna.

“Che brava signorina. E’ la tua maestra?” Nonna asks, as she turns and makes her way back into the kitchen.

“Yes Nonna! She’s my new teacher!”

I race up the stairs to the attic window. I stand on the Eaton’s catalogue and prop myself up to watch Miss Work already halfway up Sheridan Avenue.

Half a century has passed since this encounter. As I reflect upon this encounter, I am assailed by a wave of raw emotions: the anticipation of the stranger’s knock, the fear on not being able to answer in English, the embarrassment of having parents who worked in an onion factory, the shame of grandmother wearing an apron and clutching a ladle in the presence of my refined Kindergarten teacher, and the alienation of being immigrants. Why did I answer the door?

Growing up as a child of Italian-immigrants presents many obstacles; however, the greatest of these was the English language, and an overprotective family. I learned most of my English through the medium of television. My prior knowledge of the English language was limited to listening to my parents’ “Americano” (the language of America). Vygotsky (1978) theorized that learning is mediated by society. My society consisted of Italian immigrants living in Toronto’s Italian-Canadian neighbourhood of Little Italy and thus, my learning was shaped by this hard-working, illiterate society – this was my stage upon which to learn and develop. My initial learning activity was limited to my southern Italian dialect-speaking grandmother and the world of our black and white RCA television set. I spent countless hours trying to make sense of the moving black-and-white images of Commander Tom, Bewitched, The Flintstones, and I Dream of Genie. I consider television shows my first Language Arts lessons. The television set was the focal point of our living room; it was a symbol of accomplishment in a new land; it was my personal babysitter. My paternal grandmother Filomena was the only adult who remained at home with me. She toiled over the domestic chores of our overcrowded home, and often forgot about me, as she worked endlessly in the kitchen preserving fruits and vegetables and preparing dinner for everyone returning from a hard day’s work. Her entire day was occupied with preparations for the next day: ensuring that the children had clean clothes for school, the borders’ rooms were neat and tidy, and all the food for the lunches was ready for the following morning.

As a young child, I should have learned English quickly; however, language became a problem. My paternal grandmother only spoke our Southern Italian dialect. I did not have any peers with whom to interact. The daily absence of my parents, aunts and uncles, left me with the television as my only source of English and interaction with the outside world, “I will never forget the sense of adventure that I felt as I would turn to that channel and wonder which language and which culture would greet me ... to traverse from one culture to another [Italian-English] and (somehow hope to) be accepted by both” (Feuerverger, 2007, 19). It certainly did not help my language acquisition to have a grandmother who was too busy with household chores and who was terrified of allowing me to interact with the neighbourhood children. I was trapped in Little Italy with an Italian-speaking grandmother, working immigrant parents, and a black and white television set as my only link to the outside English-speaking world, “I remained cloistered by sounds, timid and shy in public, too dependent on voices at home” (Rodriguez, 1982, p.16). Unknown to my busy grandmother, I slowly began to escape the living room and venture as a joyful traveler: “a border-crosser” (Feuerverger, 2007) into undiscovered territory: the winding streets of my neighbourhood. Lessons of the English language involved listening to people talk, recognizing familiar store signs, advertisements, and road insignias, “Wide-eyed with hearing, I listened to sound more than words... there were English sounds ... the speech of people in public seemed to me very loud booming with confidence...middle-class American speech...booming with confidence” (Rodriguez, 1982, p.12). These escapes into the streets of Little Italy were my first aesthetic moments: my initial genuine experiences with the “Americano” language. However, “...I couldn’t believe that the English language was mine to use...I continued to mumble...I remained dazed, diffident, afraid” (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 19).

As my daily escapes continued, I began to recognize many words; made neighbourhood friends; and made sense of the words coming from the television set. “I lived in a world magically compounded of sounds.” (Rodriguez, 1982, p.15). I understood the difference between the language of our home, “a language different from that used in the great city around us” (Rodriguez, 1982, p.14) and the language spoken by the “Americanos”.

