Re/Discovering our Teacher Identities Through Digital Storytelling with Syrian Children and Youth: A Multi-ethnography of Four Diverse Educators

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Abstract

Through “me mapping” activities that support the development of language proficiency and community among Syrian refugee children and youth in the Greater Toronto Area, four teacher-researchers explored the social and academic integration of refugees and re/discovered our teacher identities in the process. Our multi-ethnographic methodology allowed us to carry out a critical dialogue related to our diverse backgrounds and the ways we negotiate our evolving identities in the field. Three of the four authors are teacher candidates in a graduate teacher education program, and the fourth co-author is an established scholar and professor at the University of Toronto. Drawing on relevant literature in the field, their conversations produce insights surrounding fluid identity categories as well as the connections between their experiences of privilege and marginalization and their work with Syrian refugees.

Context and Our Shared Research

Through “me mapping” workshops with Syrian refugee children and youth in a number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and schools in the Greater Toronto Area, we explored the social and academic integration of refugees. The series of “me mapping” workshops combine a focus on English proficiency development and the production of multimedia artifacts (Cummins, 2009). Over forty 6 to 16-year-old Syrian newcomers recorded their stories as they explored their changing identities and learned new concepts in English. We worked collaboratively with two NGOs and several schools in the Greater Toronto Area from July to December 2017.

The analysis of the digital artifacts produced and the workshop facilitators’ experiences lead to recommendations for educators working with refugees and their families in K-12 schools regarding how to support the social and academic integration of these children and youth. “Me Mapping” is one aspect of a larger research study which considers the educational integration of the current wave of 50,000 Syrian refugees in Canada (2015-2017) from a standpoint of complex, nuanced, and intersecting factors.
The multimedia artifacts produced during the workshops have afforded insights into the refugees’ families, important milestones in their lives, their multiple identities, their experiences at school, as well as their hopes and aspirations for their future. Reviewing these artifacts led us to think about our own fluid identities and how these impacted on our experiences with this group of learners in Ontario educational institutions.

Figure 1. Some of our “Me Mapping” workshop participants.

Our Methodology - Multi-ethnography
Duo/multi-ethnography is a fairly new and still sometimes contested research genre that has grown from research traditions of storytelling and Pinar’s (1975) notion of ‘currere.’ Duo/multi-ethnography includes critical conversations where two or more voices of people who experience similar phenomena can begin to recognize the influence of their own curriculum of life or personal history. In multi-ethnographies, three or more researchers work together to critique and question their understanding of social issues and then engage in cycles of interpretation to arrive at new insights (Sawyer & Norris, 2013 & 2015; Norris & Sawyer, 2017). In multi-ethnography, the authors are both the researchers and the researched, storytelling is a form of data collection, and discussion is a type of analysis integral to the writing process. Norris (2008) explains the dynamic relationship between reader and researchers in duo/multi-ethnography:

…. we need the other so as to understand the self. Self, then, is defined not as a fixed entity but rather as a fluid one. Readers will witness an emergent and organic progression of meaning-making. Such writing invites readers into the conversation (p. 6). In summary, duoethnography is a literary style that provides stories of insights containing theses and antitheses of two or more individuals between which readers can form their own synthesis. It is a dialogic approach to meaning construction. (p. 7)

We have been inspired by the transformative possibilities of multi-ethnography in exploring our beliefs and experiences related to our work with Syrian refugees. Norris and Sawyer (2017) describe that by re-examining the
...past through a present lens and the present though a past lens, one has the potential to reconceptualize one’s perspectives and actions. Due to its reflexive, trans-temporal nature, currere can be a pedagogical act of unlearning (McWilliam, 2005) as one re-stories self, creating epiphanies that evoke new meanings of the past and revised visions of the future. (p. 2)

We have found that engaging in this multi-ethnographic process has allowed us to trace how we came to our current understandings of working with refugees and re/discover our teaching identities. As multi-ethnographers exploring our fluid professional identities, it is helpful to consider aspects of our life history and introduce the ways that we have worked together as co-researchers, co-authors, and within a supervisor/student relationship.

