Identity Texts and Academic Achievement: Connecting the Dots in Multilingual School Contexts

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The construct of *identity text* conjoins notions of identity affirmation and literacy engagement as equally relevant to addressing causes of underachievement among low socioeconomic status, multilingual, and marginalized group students. Despite extensive empirical evidence supporting the impact on academic achievement of both identity affirmation and literacy engagement, these variables have been largely ignored in educational policies and instructional practices. The authors propose a framework for identifying major causes of underachievement among these three overlapping groups and for implementing evidence-based instructional responses. The framework argues that schools can respond to the devaluation of identity experienced by many students and communities by exploring instructional policies and strategies that enable students to use their emerging academic language and multilingual repertoires for powerful identity-affirming purposes. Drawing on projects involving First Nations and immigrant-background multilingual students, the authors document the profound transformations in academic, intellectual, and personal identity that multimodal identity text work is capable of engendering.
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During the past 20 years, "identity" has emerged as a prominent analytic construct within the fields of applied linguistics and critical pedagogy both to describe processes of language learning and to account for language learning and academic outcomes (e.g., Gee,

2004; Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995; Toohey, Manyak, & Day, 2007). Ladson-Billings (1995) succinctly expressed a central theme of this work in highlighting the link between African American students' academic achievement, societal power relations, and teacher–student identity negotiation: "The problem that African-American students face is the constant devaluation of their culture both in school and in the larger society" (p. 485). Unfortunately, the construct of *identity* has been virtually absent from "mainstream" research and policy discussions concerning educational reform and school achievement.

In this article we argue that issues related to identity negotiation, investment, and affirmation are directly related to patterns of achievement and underachievement among social groups. Our starting point is that societal power relations, and their reflection in patterns of identity negotiation in schools, operate as causal factors in explaining underachievement among students from socially marginalized communities who have experienced discrimination and restricted educational and employment opportunities, often over generations. Educational responses to underachievement that fail to address the causal role of identity devaluation, and its roots in historical and current patterns of coercive power relations, are unlikely to be successful. In other words, effective educational responses to underachievement among students from marginalized communities imply the implementation of pedagogies that promote identity affirmation or what Manyak (2004) has called *identities of competence* in association with literacy and overall academic development.

We have used the term *identity texts* to draw attention to essential aspects of the link between identity affirmation, societal power relations, and literacy engagement (Cummins, 2004; Cummins & Early, 2011). In the following sections, we (a) describe the construct of identity texts and its connection to multimodality, (b) outline the role of identity text creation within a more general framework that analyses causes of underachievement and high-impact instructional responses that respond to these causal factors, and (c) provide examples of identity text creation by First Nations students and English language learners in the Canadian context that illustrate both the links between identity affirmation and literacy engagement and the role of identity text creation within what Walker (2014) has called *a pedagogy of powerful communication.*

IDENTITY TEXTS AND MULTIMODALITY

The term *identity text* emerged initially in the context of collaborative research with teachers in the Vancouver and Toronto areas to capture

essential features of the work that students produced. The projects initiated by teachers were focused on broadening conceptions of literacy beyond linear print-based reading and writing skills in the dominant language (Cummins & Early, 2011). This research explored the instructional spaces that opened up when teachers encouraged students to use their multilingual and/or multimodal skills as cognitive tools and to employ a broad range of modalities to create literature and art and to generate insight about social and personal realities. A precursor and an inspiration for much of this work was the Dual Language Showcase created by English as a second language (ESL) teacher Patricia Chow in Thornwood Public School, a highly diverse K–5 school in the Peel District School Board in the Greater Toronto Area (Chow & Cummins, 2003). Thornwood students created dual language texts in multiple languages that were posted on the school's website (http://www.thornwoodps.ca/dual/). In some cases, newcomer students or those who had developed home language (L1) literacy skills wrote initially in the home language but more frequently students drafted their stories in English and then worked with parents (and sometimes teachers who spoke their L1) to create their L1 version.

The Dual Language Showcase and subsequent identity text projects (e.g., Cummins et al., 2005) demonstrated that teachers could expand the instructional space beyond simply an English-only zone to include students' and parents' multilingual and multimodal repertoires even when they themselves didn't speak the multiple languages represented in their classrooms. Students in these projects (and their parents) took enormous pride in their creative dual language writing and illustrations, which were frequently shared on school or university websites (e.g., www.multiliteracies.ca) or in the school library as hard-copy books displayed on the same shelves as the "real" authors whose books they were reading in their classrooms.

We concluded on the basis of this work that literacy practices that are identity-affirming are likely to increase students' literacy engagement. We argued that creative writing and other forms of cultural production or performance (e.g., art, drama, video creation, etc.) represent *expressions* of identity, *projection* of identity into new social spheres, and *re-creation* of identity as a result of feedback from and dialogue with multiple audiences (Cummins, 2001; Cummins & Early, 2011). We described identity texts as follows:

> Students invest their identities in the creation of these texts—which can be written, spoken, signed, visual, musical, dramatic, or combinations in multimodal form. The identity text then holds a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light. When students share identity texts with multiple audiences (peers,

teachers, parents, grandparents, sister classes, the media, etc.) they are likely to receive positive feedback and affirmation of self in interaction with these audiences. Although not always an essential component, technology acts as an amplifier to enhance the process of identity text production and dissemination. (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 3)

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 affirmation of identity embedded in the process of creating identity texts involving multiple modalities constitutes a counter-discourse that repudiates the devaluation of identity that is frequently embedded in educational structures and relationships.