I considered our home language – Italian- to be our private language that was “in counterpoint to the English of public society” (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 11). We soon welcomed my 5-year-old Italian cousin Gianfranco and his family into our already over-crowded home. As was customary in the late 60's and early 70's, immigrant families sponsored other relatives from the homeland to settle in America. And so it was that Italian speaking Gianfranco and semi-literate-Canadian-born Rocco (me) began their elementary school journey together. What a wonderful day it was! To my surprise, mom stayed home from work that cool, crisp, sunny September morning and escorted my cousin Gianfranco and me to Kindergarten. My parents were willing to sacrifice everything to provide their children “chances they never had – an easier way” (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 56). After saying goodbye to my mom, the day began with an assembly and the presentation of the Centennial coin that after 42 years still shines on my bookshelf.

The experience was welcoming but short-lived. As the days became shorter and the sun seemed to lose its warm glow, my Kindergarten teacher and the public school Principal continued to contact my parents informing them that I was demonstrating extreme difficulties due to very poor English language skills; there was very little communication between Ms. Work and Rocco; and placing Rocco and Gianfranco in the same English classroom was a mistake. What was I doing wrong? Why did my parents seem preoccupied about something other than work? Then, the hatchet fell! My parents were informed that it would be best if I remained home until the opening of the Catholic Elementary School in our neighbourhood. The Principal was certain that there would be a Kindergarten teacher that understood Italian and this would allow me success in the classroom since I would be able to communicate with the teacher. It was a traumatic experience, to say the least! I was being removed from a daily activity (Kindergarten) that was supposed to be welcoming and nurturing.

Why was I being removed from the group? Why was I not being allowed to participate and interact with my new classmates, and my teacher? I loved my new classroom with all the beautiful pictures and colours. I was learning to recognize all the words and labels Mrs. Work had placed in different areas of our classroom and on different objects: glue bottles, pencils, paper, sharpener, exit, reading corner, activity table, today's date, teacher's desk. I even recognized the bright orange Crayola crayon Mrs. Work had given me to write my name that warm summer afternoon in my home; the crayon was waiting in the shiny silver canister with the large red letters that spelled “Crayons” in the corner of the room that was labeled Activity Center. I was discovering the world of school with my new classmates and my teacher; I wanted to remain there. The classroom had become my new home and it, like Commander Tom on the RCA television, was introducing me to things I never knew. I was now a member of the group, and I had finally escaped the confines of my living room. In class “I raised my hand to volunteer answers... the calming assurance that I belonged in public, had at last taken hold” (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 21). Foolishly, “I was increasingly confident o my own public identity” (Rodriguez, 1982, p.25). Yet, the truth was that “the social” as Vygotsky (1978) foregrounds, was being taken away from me because of my weak English language skills. My “zone of proximal development” (Vygotsky, 1978) with Ms. Work was not welcoming; it was oppressive. “It would have pleased me to hear my teacher address me in [Italian] when I entered the classroom. I would have felt much less afraid. (Rodriguez, 1982, p.18) I was not being given the opportunity to interact with my teacher and my peers to learn more than I had already learned from my parents, my grandparents, television and Commander Tom, and my journeys through the streets of Little Italy.

On the one hand I, “longed that the school teacher should know something about the lives [my] parents lead...” (Addams, 2004, p. 27) and something about my experiences as a child of working immigrant parents; however, I realized that I could not make this demand, so I did what I believed to be the next best thing. I wanted so much to belong that I changed my name. I told Ms. Work that my name was Rocky not Rocco. There I was, a Canadian ironically attempting to redefine myself, my identity, so that it would be more acceptable to my teacher and perhaps, I could stay in school. Even my cousin Gianfranco became John. We needed to belong. I never told my parents about my name change, and I never told them that my teacher discouraged the way we spoke at home. I, now, understand how my parents felt as immigrants in a new land unable to speak the language, struggling to make a better life for themselves and their family “pasted over with labels that [gave them] identities that [were] extraneous to [them]” (Bannerji, 2000, p. 65). It was becoming clearer that those labels socially ascribed to my parents and to all immigrants like them, were also attached to me. But I wasn't an immigrant! I wasn't transplanted! I wasn't supposed to be crossing any barriers! I was Canadian! Was it possible that while I was in my Kindergarten classroom, Mrs. Work had secretly placed a label on my back like the ones throughout the classroom?

What did it say? Rocco? Rocky? Immigrant child? Newcomer? Minority? Multicultural Community? Italian? Alien? Foreigner? English Language Learner? Other?