Table 1. Antoinette, Dania, Ghada and Sumaya’s Background Information

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Antoinette</th>
<th>Dania</th>
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<td>Professor, Associate Chair, Student Experience, University of Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>Director, Lead Arabic Teacher, Greater Toronto Area Outreach</td>
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<td>Educational Policy specialist, Abu Dhabi Education Council, United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>Teaching assistant, McGill University, Canada</td>
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<td>ESL adult educator, Montreal &amp; Toronto, Canada</td>
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<td>Tutor for Arabic as a second language, The student tutoring network, Greater Toronto Area, Canada</td>
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<td>Teacher educator in 4 different universities &amp; a number of different programs, McGill University (Montreal, Canada), University of Quebec (Canada), York University (Toronto, Canada), Aga Khan University (Karachi, Pakistan)</td>
<td>Different volunteering experiences across Canada as a teacher, and parent council member/Vice Chair</td>
<td>Various volunteering teaching experiences in schools and NGOs.</td>
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<td>First year chemistry teaching assistant. McMaster University, Canada</td>
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<td>Associate Chair, Student Experience, Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Department, OISE (Toronto, Canada)</td>
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Our multi-ethnography was shaped by 8 months of collaborative work that includes over 20 hours of conversations via Skype as well as discussions before and after the facilitation of our workshops with Syrian refugee children and youth. We used Google Drive to store our videotaped conversations and to organize the background readings. We created a folder with our drafts and wrote using different colours to highlight our contributions to each draft. By using a Google Doc draft we were able to asynchronously access our growing conversations and respond to each other. In the next section, we provide an overview of intersectionality (Hankivsky, 2014), the theoretical lens we applied in our work.

To illustrate both our process and our learnings, we then offer three dialogues related to the most salient aspects of our biographies as they connect to our intersectional lens and our transformed understanding of our teaching identities.

**Our Conceptual Lens - Intersectionality**

Using intersectionality (Hankivsky, 2014) as our lens, we have gained a new perspective on our research and advocacy work for and with Syrian refugees. This framework has helped us to understand language, culture and immigration status as just three aspects of the complex identity of Syrian refugees and of our own professional identity. Intersectionality also highlights how problematic it is to reduce any person’s identity to a few characteristics often ascribed by ‘others’ to define them.

![Intersectionality Lens](image)

*Figure 2. Intersectionality Lens. Adapted from the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (2009, p. 5).*
The Intersectionality diagram helps us to see how each person’s unique circumstances are affected by aspects of their identity. In turn, it illustrates how different types of discrimination and attitudes impact one’s identity while larger forces and structures work together to reinforce each individual’s experiences of oppression and/or privilege.

**Our Conversations**

Our first conversation considers our diversity as a research team by exploring our experiences of privilege and oppression using an activity adapted from Morgan (1996). In our second conversation, we explore our distinct backgrounds, and then in our third conversation we consider which aspects of our identities were most salient and impactful as we facilitated storytelling workshops with Syrian children and youth. In particular, we discussed our linguistic, racial, cultural and religious identities and their effect on the learners as well as on our professional identities. We attempted to keep our conceptual lens of intersectionality central in these conversations.

**Conversation 1 - Experiences of Privilege and Oppression**

Antoinette: I find that our coloured intersecting axes of privilege/society normatives and oppression/resistance are useful to show how we situate our multiple identities. This activity helped to focus my thinking. Although what we understand broadly as privilege and oppression has not changed much since 1996 when Morgan designed these axes, the specifics and how we experience power, privilege and oppression is unique to each of us and varies depending on the context in which we find ourselves (Hankivsky, 2014). In fact, I know that we have had several discussions about how some of our daily experiences are not reflected on any of these axes.
Figure 3. Antoinette (top left), Ghada (top right), Dania (bottom left) and Sumaya’s (bottom right) axes of privilege and oppression.

Antoinette: In looking at how I positioned myself on the various axes, I am struck by how much my life has been and continues to be defined by the privilege of being part of my society’s normative groups. However, I attribute my career choice as a language and literacy educator and teacher educator in part to my experiences of oppression growing up. In particular, [these relate to] being perceived as a “maudite anglaise” (damn English girl) in my French elementary and secondary schools and living with a single mother in the then very Catholic province of Quebec where the traditional family with a mother and father living together was sacred (Dickinson & Young, 2003).

Ghada: Placing myself on the axes of privilege and oppression brought questions and concerns to mind. As the mother of a child who lives on the “spectrum,” can I also consider myself oppressed because of disability? Every day I experience discrimination because of my child’s distinct needs in the community and the lack of the appropriate support that he needs at school.