The central role that identity affirmation plays in literacy engagement is clearly expressed by students who have participated in identity text projects. Cassandra Bice-Zaugg, a member of Mississauga of the New Credit First Nations, highlighted the centrality of identity for academic achievement in reflecting on the visual art and poetry that she and her high school classmates created as they worked with Ojibwe artist and Elder Rene Meshake (the *Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives* project is described in a later section):

Take away identity and what do you have? If you have a student that doesn't know who they are, do you think they care about what goes on in the classroom? (Montero, Bice-Zaugg, Marsh, & Cummins, 2013, p. 90)

Grade 7 student Kanta Khalid, in a presentation at the 2005 Ontario Teaching English as a second language (TESL) conference, highlighted how writing an Urdu-English dual-language book entitled *The New Country* with two of her Urdu-speaking classmates enabled her to re-create her sense of self and repudiate the way she had been positioned as less intellectually capable when she first came to Canada:

How it helped me was when I came here in Grade 4 the teachers didn't know what I was capable of. I was given a pack of crayons and a colouring book and told to get on colouring with it. And after I felt so bad about that—I'm capable of doing much more than just that. I have my own inner skills to show the world than just colouring and I felt that those skills of mine are important also. So when we started writing the book [*The New Country*], I could actually show the world that I am something instead of just colouring. And that's how it helped me and it made me so proud of myself that I am actually capable of doing something, and here today [at the Ontario TESL conference] I *am* actually doing something. I'm not just a colouring person—I can show you that I am something. (Cummins & Early, 2011, p. 50)

In summary, the construct of *identity texts* goes beyond instructional practices such as promoting creative writing or digital storytelling insofar as it is embedded in a theoretical framework that identifies societal power relations and their reflection in educational structures and interactions as a primary cause of underachievement among English language learners and students from marginalized social groups. The creation of multimodal identity texts is obviously a cognitive and linguistic process but it is also a sociological process that potentially enables students and their teachers to challenge coercive relations of power that devalue student identities; the identity text acts as a vehicle whereby students can repudiate negative stereotypes and simultaneously construct identities of competence that fuel academic engagement.

IDENTITY TEXTS AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

With respect to promoting the academic achievement of English language learners, there is a large degree of consensus among researchers, educators, and policymakers about the importance of three components of effective instruction: (1) scaffolding meaning, for example by expanding the modalities available for knowledge representation and generation beyond simply the linguistic mode, (2) activating and building students' background knowledge, and (3) extending students' knowledge of academic language through explicit instruction (Cummins & Early, 2015). These three components of effective instruction are incorporated into the instructional framework outlined in Figure 1. This literacy engagement framework posits print access/literacy engagement as a direct determinant of literacy achievement and also specifies four components of instruction that enable students to engage actively with literacy. Engagement with literacy, broadly conceived, will be enhanced when (a) students' ability to understand and use academic language is scaffolded through specific instructional strategies such as use of graphic organizers and development of efficient learning strategies; (b) instruction connects to students' lives by activating their background knowledge, interests, and aspirations; (c) instruction enables students to carry out challenging academic work that affirms their identities; and (d) instruction explicitly develops students' awareness of and control over academic language across the curriculum.

The distinctions captured in the framework are frequently fused in classroom practice. For example, acknowledging and activating students' background knowledge simultaneously affirms the legitimacy of students' experience and, by extension, the legitimacy of students'

Literacy Attainment

↑

Print Access/Literacy Engagement

↑

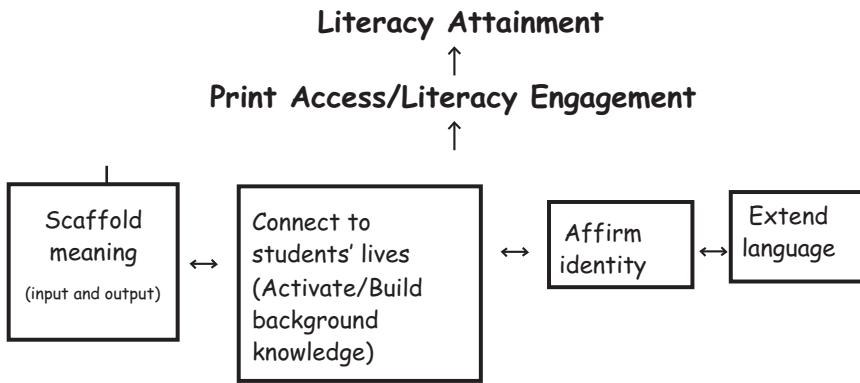| Scaffold meaning

(input and output) | ↔ | Connect to students' lives (Activate/Build background knowledge) | ↔ | Affirm identity | ↔ | Extend language |

FIGURE 1. The literacy engagement framework.

identities. Bilingual students' identities are also affirmed when teachers expand the linguistic space for learning by encouraging them to engage with literacy in both their L1 and L2 (e.g., by creating dual-language texts). In situations where language operates as a strong cultural identity marker, such as for many Aboriginal people, identity texts provide opportunity to invoke Aboriginal languages to communicate understandings of their physical and spiritual worlds. For example, words used to identify clan and land memberships can be integrated into identity texts.

The dimensions of print access/literacy engagement and identity affirmation have been largely ignored in mainstream policy discussions concerned with promoting academic achievement and closing the achievement gap between social groups. In the following sections, we sketch the research basis for highlighting these components as central to academic achievement.

Literacy Engagement and Achievement

Print access and literacy engagement represent two sides of the same coin because literacy engagement is impossible without ample access to print. Syntheses and meta-analyses of the research relating reading achievement to both print access and literacy engagement highlight the consistently strong relationships that exist among these variables (e.g., Brozo, Shiel, & Topping, 2007; Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Guthrie, 2004; Krashen, 2004; Lindsay, 2010; Mol & Bus, 2011; Nakanishi, 2015; Neuman, 1999). There is extensive evidence from both L1 and L2 contexts that literacy attainment is enhanced when students engage actively in literacy activities, both in

school and in out-of-school contexts. In other words, the relationship is *causal*. Although most of the research has focused on *reading*, it seems appropriate to broaden the focus from simply *reading engagement* to *literacy engagement* in light of the fact that there is considerable research documenting the role of extensive writing not only in developing writing expertise but also in improving reading comprehension (Graham & Herbert, 2010).

