Pedagogies of Radical Hope: Funds of Identity and the Practice of Literacy in New Arrival Programs

In 2016, Junot Díaz published a widely read letter in *The New Yorker* in which he referenced philosopher Jonathan Lear’s discussions of radical hope:

Radical hope is not so much something you have but something you practice; it demands flexibility, openness, and what Lear describes as “imaginative excellence.” Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes the survival of the end of your world possible. (4)

As teachers, we are privileged witnesses to radical hope each day; it is among our students’ greatest strengths, regardless of background. The art of teaching is in our capacities to unlock radical hope and build contexts that allow it to flourish.

Nevertheless, this kind of work is never easy; to see students’ radical hope, teachers must have their own. The profession of teaching has little space for conversations about despair; we are reluctant to discuss, much less write about, instances when our work is painful, when we’ve struggled immensely with our pedagogies, assumptions about our connections with students, and tensions with colleagues or contexts, especially when we cannot offer useful solutions. In 2015, we worked together in a South Australian classroom with a group of twelve adolescent newcomers who had limited access to formal education prior to arriving in Australia. Our despair emerged in the seemingly impossible endeavor we faced: to reconcile what Brian Street defines as literacy as a social practice that values reading and writing as “rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, and being” (“What’s ‘New’” 77–78) with an international culture of schooling that views literacy as an isolated set of skills “defined and performed in education” (Street, “Society” 221). Sometimes, this tension got in the way of our abilities to witness radical hope in that little classroom. That year, our conversations became our “best weapon against despair” (Díaz 4), and they have continued over the past two years, demanding “flexibility, openness, and ‘imaginative excellence’” (Díaz 4), even though we were in geographically separate and newly challenging contexts. The result of those conversations is this article; it hinges on the simple reminder, in these isolationist times, that our experiences as ELA teachers are not unique. Engaging in the intellectual dialogue surrounding teaching and learning, regardless of our fears and time constraints, is the uniquely transformative piece.

Here, we offer two honest snapshots of literacy classrooms in Australia and the United States where adolescents were learning to read and write for the first time in their lives, in spite of their trauma, informed by their experiences of forced migration, and in rejection of the deficit labels they have been given. We interrogate the in-between space where Moisés Esteban-Guitart and Luis Moll write that “funds of knowledge become funds of identity” (33) and unpack the challenge teachers often face in connecting students’ accumulated “bodies of beliefs, ideas, skills,
and abilities” (43) with the practice of teaching school-recognized literacy. To do this, we must see literacy as an expansive practice. Lew Zipin writes that teachers often build curricula around students’ “light” funds of knowledge but resist working with “dark” or disturbing pieces from students’ lifeworlds (318). In the two contexts we write about in this article, students brought “dark” knowledge with them; they knew about and navigated violence and forms of exclusion that we could never imagine, but they also knew love, camaraderie, and forgiveness. What mattered was how we, as teachers, privileged both of these “ways of knowing” (Zipin 318) as fluid parts of literacy as a social practice and one that is “defined and performed in education” (Street, “Society” 221). These are windows into what it’s like to be teachers, researchers, and students in contexts where “dark” and “light” funds of knowledge are integral in the practice of literacy as a means of negotiating identity.

BRONWEN’S STORY
My school in South Australia is a New Arrivals Program (NAP). In Australia, the New Arrivals Program is a federally funded, short-term, intensive English program for all school-aged newly arrived refugee or migrant students. We pride ourselves on our compassion and skill, particularly in working with students who have little or no prior formal education and who may have experienced significant trauma and dislocation. In 2016, we enrolled approximately 160 adolescent Syrian refugees whose needs were enormous; the students’ energy levels were high—this resulted in lively classrooms, passionate discussions, and, at times, violent conflicts, including serious self-harm as well as physical fights. We scrambled desperately to manage the complex, chaotic, interrelated incidents and their impacts on the school and wider community. By mid-2017, most of the Syrian students had started to settle, but five fourteen- and fifteen-year-old boys had amassed the maximum allowable number of suspensions (mostly for significant violence) and were in line for expulsion. On school-based assessments of language and literacy learning, their progress also continued to be negligible.

COURAGE: LETTING GO OF THE KNOWN
As a school, what we did was courageous and innovative; we threw out the curriculum and standard classroom expectations and created a special class catering specifically to the needs of these students. As one of the two teachers for this class, I had to relinquish my go-to strategies from years of working with new arrivals and be willing to try anything that worked. My practice wasn’t artful; it was a reactive scrabbling for handholds in a landscape unfamiliar and tricky—the kind of practice that evolves when every day you are hitting your absolute limit. In this “unmapped territory” we built strong relationships, through a focus on strengths, and particularly on the students’ powerful cultural traditions of hospitality. It was not, however, a smooth ride.