Antoinette: I agree that as parents we are often considered responsible for our children’s actions / behaviors and that we do indeed absorb the impact of the discrimination targeting our children.

Sumaya: Although I know the diagram cannot include all forms of discrimination, I was left wondering why Islamophobia was not included when anti-Semitism was.

Dania: Similar to Sumaya, two things struck me; one is the absence of Islamophobia as one of the axes. Where does it appear at this time when Islam and Muslims are the target of so much discrimination and media attention?
Antoinette: In fact, to address this very issue in 2016, the Islamic Social Services Association and the National Council of Canadian Muslims (NCCM) developed a guide for educators called *Helping Students Deal with Trauma Related to Geopolitical Violence and Islamophobia*. Furthermore, I recently read that Ihsaan Gardee, the NCCM Executive Director, applauded the specific naming of Islamophobia, alongside other serious forms of religious discrimination, by the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage in its February 1, 2018 Report *Taking Action Against Systemic Racism and Religious Discrimination including Islamophobia*. Gardee highlighted that this recognizes the realities facing many Muslims in Canada and shows that the federal government understands the urgency of this form of discrimination.

Dania: I am glad to hear of this progress. Another axis that I find problematic is labelled the Politics of Appearance which, for me, is related to the missing axis of Islamophobia and the wearing of the hijab. As a wearer of the hijab, am I automatically unattractive? Do I put myself, on this axis, as unattractive, or should there be yet another axis to address style of dress? I have wondered many times when looking in the mirror whether people would treat me differently if I went without my hijab.

Antoinette: I do think that many Canadians would treat you differently if you did not wear the hijab as I assume that they make many assumptions based on your choice to do so. Secularism in society has led to a backlash against those who wear visible symbols related to their religious beliefs. However, there are various groups of Muslim women also fighting back against the stereotypes as can be seen in a short CBC video on the politics of the hijab (CBC, The National, 2017).

Sumaya: Dania brought forward the issue of what it means to be attractive or unattractive. Isn’t everyone attractive in their own way? Isn’t that why the phrase "beauty lies in the eye of the beholder" was coined? The term “politics of appearance” struck me. Does a person need to have their figure and hair visible to be considered attractive in today’s world? I was also struck that only the label Black was highlighted as part of the ethnic minority axis. Shouldn't this axis include all visible minorities?

Dania: Completing the “class” axis led me to reflect on my status in the teaching profession... I was raised to think of teaching as a greatly respected profession. However, moving from being an instructor at university to a student teacher has been a sometimes challenging journey. I did not realize some of the negative attitudes toward school teachers until I became a teacher candidate - yet another interesting term. I have certainly felt a loss of privilege moving from being a doctoral student and instructor to being a teacher candidate. Working with children is something that I find rewarding and have always wanted to do. Completing this exercise made it clear that my experiences of privilege and oppression changed dramatically when I moved to Canada nearly two decades ago.
Antoinette: It sounds like we all agree that completing this exercise developed by Morgan in 1996 was helpful in focusing on our experiences of both privilege and oppression. We also seem to be on the same page in terms of seeing the need to adapt and update the many axes in the diagram to better represent broader societal forces in Canada in 2018 as well as our unique experiences of privilege and oppression.

**Conversation 2 - Where We Are From…**

Antoinette: Although I have worked with English learners of all ages and [in different] parts of the world, I am left wondering how much where we are from matters. Recently, I learned about a powerful way to delve into the essence of where we come from through the creation of a poem from a template (Lyon, 1999; see Appendix). I was moved by having to think back to where I am from and hope that this experience will help us to answer this question.

![Figure 4. Antoinette’s “Where I’m from” poem.](image)

Antoinette: Although, my “Where I’m from” poem helped me to see even more clearly that my roots are those of the colonizers and oppressors in Canada, it also brought into sharp focus the many times when the roles were reversed and I experienced the loss of some of that privilege. Although where I lived was decent, I was ashamed of living on the top floor of a walk-up apartment tightly sandwiched between a large Hasidic Jewish family and a very loud/angry couple from Russia. Many of my school friends lived in spacious houses at the foot of the famous Mount Royal which is home to several political dynasties. As such, I understand that one’s immediate surroundings temper the degree of privilege or oppression experienced (Hankivsky, 2014). I understand how living across languages, religions and cultures forced me to see the world from...
multiple perspectives and develop a respect for differences at various levels ( Ikas & Wagner, 2009).