The causal relationship between print access/literacy engagement and literacy achievement is clearly expressed in the conclusions of the Mol and Bus (2011) meta-analysis:

> For all measures in the outcome domains of reading comprehension and technical reading and spelling, moderate to strong correlations with print exposure were found. The outcomes support an upward spiral of causality: Children who are more proficient in comprehension and technical reading and spelling skills read more; because of more print exposure, their comprehension and technical reading and spelling skills improved more with each year of education.

The Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) reached similar conclusions (OECD, 2010a). Engagement in reading was assessed through measures of time spent reading various materials, enjoyment of reading, and use of reading strategies. Across OECD countries, approximately one-third of the association between reading performance and students' socioeconomic status (SES) was mediated by reading engagement. The implication is that schools can potentially push back about one-third of the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage by ensuring that students have access to a rich print environment and become actively engaged with literacy. Because many low SES students experience limited access to print in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools (Duke, 2000; Neuman & Celano, 2001), schools have a crucial role to play in providing abundant access to print and ensuring literacy engagement from an early age.

Identity Negotiation and Achievement

The role of identity affirmation is highlighted in numerous qualitative and quantitative studies that have documented the impact of societal power relations both on patterns of teacher–student interaction in schools and task performance more generally (e.g., Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Ogbu, 1978; Steele, 1997). Groups that experience long-term educational underachievement have frequently been excluded

from educational and social opportunities over generations. The interactions that students from marginalized social groups experienced in school often reinforced the broader societal patterns of exclusion and discrimination (Battiste, 2013; Cummins, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This pattern was documented in research conducted by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1973) in the U.S. southwest, which reported that Euro-American students were praised or encouraged 36% more often than Mexican American students, and their classroom contributions were used or built upon 40% more frequently than those of Mexican American students. The mechanisms through which these patterns of interactions influence academic performance are evident in the well documented phenomenon of *stereotype threat* (Steele, 1997), which refers to the deterioration of individuals' task performance in contexts where negative stereotypes about their social group are communicated to them.

A direct instructional implication is that in order to reverse the impact of identity devaluation in schools and the wider society, educators, both individually and collectively, must create interactional spaces that affirm students' identities in association with literacy. This claim is supported by Sleeter's (2011) synthesis of the outcomes of culturally responsive education in the United States, which reported that literacy pedagogies that challenge the operation of coercive relations of power in the wider society produce positive outcomes for students from socially marginalized communities.

CAUSES OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND HIGH-IMPACT EDUCATIONAL RESPONSES

The international research literature on educational disadvantage typically identifies three categories of students who are at risk of underachievement: (a) linguistically diverse students whose L1 is different from the dominant language of school and society, (b) students from low SES backgrounds, and (c) students from communities that have been marginalized or excluded from educational and social opportunities (often over generations) as a result of discrimination in the wider society (e.g., many indigenous communities around the world). Although these three groups frequently overlap, they are conceptually distinct. Some students may fall into all three categories of potential disadvantage (e.g., many Latino/a students in the United States), while others may be characterized by only one dimension (e.g., immigrant students from highly educated parents learning English in the United States).

The relationships outlined in Table 1 highlight the fact that these dimensions of students' background experiences are transformed into actual educational disadvantages only when the school fails to implement effective evidence-based instruction. For example, a home-school language switch becomes an educational disadvantage only when the school fails to support students effectively in learning the school language (e.g., Cummins, 2001). Similarly, the effects of racism in the wider society can be significantly ameliorated when the school implements instruction that affirms students' identities and challenges the devaluation of students and communities in the wider society (e.g., Sleeter, 2011). Sources of potential educational disadvantage and evidence-based educational responses for each of the three categories are briefly reviewed in the following sections.

Linguistically Diverse Students

As noted above there is a large degree of consensus among researchers that effective instruction for English language learners

TABLE 1
High-Impact Instructional Responses to Sources of Potential Academic Disadvantage

Student Background	Linguistically Diverse	Low SES	Marginalized Status
Sources of potential disadvantage	Failure to understand instruction due to home–school language differences	Inadequate healthcare and or nutrition Housing segregation Lack of cultural and material resources in the home due to poverty Inadequate access to print in home and school	Societal discrimination Low teacher expectations Stereotype threat Identity devaluation
Evidence-based instructional response	Scaffold comprehension and production of language across the curriculum Engage students' multilingual repertoires Reinforce academic language across the curriculum	Maximize print access and literacy age engagement Reinforce academic language across the curriculum	Connect instruction to students lives Decolonize curriculum and instruction Affirm student identities in association with literacy engagement

requires that teachers scaffold meaning and reinforce academic language across the curriculum. There is also considerable research that documents the positive role that students' L1 can play in promoting achievement both in the context of bilingual and nonbilingual programs (e.g., Lucas & Katz, 1994). Several recent comprehensive research reviews on bilingual education for underachieving minority language students suggest that, in contexts where bilingual education is feasible (e.g., high concentration of particular groups), it represents a superior option to immersion in the language of the host country (Francis, Lesaux, & August, 2006; Lindholm-Leary & Borsato, 2006). In cases where bilingual education is not feasible or is excluded from consideration for ideological reasons, instruction that engages students' multilingual and multimodal repertoires represents an effective tool for teachers to scaffold meaning, connect to students' lives, affirm their identities, and enhance awareness of how academic language works (Celic & Seltzer, 2011).

Students from Low SES Backgrounds

The OECD PISA studies have consistently demonstrated a negative relationship between low SES and achievement both with respect to the SES of individual students and the collective SES of students within particular schools (e.g., OECD, 2010b). Some of the sources of potential educational disadvantage associated with SES are beyond the capacity of individual schools to address (e.g., housing segregation) but the potential negative effects of other factors can be reduced by school policies and instructional practices. In this regard, it is clearly feasible for schools serving low SES students to address the limited access to print experienced by many low SES students in their homes, neighborhoods, and schools by immersing them in a print-rich environment in order to promote literacy engagement across the curriculum.