It was obvious that I had two identities: the life at home as Rocco with my working parents who disappeared before the sunshine broke through my bedroom window and my dialect-speaking grandmother stuck in the kitchen for the better part of the day; and the other life at school where I became Rocky: the son of Italian immigrants who had assumed a new Canadian identity. Wang's (2006) Post Structural ideology foregrounds individuals facing the complicated issue of identity and culture, and discusses the need for a "third space" which cannot be assumed but must be created. My parents and I needed to create this new space where we could exist and could be identified as neither Italian nor Canadian, but both. We were living in a liminal space. School, I was told, was going to be welcoming, and fun, however, as soon as I left my home I was in a different world and I felt like I didn't belong. It was fear, loneliness, and separation that I was experiencing in my first weeks of elementary school. "The Italian child goes back to its Italian home more or less disturbed and distracted by the contrast between the school and the home" (Addams, 2004, p. 25). Was this what my aunts and uncles had experienced as they struggled to piece together new words by taking an English verb and giving it an Italian ending? Why was it so difficult to belong, to speak the language used in the great city around us, to feel a member of society?

Another pivotal moment in education was in a semi-private high school led by a group of Basilian Fathers. The school was based on the "Fordist model". The classrooms were all exactly the same in size and sterile in appearance. They were stark white, with rows of individual desks all facing a dusty chalkboard, a large teacher's desk that seemed isolated and distant, and a lectern that was the pulpit of Socratic instruction. Not only were the classrooms void of bulletin boards displaying and celebrating students' work, the entire school appeared very clinical. The classroom was where instruction was delivered, and the long poorly illuminated hallways linked this monotonous chain of rooms. The school existed on its own, isolated from the community and family, oblivious to the depth and riches of the students' past and their future aspirations. The method of instruction rarely changed "... for all students to use identical methods of learning, is a highly questionable procedure from the standpoint of efficiency in stimulating and using intelligence" (Taba, 1962, p. 308). Inequality in the opportunity to learn was prevalent. Variety must be based on differences in students' needs, levels of comprehension, or ability. Rarely was there opportunity for student interaction. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory recognizes that at the center of curriculum is the learner who experiences a journey through learning. However, this learning space offered little opportunity for "the social": the opportunity to become actively involved in the journey of learning and to allow others to share in one's knowledge of the world.

Indeed, there was social aspect, but it was an austere one, different from the social world beyond the classroom. In the classroom, our prior knowledge and prior experiences remained cloistered, and it was expected that we begin *tabula rasa* and acquired the "new" knowledge transferred upon us from their mighty lecterns. Newell (2006) suggests that when the teacher becomes collaborator rather than simply evaluator and the students become meaning makers rather than memorizers, then learning takes place and student performance increases. This static learning environment and method of instruction offered little process of exchange between Rocky-and-student, and Rocky-and-teacher. It was as if we existed in two different worlds and a fear of discovering each other lurked. The teacher and the books were the sole source of wisdom and knowledge. My secondary teachers appeared afraid to stray from the text and were reluctant to incorporate a curriculum that strived to bring humanity together. A student's personal experience, that would have added some relevance and interest to the individual lesson, remained irrelevant. My teachers offered no stories about their own personal experiences into the classroom discussion. They functioned as the all-knowing, silent interrogators. There was no trust and safety, no community and confidence in the classroom.

I was a good student, a thinker. My secondary experience shaped me into "a great mimic; a collector of thoughts, not a thinker; a dummy mouthing opinions of others..." (Rodriguez, 1982, p. 73) I remained submissive and was willing to mimic teachers. The failure to adapt the teaching materials to the needs and capacities of individual learners created non-educative experiences. I really wanted to tell them that if they listened to my story and the stories of others, our classrooms would be more interactive, more interesting; we would learn from each other and experience diversity and cultural differences. The classroom was not a site "of cultural encounters and spaces for dreams and friendship and knowledge" (Feuerverger, 2007, p.1).

The classroom was not a time for sharing; rather, it was a time of silence, isolation and loneliness. Feueverger (2007) foregrounds that education is about 'soulful education': education that shares not imposes; education that shares loving authority not brute discipline that denies personal choice. I didn't utter one word as Rocky (the Canadian student) because I was afraid of being kicked out again. I "became enormously obedient to the dictates of the world of school" (Rodriguez, 1982, p.51). So, like my parents and grandparents entering a foreign land, I remained silent, isolated, and, above all, frustrated. I was the immigrant child who was giving in to the limitations and restrictions imposed on me by my culture, identity and language. I did not have a place in my new classroom or within Canadian society.

