

TELL
ME
YOUR
STORY

TELL ME YOUR STORY

Confirming identity and
engaging writers in the
middle years

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Paint Me Proud

In the great procession of warriors and poets painted there,
I do not see myself or one like me.

Omar Musa, *Millefiori* (2017)

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Preface

Tell me your story provides a valuable resource for teachers who want to negotiate and confirm the identities which their students bring to learning in middle-years classrooms. In education, it is seen as increasingly important for teachers to understand and acknowledge the language and literacy practices of student communities and home backgrounds, especially the languages and registers that students speak both inside and outside the school. However, for many teachers who have students from a wide range of ethnic, linguistic and social backgrounds, this may prove to be very challenging. Paolo Freire (1975, p. 46) says: 'In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing'.

The act of naming (Tuhivai Smith, 2004) is a powerful tool, and the strategies we share in this book will support teachers to step aside and empower students to confirm their own identity by choosing how they will represent themselves. They are supported to choose their story and the way they will tell it. This is particularly significant for students from Aboriginal (Rushton, 2009; 2010; 2015), Torres Strait Islander, immigrant, refugee and low socioeconomic backgrounds, all of whom are frequently marginalised in education and the broader society. Such understanding and acknowledgement is recognised as a way of empowering students:

When educators encourage culturally diverse students to develop the language and culture they bring from home and build on their prior experiences, they, together with their students, challenge the perception in the broader society that these attributes are inferior or worthless.

(Cummins, 2000, p. 246)

The educational impact of home and community practices and discourses on learning has been investigated over a number of decades by sociologists, linguists and educators (Bernstein, 1990; Halliday, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2008; Painter, 1996; Williams, 2000). Language development and socialisation in the home may support the transition to the discourse of the school, but for some students there may be a challenging dislocation which becomes a barrier to educational attainment. Bernstein (1990) used the concept of a coding orientation to show how both social privilege and disadvantage are realised through personal language choices. An orientation to an elaborated code may be developed as an individual proceeds through the education system, but for students who have an orientation towards the use of a restricted, context-dependent code, developing language and literacy in their first or an additional language may be much more challenging.

The authors of this book have been working in educational settings which reflect the contemporary diversity of Australian classrooms, with teachers and students from a variety of backgrounds. Some students are learning to speak and operate with Standard Australian English (SAE) in the classroom as an additional language or dialect. Some come to the classroom from economically disadvantaged homes and communities, and some are from privileged English-speaking backgrounds.

The book aims to provide practical examples of how teachers in the middle years of schooling can build on their existing programs by incorporating inclusive strategies and perspectives that will support all students to engage with subject English and develop

language and literacy. These pedagogical approaches have been successfully used to support the development of language and literacy, especially in writing (Cummins, 2000). Improved outcomes in language learning and broader academic achievement are facilitated when student languages are employed in the classroom.

Much of the book stems from research projects into identity and literacy conducted in contemporary classroom writing (D'warte, 2014; Dutton & Rushton, 2018; Rushton, 2008). To support the social and emotional aspects of student engagement, teachers who worked with the authors chose to confirm identity and provide opportunities to interact with student communities by inviting the students to use their first language in the classroom, to create texts about their own lives and reflect on their own language use. As Cummins, Hu, Markus & Montero (2015, p. 558) suggest, these are especially important aspects of confirming identity:

The creation of identity texts assumes particular importance in the case of students from social groups whose languages, cultures and religions have been devalued, often for generations, in the wider society.

The book includes reflections from teachers and students who worked with the authors in various classrooms.

What you will find

The chapters provide a range of pedagogical approaches that focus on engagement and the affirmation of student identities. Each chapter has a particular focus, and readers can choose the chapter or chapters that reflect their preferred approach to negotiating and confirming student identity in their own classrooms. The chapters provide a range of suggestions for working with students in the middle years and many examples of how different approaches can be implemented in classrooms.

Chapter 1 Placing student identity at the centre of classroom literacy

This chapter outlines a research project that the authors were involved in with teachers in a variety of middle-years classrooms. It provides an overview of the pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies used to explore student identity and first language use and to develop literacy.