Students from Socially Marginalized Backgrounds

How can schools counteract the negative effects of societal power relations that devalue minority group identities? Ladson-Billings (1994) has expressed the essence of an effective instructional response: "When students are treated as competent they are likely to demonstrate competence" (p. 123). In other words, educators, both individually and collectively, must challenge the devaluation of students' language, culture, and identity in the wider society by implementing instructional strategies that enable students to develop

identities of competence (Manyak, 2004) in the school context. These instructional strategies will communicate high expectations to students regarding their ability to succeed academically and support them in meeting these academic demands by affirming their identities and connecting curriculum to their lives.

The operation of coercive relations of power and their reflection in educational structures and interactions between teachers and students can be illustrated with respect to the experience of Aboriginal communities. Researchers and community activists have highlighted the necessity for schools to challenge the legacies of oppressive policies by decolonizing curriculum and instruction. A decolonized pedagogy would bring all students' worldviews; ways of knowing; and cultural, linguistic, and spiritual traditions to the centre of the school curriculum (e.g., Battiste, 2013; Dion, Johnstone, & Rice, 2010; Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Kanu, 2011; Tejeda, Espinoza, & Gutiérrez, 2003; Toulouse, 2011). Dion et al. (2010), for example, pointed out that the system of residential schools in the Canadian context was instituted with the intention of "enforcing policies aimed at erasing students' understanding of themselves as Aboriginal people, policies which ultimately were responsible for decimating Aboriginal families, cultures, and nations" (p. 12). These scholars argued that decolonizing the structures of formal education is crucial to reversing the erasure of identity brought about by residential schooling. This decolonizing process involves "critiquing western worldviews and challenging oppressive power structures that they uphold" (p. 12).

Battiste (2013) also noted that school curricula have long ignored First Nations' languages, traditions, and knowledge, with the result that students cannot see themselves in the curriculum. In some contexts, this situation has begun to change as schools have begun to create programs (or schools within schools) that focus on Aboriginal culture and ways of knowing. One such program is the Native Arts and Culture program within the Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School in Hamilton, Ontario, which we discuss later in this article. Makwa Oshkwenh-Adam Cyril John Marsh, a member of the Baker Lake First Nation, who was raised by his non-Aboriginal mother with his half-siblings expressed the impact that this Aboriginal-focused school program exerted on his sense of identity:

> Here you have an amazing Native program. ... Right, in Toronto you didn't even have this. You didn't have a Native program. You have a cultural center, yeah, but in a school—nothing. Growing up in Toronto, I went to two high schools and three elementary schools. Not one of them brought up any Aboriginal culture—none of them! It was about Canada, it was not about the people who were here first ....

> Coming here, this school puts Aboriginal people first .... That's what I like about this school, and here I found myself. I found who I am, what I am. (Personal interview, June 12, 2012)

Cassandra Bice-Zaugg expressed a similar sentiment: "Education is about truly learning stuff. I haven't learned as much in my entire educational career as I learned here [at the Native Arts and Culture program] because I learned about myself" (Personal interview, June 12, 2012).

In the following sections, we review two projects that illustrate the power of multimodal identity texts to amplify and expand students' sense of self, thereby challenging the devaluation of identity experienced by many low SES, multilingual students from marginalized communities. These projects were undertaken by teachers who exercised their agency as educators to interpret literacy engagement as inseparable from student identities and involving multiple modalities and/or languages.

ILLUSTRATIVE IDENTITY TEXT PROJECTS

Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives

Songide'ewin is an Ojibwe word meaning *strength of the heart* and it expresses the identity-affirming process and outcomes of the visual art and poetry project undertaken between 2010 and 2013 by students in the Native Arts and Culture Program at Sir John A. Macdonald Secondary School. More than 75 Aboriginal identity texts including paintings and poetic responses were created by students, teachers, and preservice teachers. This multimodal creative work was exhibited in three Ontario art galleries between May 2012 and April 2013. Figure 2 displays the brochure describing the exhibit at the Art Gallery of Hamilton in southern Ontario (excerpts from the exhibit opening can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk5tTtVM2jQ).

The project was initiated by Dr. Kristiina Montero as a means of bringing Aboriginal youth and non-Aboriginal preservice teachers together to learn about each other in a nonhierarchical manner. It was carried out through consultation and collaboration with Aboriginal elders, Aboriginal secondary students and their teachers, and teacher education candidates. Educators in the Native Arts and Culture Program welcomed the project, which was highly congruent with their goal of helping Aboriginal youth establish and/or stay rooted in their Aboriginal cultural traditions through culturally responsive, Aboriginal-centered curriculum. Additionally, the program included

FIGURE 2. Songide'ewin brochure at the Art Gallery of Hamilton.

the provision of sociocultural supports to help students navigate the ways of mainstream schooling. Students in this program had the opportunity to study novels and plays written by Canadian Aboriginal authors; to explore music and lyrics by musicians such as Buffy Sainte-Marie, Susan Aglukark, and Robbie Robertson; and to examine the biographies of sports legends such as Fred Saskamoose, former player in the National Hockey League.

The rich Aboriginal-centered curriculum and student-centered programming formed the backdrop of the *Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives* project where participants worked with Ojibwe elder and artist Rene Meshake to create visual and literary Aboriginal identity texts (Montero et al., 2013). The identity texts communicated messages about Aboriginal identity through multimodal images, colours, symbols, song, and language. For example, students explored the symbols (e.g., eagle, bear, turtle, wolf, drum, eagle feather) that connected them to the land, sacred teachings, and worldviews in their paintings and again in the poetry they wrote in response to the paintings.