It was definitely not a thought of any teacher to preoccupy themselves with my experiences. A large gap existed between the experiences of the teacher and my experiences. The teachers neglected their responsibilities to understand my needs and capacities as an individual learner and violated the principles of learning through personal experience. "What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worthwhile, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desire to apply what he has learned [past experiences] and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur?" (Dewey, 1963, p. 49). To what end, then, was I attending school if my persona was lost; if the curriculum and my persona were distinct entities in the same classroom?

Besides the fact that there was very little choice in course selection, I was placed in classrooms where we were all taught at the same level with one sole objective in mind: passing the final examination. All disciplines were taught "in a vacuum"; that is, each discipline was taught in isolation and there was never any attempt to relate one discipline to another. Learning was sterile, clinical, and distant; both my identity and my experiences were alienated from the subject matter. Each discipline was distinct hence, there was no collaboration of learning transpiring between any discipline; my learning experience seemed to evolve in a "staccato" tempo: each period began with "today's lesson is..." and ended with the shriek sound of the bell announcing the end of one lesson and the monotonous invitation to begin another. There was not horizontal integration of learning, no cumulative progression of learning, no well-orchestrated learning through collaboratively developed common topics to unify our disciplines, "Learning is more effective when facts and principles from one field can be related to another, especially when applying this knowledge" (Taba, 1962, p.298). It really was a robotic, monotonous time in my life.

I definitely suffered through these years of education. I didn't want to continue learning and I definitely knew I had much more to offer, if I only had the opportunity to do so. I yearned to break away from the "cookie cutter" process of education. My personal experience as a child of Italian immigrants was denied in this traditional secondary school, and my personal identity was also negated. It was impeded because the "true self" was affected by a larger social framework in which we all existed, leading to "self-estrangement" (Pinar, 1994, p. 203) As a teenage-learner in a traditional educational institution, I lost my identity because I was subject to a curriculum and learning experience that was exclusively controlled by the adult and society (teacher, administrator, curriculum developer). This adult world was inculcating a standard social construction of knowledge, culture, and self through the curriculum. The learner must be allowed to bring their personal experiences into the classroom, thus producing a better learning environment and allowing the possibility of developing and maintaining a personal identity. (Pinar, 1994) By creating a curriculum that is learner-centered and allowing the learner to explore and develop, the learner is able to develop their "true self". The traditional secondary school remained a negative, limiting experience for me, as did my elementary school experience. Didn't anyone want to know my parents' story? Was there no time to speak about growing up with my grandmother in Little Italy? Didn't anyone want to know why I called myself Rocky? I needed to let someone know that the public school system had failed me; it had alienated me because of who I was, and it forced me, as a means of survival, to change my name. This demonstrated a careless indifference and an assault on my personhood. Wouldn't anyone listen? Didn't anyone care? I was without a voice within an educational system that remained oblivious to my childhood experiences and thus, created a culture of silence dominated by some distant hierarchical structure – this was "the truth" (Freire, 1998, p. 512). I was learning, yet, I was missing the opportunity to share my individual experiences (my story) with others; I was the silenced minority. I was missing the opportunity to listen, agree or disagree with the stories of others that, like mine, connected immigrant children with their past, and with the beauty and charm of their language, history, and the tradition of their parents that created their present.

I felt like an alien without a home; “the status as alien indicates not fully belonging to either the old setting or the new setting” (Wang, 2006, p. 1). This complicated the issue of my identity; who was I, since I did not fully belong to either setting? I was neither Italian immigrant nor Canadian native even though, I was born and raised in Canada. I was living a liminal existence.

My graduate experience was a very liberating experience. The linguistic, literary, artistic, and creative writing experiences with the Department of Italian Studies were the bridge that allowed for an experiential continuum. The bridges allowed me the opportunity to link and reflect upon my parents’ immigrant experiences, the immigrant experiences of others, and my early childhood experiences as the son of Italian immigrants. The process of active reflection linked the curriculum to my past and to my culture. I had created “my third space” (Wang, 2006, p. 1). I was neither Italian nor Canadian. I was both. Graduate work was both very liberating and very relevant: it was not simply a “Crystal Palace of ideas” (Green, 1971, p. 262).