Chapter 2 Confirming identity through drama pedagogy

This chapter focuses on well-planned drama strategies that offer a rich pedagogy for developing literacy. These strategies provide experiences that draw on each student's unique prior knowledge about self and the world, confirming their identity and connecting student communities with the school.

Chapter 3 Exploring linguistic repertoires: language mapping as a tool for teaching and learning

This chapter draws on recent research that engaged young people in studying their linguistic

repertoires and the ways they use language and literacy both inside and outside the classroom. Students become co-researchers and linguistic ethnographers with teachers as they document and analyse how and when they use one or more languages to read, write, talk, listen and view in their everyday lives.

Chapter 4 Using a student's first language in the classroom

This chapter focuses on welcoming the use of languages other than English into the classroom as a way of honouring the speakers of those languages and extending an invitation to share cultural and linguistic experiences.

Chapter 5 Composing identity texts with recently arrived refugee students

The overall focus of the approach outlined in this chapter is on the improvement of writing outcomes through the explicit teaching of language, the use of EAL/D (English as an additional language or dialect) pedagogy and moving students along the mode continuum from spoken to written language. These approaches are underpinned by high expectations and a commitment to value the identities and backgrounds of the students.

Chapter 6 Creative strategies for writing

The classroom examples outlined in this chapter create multiple opportunities for expressive writing, either as a standalone activity or as preparation for transactional or poetic writing. Expressive writing offers writers a space in which to grapple with new concepts and make connections between established and emerging understandings. It is nurtured through students writing identity texts using material and linguistic resources from their own backgrounds.

Chapter 7 Meeting high challenge with high support in the middle years

The classroom approaches outlined in this chapter support students to be highly engaged composers and to draw on their individual skills and knowledge when making language choices as they create poetry, news reports and comics.

Chapter 8 Identity and wellbeing: making connections to the community

This chapter illustrates how a genuine invitation to share personal stories and language in the context of the school can provide a way to break through barriers. Involving family and community in the classroom can create a genuine opportunity for teachers to learn about the lives of their students and to engage with parents and caregivers on an equal footing, where knowledge and expertise is shared from both sides of the home-school divide.

Placing student identity at the centre of classroom literacy

The authors of this book are concerned to promote the wellbeing of all students and a focus on learning, while supporting engagement with English literature, language and literacy. We share a belief that language and culture are inextricably linked and for that reason, if no other, students should be supported to use all their linguistic resources in the classroom. By negotiating and affirming student identities, a real connection can be made between the home and the classroom.

The suggestions and strategies we outline seek to honour and respect all of the languages and cultures found in Australian classrooms. Even if the majority of children in a class speak English fluently, some of the children may have linguistic and cultural links to other countries or to the rich linguistic and cultural heritage of Indigenous communities. The book focuses on supporting students to reflect on their use of language as a first step towards understanding the audience and purpose of any spoken or written text in any language (Gibbons, 2015).



FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE AND CREATIVE PEDAGOGY

The ideas outlined in the book reflect a pedagogy which confirms the suggestions and imperatives from both state and national initiatives and policies (see PETAA website for links to state and national policies and frameworks). Figure 1.1 summarises the main principles of the inclusive pedagogical approach adopted in the classrooms featured in this book.

Valuing the linguistic and cultural heritage of students is an important way to develop inclusivity and connectedness and to promote wellbeing and engagement with learning. By fostering an inclusive creative pedagogy, teachers can meet the needs of students from a range of linguistic, cultural and social backgrounds.

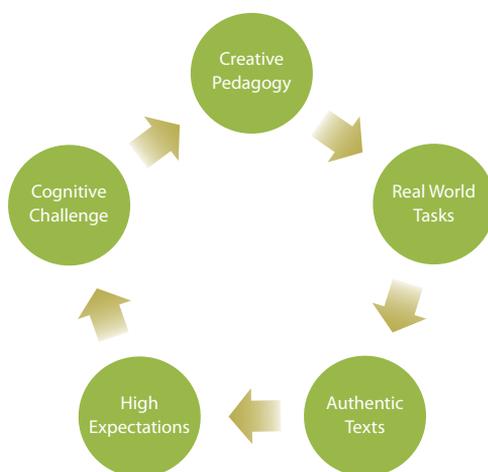


Figure 1.1 Fostering an inclusive creative pedagogy

Authentic, quality texts provide the vocabulary needed to describe, respond, explain, instruct, persuade or discuss within the topics students are exploring in class; of course, developing students' vocabulary underpins both reading and writing and the development of literacy. A focus on metalanguage – the language we use for talking about language – is best developed using purposeful real-world tasks that engage students. The result can be meaningful, substantive communication about both the task and the language used in its execution. The use of real-world tasks and authentic texts has been shown to promote student engagement and motivation. To develop intellectual engagement, students and teachers need to engage with cognitively challenging ideas and tasks. Deep knowledge and understanding can be developed if teachers demonstrate high expectations of their students by problematising knowledge and promoting higher-order thinking.