School programs and projects such as *Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives* that place Aboriginality at the centre of the curriculum enable students to find ways to rise above negative stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples that persist in the wider society. For example, in response to a painting entitled *Six Over the Sea* by Danny Jaslowski, Nicole Cowe wrote a poem entitled *Six Nations Poems*:

Six Nations is my home

Mother Earth is there with me.

When we're home we have that

sense of unity and we are connected.

Full of fresh green grass and open fields;

Makes me feel the peace at home.

Our home is full of spirituality

because we stand up for what is right

for our people, but I think most

importantly we show pride. Pride by

continuing our language, pride by

attending longhouse, showing our

culture. This is why I am proud to

say Six Nations is my home.

Dylan Rivers, one of the student artists, expressed the impact of the project in his speech at the opening of the Songide'ewin Exhibit at the Art Gallery of Hamilton (Hamilton Wentworth District School Board TV, 2013):

There were a lot of creative flows going on in the classroom. We worked with different textures. It was such a beautiful way of doing art, incorporating a feel, and visual art. It's beautiful. ... It's impacted me a lot as a student and as an artist. It's made me feel a lot more confident about being an artist and being an overall, even musician. It brought a lot of creative flow musically. I've written some songs as a process of doing this. It has helped me. All of the push from everything, and all the teachers, the artists, have helped me be so embedded into my culture, and learn and absorb and preserve it, and join the drum group, and sing better, and work harder, and I'm very thankful.

The multimodal Aboriginal identity texts created in the context of the *Songide'ewin: Aboriginal Narratives* project are physical artifacts that begin to unravel the colonizing processes at play in the lives of their authors. Aboriginal identity texts can be viewed as a decolonizing pedagogy. Through these texts, Aboriginal youth explored their relationship to the land, to the Creator, to diverse Aboriginal languages, to their relations or ancestors, and to their relationship with the future. This is powerfully expressed by Cassandra Bice-Zaugg in reflecting on her participation in the project:

This experience gave me a gift of poetry. I started to develop a passion for poetry during this project. I didn't know I had this passion. Since this project I have written and shared many pieces of poetry. My identity story is a representation of how I feel, what I think, what I believe to be true .... It is a wonderful feeling to share a talent that others

appreciate, understand, and encourage. It's so important for adults to help young people recognize their gift. Participating in this project was like hearing a collective voice telling me: "We are proud of you. We care about you. You have a future." Being able to express my thoughts about who I am as an *Anishinaabekwe* (an Ojibwe woman) made me feel like I belonged and was connected to a larger community. (Montero et al., 2013, p. 88)

Creating Bridges to Student Voice through Multimodal Identity Texts

Our work with identity texts and English language learners in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) has been a journey of discovery in providing not only a springboard for language and content learning, but also opportunities for students to increase their feelings of self-worth and pride in themselves and in their cultural and linguistic communities.

The journey began in 2009 when a group of four teachers at Oakridge Junior Public School (Shirley Hu, Lisa McDonald, Shamira Mohamed, and Grace Wong) and their Grades 4 and 5 English language learners with limited prior schooling cocreated a book entitled *Flying Home: A Migration Story*. Students studied the migration patterns of Canada geese and reflected on the birds' journey to survive between two homes. As the students learned about the flight of birds, they connected what they were learning to their own experiences of migration. They discovered many profound truths about themselves, their families' reasons for migration, their growing love for their new home in Canada, and their continued attachment to their places of origin. Students who rarely spoke in class became more vocal because the important experiences they had to share were validated. The illustrations representing both the migration patterns of Canada geese and students' experiences were created using watercolor, collage, and tableaux. The text above the illustration describes the migration of the geese while the text below describes the experiences of students and their families. Every line in the story was taken from the narratives of these students who were facing the challenges of acculturation. The creation of a digital narrative and hardcover book allowed the teachers to integrate subject matter using knowledge and skills from across the curriculum. The digital text was recorded in a variety of languages to recognize and honor the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in the classroom (see https://digitalstorybooks.wikispaces.com/space/

content for English, Czech, and Romani video versions of this text that can be played on Windows media player).

After completing the migration story project, Shirley became an instructional leader in the central ESL/ELD department and shared her rich knowledge and enthusiasm for creating e-texts in a learning module for elementary and secondary teachers. Forty participating teachers learned how to create both digital and hard-copy fiction or nonfiction picture books with their students. Teachers observed that the digital identity text pedagogy generated high levels of academic engagement among their students and enabled students to succeed at writing and to see themselves as authors. Yasmin Khan, one of the participating ESL teachers, noted: "What blew me away completely was the quality of [the students'] written connections that they made and the symbolism in their art. What a wonderful way to show [students'] higher level thinking skills" (see the video entitled "Red Carpet: June 6, 2013" on the opening page of the Digital Book Centre wiki noted below for a video that highlights teachers' experiences, including Yasmin's, with the project). These projects provided students with a platform to share their personal voices and receive positive feedback and affirmation of self from the multiple audiences.

To celebrate the students' work, a board-wide "Red Carpet Gala" was organized where students and teachers shared their projects in video format, as well as in a gallery walk of the many different student-created book projects. Students and teachers also had the opportunity to share their successes and challenges at a "Speaker's Corner" booth that was set up to enable them to share their experiences. The digital projects and the Red Carpet videos can be viewed on the wiki available at https://digitalbookcentre.wikispaces.com/.

The multimodal identity text creation work has generated considerable interest among TDSB teachers over the past several years, with more teachers coming on board to learn new technologies and incorporate additional artistic and creative modalities to facilitate the inclusion of their students' voices in classroom projects. Next, we present brief descriptions of identity text projects that teachers created with elementary and secondary English language learners. In addition to the projects initiated by TDSB teachers, we include some notable identity text work undertaken by a kindergarten teacher in a neighbouring school board. The names of the teachers primarily responsible for the project are noted in parentheses.