My studies introduced me to a career in translation and editing that took me to different corners of the world and introduced me to prominent world leaders. I have since engaged in Italian-English translation and edited many scholarly works for prominent leaders such as: Pope Benedict XVI, Professors of Cultural Anthropology, History, and Religious Studies from universities throughout Italy, and worked with the Italian Consul General in Rwanda who documented the atrocities of the Rwandan Genocide. This was my way of acting upon the world. I was not ready to, “remain alienated from [myself] and my own possibilities” (Greene, 1971, p. 266), even though I had been for most of my academic life. Once, I was the lost immigrant child trying to orient myself with a map (the curriculum) in a strange land (the school); and then, I was able to reclaim my identity, my name as Rocco – something that I had lost some 40 years ago. In an attempt to belong, I changed my name to one that might be more acceptable to the mainstream and, in so doing, in that moment that I became Rocky, a part of my identity was stripped away.

The discourse that encompassed my learning is not the discourse I presently encapsulate in my teaching. The discourse of my youth and my education encompassed binaries; at home, the discourse was based on personal history and narrative; spoken in my southern Italian dialect; I was Rocco. At school, the discourse was based on the language of the dominant culture cold, clinical, and insignificant to my being but that to a certain extent defined my being in English as Rocky. As a teacher, I am determined to give my students agency beyond the confines of the classroom curriculum through their voice, their experiences. The curriculum in my classroom, partially shaped by my educational experience, and yet, still defined by the expectations of the Ministry, consists of a lived curriculum – a curriculum that thinks about the individual, their past, and the way in which that past shapes their identity in the classroom and in the world. I embrace cultural and linguistic diversity and encourage my students to do the same by encouraging them to share their personal stories in the classroom through classroom discussion and writing.

These stories are often the immigrant experiences of traumas and oppression (violence, war, abuse, poverty, and alienation). The stories serve on two different levels. For the narrator, it is an opportunity to escape the feeling of being the lonely unwanted outsider, of dislocation and triumph over adversity, and to stand among peers and shout, look at me! This is who I am! This is where my family comes from! This is my story! For the listeners, it is an opportunity to learn about others, to learn their role among others, to accept and to become responsible global citizens: “culturally responsive education” (Feuerverger, 2007). And between the narrator of the stories, “compassion emerges from a sense of belonging: the experience that all suffering is like our suffering and all joy is like our joy (Feuerverger, 2007, p.113).

The teacher’s role is to help these children tell their peers what they have learned from their life stories and enrich dialogue around difference, acceptance, and community. Stories, dialogue and discussion of self and other break down ethnic, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Sympathy, compassion, and understanding toward others is a moral lesson that educators need to promote on a daily basis because teaching is not only about information and technique; it is about “the capacity for connectedness – the courage to be” (Feuerverger, 2007, p.2). Atticus Finch, the voice of equality and justice, teaches his young daughter Scout that we must learn to honour and respect all individuals, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around it (Lee, 1960). I strive to avoid having students struggle “with and in-between realm, I am in constant search for a cross-cultural identity which is neither confined within one space nor trapped between two spaces” (Wang, 2006, p. 2).

I maintain a sense of social sympathy and social justice in my classroom through multicultural education, “teaching all children as individuals” (Wang, 2006, p. 3). I attempt to do in my classroom that which was denied to me as a student in allowing my students to remain individuals. Students maintain their individuality in their voice: race, gender, class, and sexuality are used as a means of empowerment rather than silenced in the “rhetoric of repressive pluralism” (Wang, 2006, p. 3). As a student, I was denied my home culture in the school system. This created struggle and conflict in my life as I tried to coexist, with two different cultures, (two different names) as one person. It was a paradox. “A major goal of multicultural education is to provide all students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge needed to function within their ethnic culture, the mainstream culture, and within and across other ethnic cultures” (Wang, 2006, p. 2). Such is accomplished in my English classroom through the study of such works as: *The boy in the striped pajamas*; a novel about a Jewish war-child who befriends his German archenemy, *And the rat laughed*, a novel about a young child who remains hidden from the horrors of Nazi occupation in a hole below a German family’s farmhouse, and whose only friend is a rat who lives alongside her in this infested abyss. Through these works and many others, students are able to share their own cultural experiences while learning about those of others in the mainstream classroom. It develops the students’ capacity to see the world sensitively and to shape their own reality positively. The teaching of these literary texts promotes respect for all peoples by remembering the lessons of the past (the Holocaust) and how they impact positively on our future.