AFFIRMING STUDENT IDENTITY

The concept of the *identity text* (Cummins, 1981; Cummins 1986; Cummins & Early, 2011) applies to any oral or written text which reveals some aspect of a student's own life. The concept was developed in response to 'essential aspects of the link between identity affirmation, societal power relations and literacy engagement' (Cummins, Hu, Markus & Montero, 2015, p. 556). Identity texts can be funny or sad and can be about any member of a student's extended family or community; the choice lies with the student.

There are many ways that identity can be affirmed, and the educators who have contributed to this book approached a pedagogy of inclusivity in their own ways. However, they all agree that recognising the use of first languages or dialects should be encouraged, rather than ignored, to develop engagement and affirm identity.

Every educational context presents unique challenges for teachers in meeting the needs of their students. Language development is a socio-cultural process (Bernstein, 1990; Halliday, 1985), and it is necessary to differentiate programs for different groups of learners. Many students in mainstream classrooms are learning English as an additional language or dialect and may need support in language development. Competency in English does not develop in a vacuum but needs to consider meeting the emotional, cultural and social needs of learners. Students come from a very wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and teachers cannot be aware of the nuances of every student's cultural and linguistic heritage. However, the pedagogical suggestions in this book aim to encourage students to proudly share information about their backgrounds with teachers and peers. The following reflections are from primary school students in the classrooms featured in this book. They suggest that sharing linguistic and cultural information builds engagement and can be leveraged to support student learning:



- S1 *It was easy to get a family story as I already knew this one and also I know lots of words from different languages, I used some in my story.*
- S2 *It was fun to share stories as it's good to listen to other people's past and their parent's past. Even if it was sad.*
- S3 *When I came to Australia this year I could not speak English. I found the language and how people speak hard. I was worried and angry with myself because when people speak to me I could not understand them. It was a lot hard to learned with my mum, my friends and my teachers. When I started to learn English, I felt happy I would learn more English in the playground and at home because I was not so shy. I think this is because I could point and use my body to be understood. I believe that the activities we have done in the class has helped me. I have felt more comfortable using my language in the classroom. It is much easier to understand English than it is to speak it.*

The S3 student arrived in Australia in January and wrote this reflection in November of the same year, indicating remarkable progress in English language development.

Teachers can also share their own stories with their students and use their own languages in the classroom as a way of encouraging students to do the same, as this statement from one of the teachers who worked with the authors makes clear:

“ T *Sharing my own story with the class was very powerful as the children were noticeably more involved in the lesson. This is a strategy I have been using for numerous years in many lessons, to capture the students' attention. It has proved to be very effective as all the children become engaged when you link the learning to a personal narrative. They also remember concepts and information more readily.*

EXPLORING LINGUISTIC REPERTOIRES

We believe it is important to create opportunities for students to reveal and showcase their strengths in the classroom. Exploring students' linguistic repertoires provides opportunities for teachers to learn about and with their students, as they target English learning outcomes. Ongoing research in classrooms with multilingual learners suggests that many young people do not see their language competencies as assets, but instead internalise deficit views of their language skills. Exploring students' linguistic repertoires has been shown to increase student confidence and to help teachers to develop targeted English instruction that significantly supports ongoing learning, as one Year 5 teacher commented:

“ T *I learned so much about the children in my class and they learned so much about each other; it helped all of us to recognise what we knew and could do.*

Many students in Australian schools come from diverse ethnicities and linguistic, cultural and class backgrounds, and language and literacy are regarded as important at all stages of education. However, most classrooms offer few opportunities to reflect on and explore the role of language in learning. Students in the various classrooms featured this book were encouraged to undertake multimodal activities through which they could map their own use of language and the role it plays in the different aspects of their lives. In the following pictures students explore the use of language as they move from Japan to Australia. In Figure 1.2, a bilingual Year 3 student shows how language use changed in Japanese-to-English casual conversations with friends after the student moved from Japan to Australia. In Figure 1.3, a bilingual primary student records the use of English and Japanese in a range of social interactions from less formal to more formal.