Wavin' Flag: Journeys to Canada (Claudia Ancuta and Jo Nieuwkerk). Beginning-level adolescent English language learners with limited prior schooling read the picture book, *When I Get Older: The Story Behind "Wavin' Flag,"* Canadian rapper and FIFA World Cup songwriter K'Naan's story about his family's journey from Somalia to Canada. In

response to the book, students created digital stories about their own journeys to Canada using personal and stock photos, music clips, and narration. Students also created a short video that demonstrated the process of how they composed and edited their digital stories.

Math identity texts in inner city schools (Jennifer Fannin). English language learners in Grades 2–5 created number sense problems and timelines in photo stories that incorporated their lived experiences, families, and home lives. Students used the ages of their family members to create personally relevant addition and subtraction problems, such as how old their parents were when they (the students) were born. Another photo storybook used students' after-school activity schedules to create timelines representing their understanding of elapsed time over the day. The project resulted in increased student engagement in mathematics activities by giving importance to the wealth of personal background that students bring to math explorations. The project also allowed students to reflect on how effectively they use their time out of school. For example, one student wrote in the book, "It helped me because when I look at other people timeline it tells me that what should I do more and what should I not do" (sic).

Pay the Fine, Time to Save! The Right Shoes, We Pay the Tax (Mandi Gerland and Ann Woomert). These students and teachers cocreated photo stories focusing on financial literacy for newly arrived adolescent students with limited prior schooling. Their stories were part of a larger ERGO (ESL/ELD Resource Group of Ontario) project called *Making Good Choices* led by Sharon Newmaster of the Waterloo Region District School Board. Each story was cocreated by adolescent English language learners and their teachers and features a specific financial literacy skill such as opening a bank account, making a budget, or understanding sales tax. Nearly two dozen stories were cocreated by students and teachers from across Ontario. These texts with accompanying audio can be can downloaded for free at www.ergo-on.ca.

New Year's traditions museum exhibit (Janet Jundler). The ESL Student Council from Earl Haig Secondary School partnered with the Youth Volunteer Committee of Gibson House Museum, an early Canadian historic house museum located in north Toronto, to create a New Year's traditions exhibit that was displayed at the museum for several weeks. Students shared their personal New Year's stories and contributed artifacts that represented their families, cultures, and diverse New Year's celebrations. The students' texts were professionally displayed on plaques in the exhibit and included descriptions of traditional New Year's customs, as well as their accounts of how old and new traditions have melded together in their celebrations since moving to Canada.

Self-identity collage project (Artemis Kapakos). Beginning English language learners in middle school explored their individual identities through art and language using a mixed media collage format. Using four simple sentence frames for scaffolding writing—*I am . . . , I like . . . , I remember . . . , I believe*—students explored their individuality and distinct backgrounds in a multitude of short sentences. This written identity component of the piece was then shaped into a picture frame for the student's collaged self-portrait. The creative expression of this project provided a vehicle for students to experiment freely with *their* ideas and reveal their emotions as they developed a deeper sense of self-knowledge.

Islington mural project (Anne Kong). Newly arrived middle school English language learners learned about the history of their local community through an art walk among outdoor public murals in their neighbourhood, which depict the history of the community over the past century. Students were then inspired to create a collaborative triple-panel mural of their own illustrating important and beautiful aspects of their own lives. The students affirmed themselves as artists while reflecting on the larger questions of how they fit in and contribute to their new and ever-changing community.

Welcome to Canada: A How-to Guide (Thursica Kovinthan). In this e-text book writing project, English language learners in Grades 3–6 wrote informational procedural texts to help other newcomers learn how to do various things in Canada. Students wrote about checking out a library book, making a snowman, dressing for school in the winter, and the quintessentially Canadian winter activity: ordering a hot chocolate at a Tim Horton's restaurant. Many authors presented their contributions in dual-language format (Figures 3 and 4).

M Is for My Canada (Natsuko Nakamura and Glen Barbeau). In response to the question "Do you believe your actions can influence Canadian culture?" students in a Grade 6 social studies class explored their beliefs about Canada and evaluated the Canadian perspectives presented in the picture book *M Is for Maple: A Canadian Alphabet* (Ulmer, 2001). Their responses were compiled and presented in a book entitled *M Is for My Canada* (Figure 5).

Coming to Canada (Angela Sioumpas). English language learners from five different schools related their immigration stories to their itinerant (travelling) ESL teacher. Students' words, photos, artwork, and voices were compiled using iMovie. The movie takes viewers on a voyage around the world from students' points of departure through to their arrival and adjustment to their new schools and communities in Canada.