Students learn to exchange ideas to highlight the need to respect our past, learn from it, and to create inclusive school communities. It is my intention as an educator, “to select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise and potentiality of presenting new problems that by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment will expand the area of further experience” (Dewey, 1963, p.75). Such teaching allows for authentic and meaningful learning to occur; learning that begins in the classroom and continues in the world. It is such teaching that allows the world and its issues, all part of daily life, to become the student and with this, the student becomes a real person who feels, sees, experiences, and grows. This type of learning was not fostered when I was a student however it is this type of learning that creates critical thinkers apt to meeting the challenges and demands of our world. I concur with Paolo Friere that, “pedagogy has as much to do with the teachable heart as the teachable mind, and as much to do with efforts to change the world as it does with rethinking the categories that we use to analyze our current condition within history” (Feueverger, 2007, p.3).

My teaching allows for individual expression and individuality. The skills taught in my classroom are life skills as well as the skills necessary to understand the challenges of the discipline. The material presented to the students is appealing and allows the student to become engaged in various topics that allow for an understanding of our changing world. Above all, “the self” is an integral component encouraged in the classroom. Each student is unique and carries distinct past experiences that together with new experiences provide continual growth and learning, and foster authentic education processes.

As my peasant-artisan-labourer parents' and grandparents' history slowly recedes further into the past (even if I don't look at that coin sitting on my shelf too often) I am always conscious of its presence, and it often resurfaces into the present and evokes my past. It reminds me of an ongoing journey. As a child, I never thought learning would be a journey like that of my parents on the *Vulcania*, and while, I did not meet rough waters, I met large swells and white-capped waves, gale forced winds, and it was as though my ship capsized and I was lost forever; I struggled to reach the supposed welcoming shoreline like a drowning victim or a floating piece of debris waiting to be saved amidst the vast, endless currents that slowly eroded the shores of the Halifax harbour.

Immigration is a process of uprooting similar to my learning experience; I was uprooted from the safety of my ‘nonna’s’ arms and the ethnic scents that filled the house to a foreign, threatening land called ‘school’ similar to my parents who were uprooted from the sun-baked hills of southern Calabria in search of the American dream – but it was just a dream. School was supposed to be an avenue for that dream to become a reality for me, the Canadian child, however, I was quickly informed that I, also, was an immigrant; Rocco had to be Rocky, the emotional and vibrant southern dialect had to be English, my parents’ past and my history was simply a distant wave that once cradled the *Vulcania* through the warm, Mediterranean waters, through the narrow strait of Gibraltar, and across the threatening, bone chilling waves of the mighty Atlantic. The Centennial coin remains on the shelf; it marked the beginning of the journey toward remaking ourselves.

This is what I make of what I have been made. I am a Department Head of English schooled in a system in which I learned the language and earned multiple degrees, and that denied me an education at the outset. I teach a language that was foreign to me, that negated my personal history, and an identity as the son of immigrants, and I do so with the pride of knowing that my parents did reach success through me because their story finally lives on in my classroom and through my children. This narrative has a specific and personal meaning for me, growing up the son of Italian immigrants, and the grandson of post-war Italian immigrants. The synthesis of my journey through this manuscript has helped me deal with the uprooting nature of the immigration and education processes. Language became a very central part of my identity. It forced me to think of who I was, from where I came, and where I was going.

The robust ocean liners that once sailed the warm Mediterranean waters through the narrow Straits of Gibraltar now remain silently nestled in some secluded port no longer able of combating the frigid turbulent waters of the mighty Atlantic. Lulled by the lapping waves, they await the inevitable. The years of constant travel across the deep blue waters, that still separate two diverse continents, remain but a vague distant memory. The chestnut bookshelf carved by that Tuscan artisan proudly stands in my home and is witness to my children's awestruck expressions as their grandparents recount the unending tales of their childhood experiences and their journey into a strange and promising land which they affectionately call America.

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