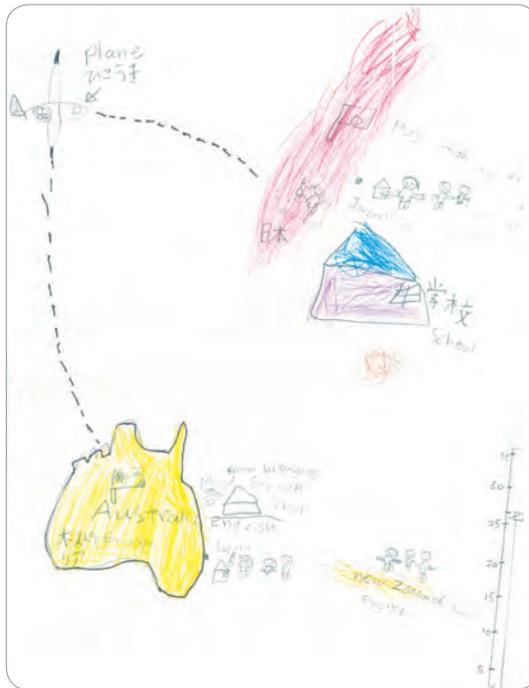


Figure 1.2 Map of language change from Japan to Australia by Year 3 student (above)
 Figure 1.3 Bilingual student maps Japanese and English language use (below)



Various strategies that investigated language use empowered students to take on the roles of researchers and ethnographers as they explored their own linguistic resources and those of their peers. They were supported to identify and explore their ‘repertoires of linguistic practice’ (Gutiérrez & Rogoff, 2003) which were then used as tools for thinking and actively learning in the English classroom. Research into the use of such strategies (D’warte, 2014) has shown that they have a positive impact on student identity and confidence and increase teachers’ expectations of student learning:



T (primary) *With such a strong focus on literacy and numeracy skill attainment, and so the focus on improvements and gaps, the education that the students are receiving, in many low SES schools, does little to prepare them for the world ... making no explicit connections between the classroom and beyond. As one Year 2 student said, in so many words, to me when we were doing some challenging Maths work: ‘I don’t need to do this Miss ... I’m not going to get a job’. Nor does it seem to value or start with student strengths.*

As you know there is so much social capital and cultural richness within these communities ... but perhaps because our approach to curriculum implementation doesn’t start with our students, we seem to try to ‘fit it in’ or miss it all together. As I am writing this I understand more and more the systemic problems of our education system. It makes the job hard for teachers when there is such a focus on skills instead of working from student strengths, concepts and then getting down to nuts and bolts.

In various classrooms, we have supported teachers to help their students achieve learning goals. This was done by incorporating a drama-based pedagogy and a focus on the use of multimodal tools, as ways for students to reflect on language use.

The key principles in supporting professional learning include focusing on developing academic language, rather than survival language, which is especially important for students in the middle years. The mode continuum (see Figure 1.4) is central for understanding language choices that occur as users move from spoken to written modes, from less formal to more formal contexts and from dialogic to monologic speech.