What Do You See When You Look at Me? (Cynthia Subramaniam and Arlene Clavo). Students in kindergarten through Grade 4 used a social
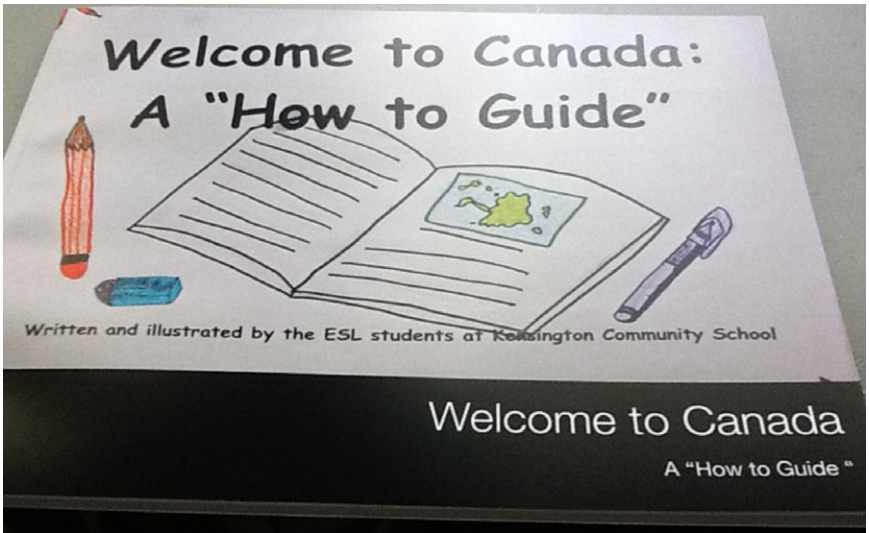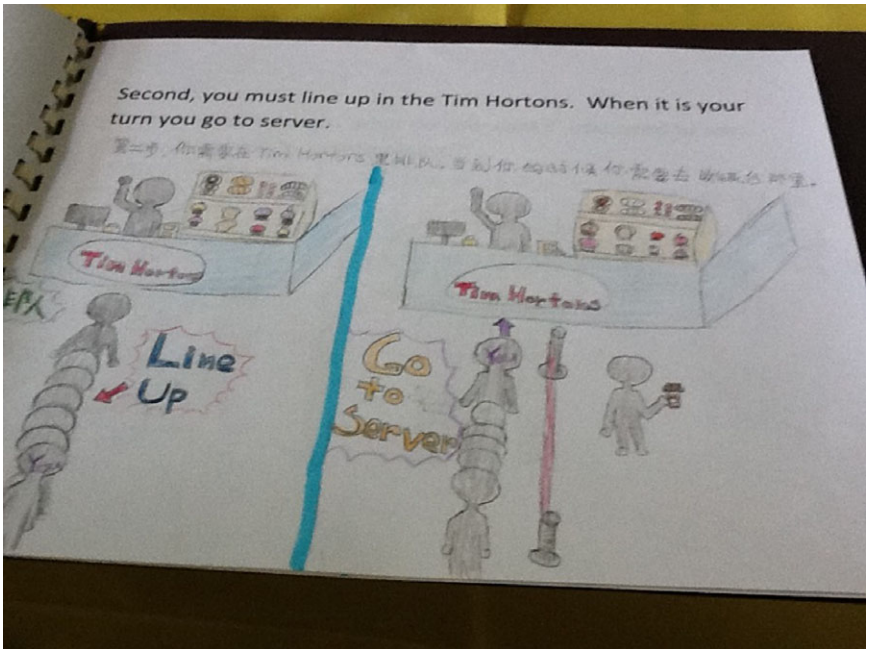
FIGURE 3. Welcome to Canada: A How-to Guide.

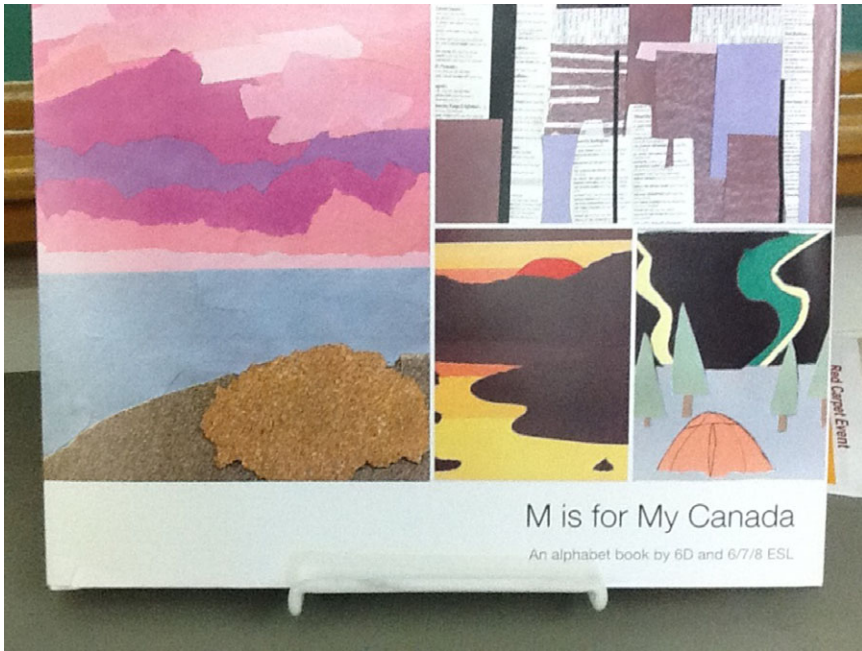FIGURE 4. Ordering a hot chocolate at a Tim Horton's restaurant.

FIGURE 5. M Is for My Canada.

justice lens to compose a patterned text focused on identity issues. Students explored how people are not defined by just one identity, but rather by a beautiful combination of many different identities that weave together diverse aspects of life. Students composed short prose poems based on identities of gender, economic background, race, religion, and family composition (Figure 6). The students' insightful perspectives are illustrated in the following excerpts:

> What do you see when I eat with my chopsticks? Do you see that this is how my family and I eat at home?

> What do you see when I wear my bindi? Do you see that it keeps me centred and focused on faith?

> What do you see when I draw the moon? Do you see that it tells me when to break the fast at Ramadan?