Sumaya: The “Where I’m from” poem made me think deeply about my roots and identity as a Muslim Arab Libyan born in Canada and raised between Canada and Libya. Teaching young children and youth and seeing how their different experiences shaped them helped me reflect on the importance of my background and culture as a teacher.

Antoinette: As I hear you mention the importance of self-knowledge, I am reminded of Kumaravadivelu (2012) when he writes about the centrality of the teacher in schools and the importance for every teacher to know themselves and understand the impact of their upbringing and life experiences on who they are as teachers.

![Figure 5. Sumaya’s “Where I’m from” poem.](image)

Sumaya: Leaving Canada and moving to Libya at the age of 6 made me explore a different worldview as one of the oppressed. Then later, fleeing Libya, the country that I once called “home,” was a big turning point in my life. Despite the struggles and challenges I endured, the country of my birth, Canada, opened a new pathway for me which led to a dream filled with opportunities. I flourished in my identity as a Muslim wearing a hijab in Canada where I could explore my individuality in the comfort of being part of a society that reflected my religion and culture.

Ghada: Sumaya, although I can relate to some of what you have said about living in the Arab world, writing the “Where I’m from” poem brought back sweet and sad memories as well as
experiences that were all entangled to make me the person I am today. Living the civil war in Lebanon in all its phases, lacking the right to visit our occupied southern village where my grandparents once lived, being displaced from one place to another, and suffering from poverty as my father’s clothing store was completely destroyed - all these hardships built my resilience and ability to stand up again after each fall.

Figure 6. Ghada’s “Where I’m from” poem.

Antoinette: Your experience of living in a war zone must be an important point of connection for you with the Syrian youth you have worked with this past year.

Ghada: Yes, this is true. In fact, I can recognize some of the same feelings and responses to war that I experienced among Syrian youth now living in Canada. I see signs of resilience among some of them while I also know some teens with post-traumatic stress disorder who find the demands of learning English and attending high school overwhelming (Stewart, 2011). Although they are grateful to be in Canada, they sometimes say they feel they have exchanged one set of challenges for another.

Antoinette: Dania, do you think that your departure from Syria before the war impacts on your relationship with Syrian youth?

Dania: As I work with younger Syrian refugees, I think that what matters most is my familiarity with the Arab world and its varied traditions combined with my experiences being a newcomer to Canada myself.
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**Figure 7. Dania’s “Where I’m from” poem.**

Dania: I found it challenging to write my “Where I’m from” poem. I asked myself: What should I include? How do I describe the places I connect with, or consider myself from? It was not easy narrowing down where I am from. What stories to include and which ones to leave out? The places where I have lived have certainly shaped who I am. I tried to provide a glimpse at cities that have a place in my heart, as I move to new places and continue to feel as a citizen of this world. I imagine that many of the Syrian children I know might also find it difficult to write this type of poem when they become teens and then adults as their journey from Syria has taken them across many landscapes.

Antoinette: I think we all felt the power of writing this poem! Although our lives differ in many ways, we share the powerful experience of having lived across cultures and languages in varied spaces across Canada and, for you, the Arab world as well. So yes, where we are from would seem to matter in that our trans/inter/cross-cultural experiences have allowed us to develop resilience which we communicate to our Syrian students in various ways. To fully capture this in the Intersectionality visual (see Figure 2), we would need a three-dimensional figure with multiple outer circles intersecting in different orbits to represent the larger societal forces impacting our experiences across different contexts.

**Conversation 3: Which aspects of our multiple identities seem to matter most when interacting with Syrian children and their families?**

Antoinette: In several of our post-workshop conversations, we indirectly touched on how different aspects of our identities impeded or enhanced the development of relationships with Syrian
children or youth and their families. We also considered which pedagogies would be most effective in engaging them in identity connected activities. Do you remember when we first talked about translanguaging as a pedagogical approach allowing for the use of multiple languages in the classroom to support learning, or when we discussed how the clothes we wore to the workshops seemed to affect the degree of trust that grew between the learners and us? One aspect of our identity that we kept coming back to was our identity as mothers.

Our identity as mothers
Antoinette: When I think of my interactions with the mothers and grandmothers of the Syrian children who participated in the workshop series to help the children improve their English proficiency by developing identity-focused short videos, I remember how aware I was of my multiple identities and the need to find common ground with them. As such, I took every opportunity to highlight our shared identity as mothers and advocates for our children and, in my case, for their children as well.