Figure 1.4 The mode continuum

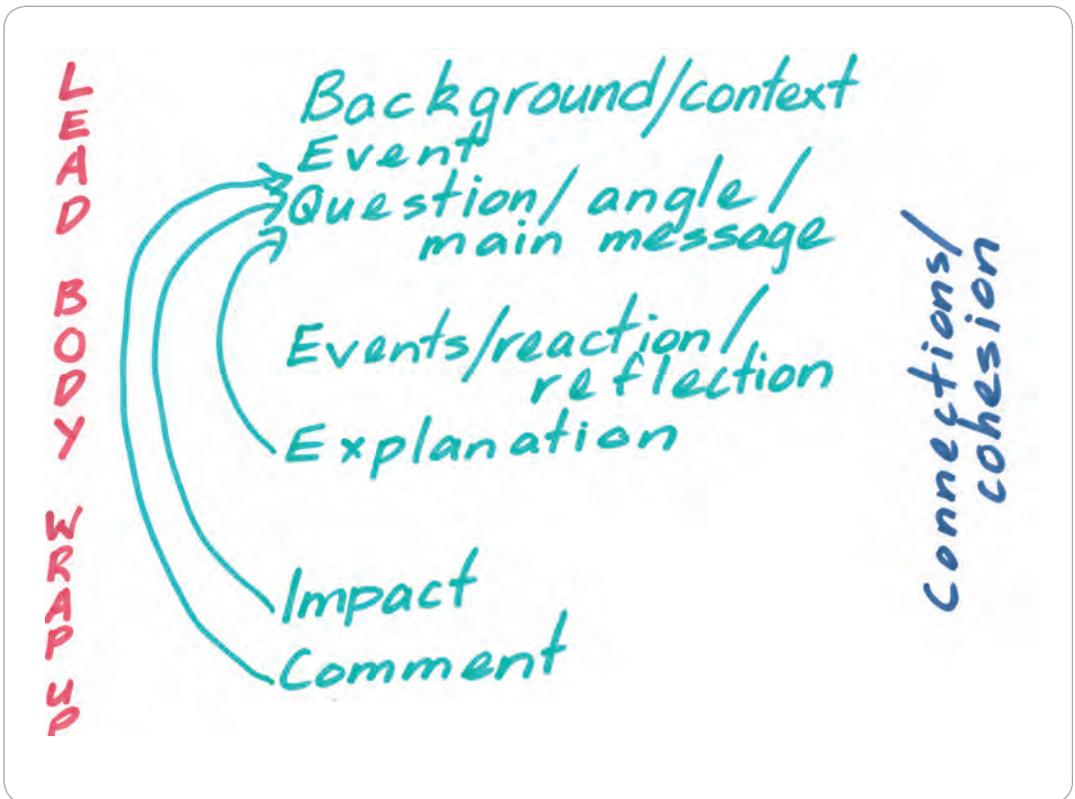


Figure 1.5 Focusing at all levels of text

Teachers were encouraged to see students as communicators by developing a pedagogy focused on student choice and meaning-making. Students were supported to make choices and meaning by using all their linguistic resources, including their first language and their own experiences. A focus on developing academic language, especially appropriate vocabulary, supported the middle-years students to develop literacy while they were learning English, learning about English and learning through English (Halliday, 2004).

While the development of vocabulary is key for many students learning English, a rich print environment must go beyond just words. The teachers focused on all levels of text from word level to the level of whole texts, including words, word groups, clause complexes and paragraphs (see Figure 1.5). In this way students were supported in developing sophisticated oral and written texts that related to particular audiences and specific purposes.

CONCLUSION

We hope the strategies outlined in this book will encourage teachers to explore student identity as they develop language and literacy programs for middle-years students. Teachers demonstrate high expectations of their students as they affirm student identity through an inclusive pedagogic approach which provides cognitively challenging ideas and tasks using authentic quality texts and real-world tasks. By using strategies that enable students to develop identity texts and explore their own rich language and literacy practices and skills, teachers can create classrooms that challenge the 'pedagogy of indifference' (Zammit, 2018, p. 49) and promote higher-order thinking.

Perhaps the words of a young Australian poet, Hani Abdile, are the best way to summarise the purpose of this book. She beautifully expresses why sharing a personal story is so powerful in confirming identity and supporting engagement in learning, especially in English.

Home far from Home *(excerpt)*

*I love the Dreamtime Stories
Which remind me of Hadrawi's poems
The aardvark telling the lion
How it's supposed to hunt
I pay respect to the owners of this land
We are lucky to be part of their oldest culture
Because I know how traditions smell
And taste of belonging
Through my lens I can see
My ruined history my destination
Poems are rain and I bless
This country with my words.*

Hani Abdile

As a refugee, Hani Abdile, began to write poetry when she was detained on Christmas Island awaiting processing. She is now poet-in-residence at one of the schools featured in this book.

We believe that many students, like Abdile, will be able to 'bless this country' with their words as the power of story helps them to share their experiences and listen to the stories of their peers and teachers.