Our Book of Awesome (Christine Syniura). Intermediate-level secondary school English language learners read selections from Canadian author Neil Pasricha's (2010) bestselling *The Book of Awesome*, a compendium of those little things in life that make people smile each day. After analyzing and practicing the basic building blocks of
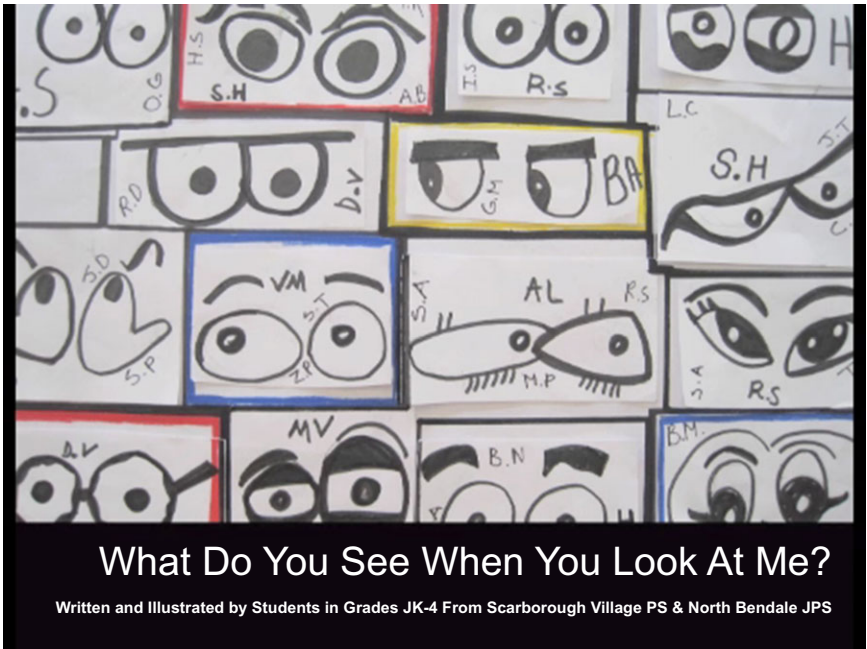
FIGURE 6. What Do You See When You Look at Me?

English short essay structure, the students wrote paragraphs celebrating the awesome things in their lives, and combined them into an illustrated digital presentation and softcover book. Students wrote about the awesome things in their adolescent lives such as finding a slice of leftover pizza in the fridge, seeing one's "crush" at the mall, and getting a "snow day" (when school is closed due to bad winter weather).

In X-ray style (Shamira Mohamed and Shirley Hu). Students were inspired to create a painting that reflected their own culture, traditions, and beliefs in the X-ray artistic style of Norval Morrisseau, a well-known Canadian First Nations artist. Students explored Morrisseau's artwork and learned many things about Morrisseau and the Ojibwe Nation from his use of images, symbols, lines, and colours. The students then used the X-ray technique in their own creations in which they shared their cultural heritage and identities. Like Norval Morrisseau, students could keep their traditions alive and vibrant through their paintings, and see themselves as contributors to the assemblage of diverse cultures in their community.

We Can Count; How Do You Say Hello? (Laurel Fynes, Peel District School Board). Thornwood Public School Kindergarten teacher Laurel Fynes powerfully demonstrates how identity text pedagogy can also

include our very youngest students in a variety of ways. Laurel maintains a wonderfully innovative blog entitled *This Kindergarten Life* (www.thiskindylife.blogspot.ca) as well as a Twitter feed about the learning that takes place in her linguistically and culturally diverse kindergarten class in her school just west of Toronto (Twitter feeds @KinderFynes and @109ThornKs). Use of multiple modalities and social media allows the children to create identity texts that can be shared with their parents and families. She also actively involves her young students' families in the creation of class identity texts. For example, the *How Do You Say Hello?* project invited parents/caregivers to send in written samples of the words for *hello* and *goodbye* in their home languages. Written and audio versions of these words were then incorporated into a class video using Voicethread technology (http:// thiskindylife.blogspot.ca/2014/04/how-do-you-say-hello.html). The *We Can Count* project featured clips of children in the class counting to ten in their home languages while using a rich variety of colorful manipulatives to accomplish the counting (http://thiskindylife.blogspot.ca/search?q=We+can+count).

CONCLUSION

The identity text projects that we have described all involved active literacy engagement on the part of students in which they employed a wide variety of modalities to create meanings, generate insights, and position themselves as powerful communicators. They illustrate the significant potential impact that pedagogy focused on literacy engagement and identity affirmation can have on student achievement, and, by the same token, the consequences for student achievement when these dimensions are omitted from policies designed to close the achievement gap between social groups.

Identity text projects reflect what Walker (2014) has termed *a pedagogy of powerful communication*. The low SES, linguistically diverse Latina/o high school students who participated in her year-long participatory study of a youth radio and radio arts curriculum created radio programs and wrote poetry and prose that was broadcast to an audience of peers and adults. Walker notes that this experience addressed the multiple dimensions of being human:

… knowing oneself, expressing feelings and ideas, sharing yourself with others, making yourself understood by others, participating as a member of a group, representing your ideas and emotions in multiple modalities and genres, shaping life in your local community, and gaining access to public media sphere to create new communities and participate in public discourse. (p. 167)

Students who are given opportunities and support to create identity texts report similar experiences, emotions, and patterns of interactions with peers, teachers, and family members. The deep structure underlying these experiences is the generation of a sense of agency or empowerment, which we have defined as "the collaborative creation of power" (Cummins, 2001, p. 16).

In schools that engage in identity text work, a radically different image of the student is at play in comparison to more typical schools that adopt a remedial orientation to students characterized as *English language learners* or *disadvantaged.* These latter terms implicitly define students by what they lack, and instruction often focuses on remediating presumed deficits in phonological awareness or other aspects of literacy skills. This instruction typically fails to invoke higher order thinking skills or cognitive challenge and rarely positions students' multilingual skills as academic resources. By contrast, students who engage in identity text work come to see themselves as capable of

- becoming bilingual and biliterate,
- higher order thinking and intellectual accomplishments,
- creative and imaginative thinking,
- creating literature and art,
- generating new knowledge, and
- thinking about and finding solutions to social issues.

Students' identity texts reflect an image of themselves as intellectually and academically competent, and this transformed identity fuels further literacy engagement. In short, multimodal identity text work repudiates the devaluation of identity that low SES, multilingual, and marginalized group students have frequently experienced in their interactions in schools and in the wider society. The theoretical analysis and empirical research we have presented further implies that policies and pedagogical interventions designed to close the achievement gap between social groups will remain futile as long as issues related to literacy engagement and teacher–student identity negotiation are excluded from consideration.

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