Dania: Being a mother and teacher has certainly fueled my passion and guided my journey with Syrian children. In fact, I try to treat each child as if they were my own.

Sumaya: Being a teacher as well as a mother of a 6- and 8-year old helped me understand the barriers that these children are striving to overcome. For example, dealing with my own child who experienced challenges in literacy at the age of 6 made me better understand the Syrian refugee children who are struggling to adopt a new language.

Ghada: I, too, related to the Syrian children and youth as a mother. I understood their anxiety and stresses given that I have four children. I could relate to the excitement but also the fear they felt being in a new environment and, as such, I was able to choose activities to help develop a sense of security and allow for engagement and eagerness for learning. Some parents shared their experiences with me because they knew that I too was a parent. One mother opened up to me about her son’s disability and the lack of support available. As the mother of a child with autism, I could relate and also guide her to available resources.

Our identity as im/migrants
Antoinette: I see your shared experience as immigrants to Canada as a major strength in working with Syrian families. Although I have not immigrated to a new country as the three of you have, my experience moving from Montreal to Toronto allowed me to get a small sense of what it feels like to use a different language in daily life and live with a somewhat different set of values.

Dania: At times, I felt like an ambassador helping families and children build bridges between their linguistic and cultural heritage and Anglo-Canadian culture. The fact that I am an immigrant myself helped me connect with parents and understand some of the concerns they have.
Ghada: I had an instant connection with the Syrian teens who had a great desire to share with me parts of their journey, especially after I shared my life journey with them. Their experiences were very similar to what I remember from 20 years ago when I was a newly arrived immigrant to Canada struggling to express the simplest things in English. I also remember the enthusiasm of being in a new country, with renewed hopes and great expectations.

Sumaya: I could relate to the Syrian teens as I could see how we walked similar pathways. Years ago, escaping oppression with my family made me connect to their struggles and challenges, specifically losing their homeland. In coming to Canada where I had to assimilate to the Canadian culture and gain a new identity, I found that the support I received from teachers was crucial to feel a sense of belonging. I remember how my high school teachers went the extra mile to encourage my passion for learning and make me feel safe and welcome. I was so inspired by them that I set a goal for myself to be an advocate in the lives of children who face barriers.

Antoinette: My sense is that your own experiences of migration, your knowledge of parts of the Arab world and your first-hand experience living in conflict zones, have all contributed to the deep empathy you have for the Syrian refugee families.

Dania: My background experience growing up in Syria and attending school there has certainly helped me connect with the children and their families at a deeper level. When little ones arrived anxious with their parents on the first day, it did not take long for them to feel a sense of belonging and comfort when I welcomed them in Arabic. As the children shared simple details of their lives in Syria and began calling me Anse or teacher, this also brought joy to my heart and childhood memories came flooding back.

Ghada: My identity as an immigrant who lived the civil war in Lebanon helped me understand the feelings of fear and insecurity they experienced every time there was bombing in their neighborhood, and every time they were displaced from one place to another. An especially touching moment occurred during one of the workshops when we listened to the sentimental Arabic song “Give us our childhood” (Khan, 2016) which speaks about how war strips the innocence from young children - we were not able to mask our feelings and this brought tears to our eyes.

**Our linguistic identities**

Antoinette: I felt that my lack of Arabic language skills made me half as effective as you have been because you are fluent in Arabic. I saw how your ability to speak Arabic opened many additional pathways to learning for our Syrian workshop participants. One well-placed word could become an encouragement, an explanation, a comfort… In addition, your ability to understand
Arabic allowed you to hear, see what a child might have misunderstood or, in fact, just how much of a concept had truly been absorbed.

Although my knowledge of French and Spanish did not directly help me, my visceral memory of how inadequate I had felt among native speakers when I was learning these languages surfaced often and I was reminded of how the children and teenagers felt as they navigated school every day.

Dania: My fluency in Arabic and use of the spoken Syrian dialect have certainly been an asset in helping me connect with both students and parents. Arabic also helped me establish a welcoming environment, encourage students and build immediate connections with my Syrian students as I could understand students’ conversations, as well as learn more about their backgrounds and experiences. When students uttered words that were considered inappropriate, I was able to remind them of social expectations and what is acceptable and what is not as well as the need to be respectful of others.

My knowledge of Arabic allowed me to explain new vocabulary and explain processes to students. For example, one student explained to me how he felt his school teacher frequently gave him timeouts because he was not able to express his ideas, and how other students were reporting untrue things to the teacher. The ability to overhear students and then have discussions with them has helped both me and these students, as we would usually talk about the expectations in schools. Also, because I understand Arabic, I encouraged students to share their ideas with me in Arabic before they tried to express them in English, if they wanted to. This helped students to develop their ideas and communicate them more clearly once expressed in English. It also helped me as an educator to distinguish between the normal challenges students face because of the developmental stage they have reached in learning English as an additional language and other issues such as speech impediments or cognitive development issues.

Ghada: Being trilingual was an advantage for me in communicating with all stakeholders. I speak Arabic, English and French. Since Lebanon borders Syria and similar dialects are spoken, I was able to communicate with the students in their mother tongue and ensure they felt at ease and comfortable with me. This opened up channels of communication and fostered a safe environment for learning. Even when they could not convey their ideas in English the children were able to express themselves in Arabic around me which allowed them to build confidence and self-esteem. This helped them to learn and grasp concepts faster because they were not afraid of saying the wrong thing nor were they self-conscious about their proficiency level in English.

Especially important, because I learned English after I arrived to Canada, I had first-hand experience in learning English as a second language and thus had valuable insights into techniques that allowed me to teach them better (Braine, 1999 & 2010). For example, from my experience I
was able to convey some words and expressions that cannot be directly translated from one language to another. I also knew which key phrases and words might be challenging for the kids to understand. As such, translanguaging pedagogy (Daniel and Pacheco, 2016), which allows for bilingual learners to utilize both their languages as they mediate complex classroom activities, became an important part of my practice.

Sumaya: Being bilingual in the languages of Arabic and English was a great asset for me. Students were able to express their emotions and needs on a deeper level using Arabic which led to an increased sense of comfort. My knowledge of some of the different Arabic dialects enabled me to code switch as appropriate. For example, it was helpful to know that some basic words differ across dialects such as “Anse” which means teacher in the Syrian dialect and “Abla” which also means teacher in the Libyan dialect.

I would often give instructions in both Arabic and English to ensure that the children understood fully. In preparing their identity connected multimedia productions, I encouraged the beginner level students to brainstorm ideas in Arabic so their videos in English would reflect greater creativity (Cummins, 2001a). I also used Arabic to assist with comprehension when students struggled with new vocabulary or needed to grasp new concepts. In addition, being able to converse more casually in Arabic with the youth group helped me make meaningful connections with the students as they shared their personal journeys in Arabic and their hope to find a sense of belonging in Canada (Cummins, 2001).

**Our cultural / racial / religious identities**

Antoinette: I am not sure that my belief system, the type of clothes I wore, or the shade of my skin mattered much to the children or their parents. My sense is that what really mattered was my ability to support them in meeting their goals by advocating for them in various ways. I wonder however, if at some level, the parents and the older children understood that my skin colour and other attributes did indeed contribute in some way to my ability to advocate for them.

Dania: My hyphenated identity as Syrian-Canadian has certainly helped me a great deal. It empowered me and encouraged me to do my best as I navigated between my Syrian heritage and Canadian experience. Furthermore, my religious background has probably helped many families feel at ease with my presence. Many newcomers struggle as they worry about their children’s loss of identity and religion. I think that my modest dress and appearance may have helped the younger children feel at ease in that I looked like their mothers or aunts. But for adolescent girls who wear the hijab, the impact may be greater. Furthermore, I think my religious and cultural background have helped me understand students better and distinguish between culture and stereotypes about Muslim women. However, at times, I had to acknowledge the diversity of cultures within Syria and that I could not claim to understand every student’s cultures and traditions. Parents’ perceptions of my cultural and religious background helped them communicate with me. One
parent asked me if I knew of any Quran classes that they can enroll their children in. I felt that for parents I was more than the “English” teacher. My Syrian/Muslim identity was clear to them more than other aspects of my identity.

Ghada: My cultural, racial and religious identity as a Muslim Lebanese is very similar to Syrian refugees. This similarity allowed me to develop connections faster with the parents and kids. This is especially true since I have visited Syria many times and Lebanon is often the first country Syrians flee to for refuge from the turmoil in their country. So many of the students were able to share their experiences in Lebanon with me, and I was able to understand and recount my stories with them. For example, one student talked about a clothing store where he worked in Lebanon and because I was familiar with the area, I had a better understanding of where he lived and the circumstances he had to deal with. Aside from the shared cultural experiences between Syrians and Lebanese, the parents and kids alike related to me because not only do I wear a hijab and am traditional in some ways, I am also liberal at heart.

Sumaya: My identity as an Arab Muslim Libyan connects me deeply with the newly arrived Syrian refugees. Coming from a religious background with strong family ties made it easy for me to relate to the children and teens. My modest appearance may have inspired the students to present their identity with more confidence. Sharing with them that I wore the scarf (hijab) in my teenage years seems to have created a comfortable space for them to share their personal beliefs and ask questions that they may not have felt they could ask someone else from a different background. Understanding their cultural perspective and sharing the same beliefs was important in order to accommodate them in this new environment. For example, when I saw the social cues of a female student who did not want to be grouped with a male student because she was uncomfortable interacting with him, I made some simple adjustments to allow her take part fully in the activity I had planned.

Antoinette: It seems that our multiple identities do indeed influence our ability to support the social and academic integration of Syrian refugees through a process where, at times, we highlight one or more aspects of our identity over other aspects to make these more salient to the learners. In other instances, we may perform one or more of our identities in our interactions without being aware that our actions are supporting the growth of the refugee students.

**Conclusion**

The multi-ethnography highlights how the countries where we have lived – Canada, Syria, Libya, Lebanon, the languages we speak – English, French, Spanish and Arabic, as well as our social class, race and religion have granted us privilege or led to our marginalization in different contexts and, in turn, impacted our effectiveness as researchers and educators working with Syrian refugees in Canada. In using Intersectionality (Hankivsky, 2014) as a lens to help us reflect on 1) our
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position on axes of privilege or society normatives and oppression or resistance, 2) our “Where I am from” poems and 3) our experiences interacting with Syrian families as researchers and educators, we have re/discovered our unique professional identities with a clearer understanding of how we negotiate societal forces and forms of discrimination as a result of various identity markers, either ascribed or self-assigned.

We encourage educators to explore how their multiple identities influence the spaces they share with learners by actively engaging with the axes of privilege and oppression as well as writing their own “Where I am from” poem. Reflection related to the intersections that exist between one’s professional and personal identities and those of our students can be a powerful catalyst for change.

To further encourage you to consider an intersectional turn in your practitioner research and professional development work, we leave you with the words of Tefera, Powers and Fischman (2018), the editors of an issue of the Review of Research in Education entitled The Challenges and Possibilities of Intersectionality in Education Research:

Indeed, intersectionality as an aspiration continues to bring both academics and activists together, because it provides much-needed language, ideas, and references that are fundamental for finding respectful spaces that allow scholars and activists to forge alliances aimed at overcoming the long-standing distance and mistrust between them. (p.ix)

Acknowledgements: We are grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding this research.

References


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Appendix - “I Am From” Poem Template

This template is for the creation of a “I am from” poem and was inspired by the “Where I’m From” poem written by George Ella Lyon.

I am from (specific ordinary item)_________________________
from (product name)____________________________and (another product name)_________________________
I am from the (home description)________________________
(Adjective that describes the above home description)______________, ___________
It (tasted, sounded, looked, felt –choose one)_________________________
I am from the (plant, flower, or natural item)________________________
the (plant, flower, or natural item)_________________________
(Description of natural item)________________________
I’m from the (family tradition)__________________________and (family trait)________________________
from (name of family member)____________________and (name of family member)____________________
and (another name)_________________________
I’m from the (description of family tendency)__________________________and (Another family tendency)_________________________
From (something you were told as a child)__________________________and (another thing you were told as a child)_________________________
I’m from (representation of religious or spiritual beliefs or lack of it)__________________________
(further description of spiritual beliefs)_________________________
I’m from (place of birth and family ancestry)__________________________
(Two food items that represent your ancestry)__________________________and__________________________
From the (specific family story with a detail about a specific person)__________________________
the (another detail of another family member)__________________________
(Location of family pictures…You pick the preposition)__________________________
I am from (general statement with DETAILS about who you are or where you are from)__________________________

This template can be found at
http://thecurrent.educatorinnovator.org/sites/default/files/files/428/Where%20I%27m%20From%20Original%20Poem%2026%20Template_0.pdf