The first dragons that we encountered were mine—my trepidation about managing extremely challenging and, at times, violent behaviors; my concern that misogyny would render me, as a female teacher, ineffectual; my reluctance to let go of the comfort of a curriculum that told me where to go. These particular students had been the perpetrators of violence in our school; they had engaged in significant self-harm and, inevitably, they had been stigmatized and labeled. These ways of being were part of their dark funds of knowledge; they had spent their lives fighting and now, in the context of school, we were asking for that behavior to quickly end. The first weeks were incredibly difficult; the students were angry about being singled out, at being labelled “the crazy class.” Much of what we tried didn’t work; two of the students were suspended for fighting within the first week. In my journal, I wrote: “Do I really think I can stem this with cups of Milo, toast, and kindness?”
HOSPITALITY: SEEING EACH OTHER AS HUMANS

The Milo and toast reference came from one of our classroom practices of sharing food around a dining table in our classroom, adapted from the Nurture Group model. Originating in England and popular in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, the Nurture Group approach has been successful for working with at-risk students in mainstream schools. It aims to intensively support students through positive behavior education and strong relationships within “home-like” classrooms (Boxall 11). It was somewhat embarrassing to me that my schedule read “morning tea” for one period every day—but in the end, that practice of sitting around a table together, and sharing food, became a kind of glue that connected us. It was a pathway through what we perceived to be the students’ negativity and disengagement and into their own “conceptions of knowledge, identity and being” (Street, “What’s ‘New’” 78). This enabled the students to begin experiencing some kinds of success in the context of school. The student who struggled the most with traditional school learning always took charge of the washing up (one eye on the clock to ensure we finished by recess). Students vied to cook the toast, to collect the bread, to make the drinks. We heard stories of home, of their weekends, of how five brothers chased away neighbors who had been harassing their family. The students taught the teachers Arabic and laughed at our pronunciation. Humor was also important; our bilingual school services officer related to the boys with warmth, relishing the verbal sparring in a way that I, speaking only English, couldn’t. Students who had been isolated and disconnected within the school became strongly connected with each other, and with teachers. In our classroom, this was meaningful literacy practice; it honored how humans read the “word and the world” simultaneously (Freire 19). Esteban-Guitart and Moll write that students’ “historically accumulated, culturally developed and socially distributed resources” are “funds of identity” on which teachers and schools need to draw to avoid operating in a vacuum, “unconnected to people, their families and their communities” (31, 44). This “world” (Freire 19) was borne out in our experience, as the morning tea/breakfast table expanded into cooking lessons.

Students decided they wanted to choose what to cook.

“Teacher, next week fish.”

“How?” I asked. “What do we need?”

And on we went. The students thrived, teaching me their way of cooking and demonstrating an ability to work together, to focus, to wait, that I had not seen from them in any other context. Their pride in presentation and enjoyment in sharing what they had made was palpable. We had managed to tap into powerful funds of knowledge and identity that bridged their cultural and home-based literacy practices with the work of school (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 37; Street, “Society” 217). These students brought no physical schoolbag with them each day, tricking us into assuming that they didn’t have resources to draw on that would help them to learn. However, their “virtual schoolbag” held a rich resource of knowledge about food and an ability to enact hospitality beautifully (Thomson 1). In addition, their engagement with something familiar in the context of school enabled them to relax and be safe.

IDENTITY TEXTS: BUILDING LITERACY THROUGH STUDENTS’ LIVES

The other dragons to be faced belonged to the students. All of them struggled with learning. They masked their shame and fear with wild behavior, anger, and bravado. Toward the end of the six months, we used a narrative tool that bears similarities to the self-portrait and significant circle techniques described by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (38, 41). Self Portraits, Significant Circle, and Tree of Life are all identity texts in that they require participants to draw or write about different aspects of their lives and relationships, identifying those of most value to them. David Denborough developed the Tree of Life as a metaphor to map different aspects of a person’s life (57–76). The trunk represents the student’s strengths or abilities; we asked them to identify these for each other. What was surprising and exciting was how students, who had begun their
time in the class feeling like failures, noticed real skills and abilities within each other and accepted the gift of peers naming their own strengths. The Trees became important alternative identity documents for the students and literacy artifacts that represented a range of funds of identity.

The practices described here engaged students in ways that mobilized their culturally and socially constructed knowledges and made space for literacy as a social practice (Street, “Society” 222). We also devoted substantial resources to the literacy practices defined by Australian schools. Through a systematic approach, my colleague worked with the students in tiny increments, teaching how letters and sounds work in English. She used texts we had specifically written for them, which were built from our experiences working with them and getting to know their interests. Little by little, they began to see meaning in the squiggles on the page. One student often repeated, like a mantra, “me, good Ingelsi,” every time he successfully completed a task. Certainly, we saw seeds of radical hope.

SALLY’S STORY

At the end of the 2015 school year, we (a team of highly skilled teachers, one university volunteer, and I) were monitoring a group of adolescent English language learners (ELLs) in a large US urban school. These students attended one sheltered intensive English class per day; their remaining classes were mainstream content-area classes with push-in ELL specialist support. Our data showed that this approach was not effective for these particular students, who had lived their entire lives in refugee camps and had previously little or no access to formal education. They were lost in the larger school and struggled to obtain the necessary credits or test scores to get a high school diploma within the district’s maximum allowable time (by age 23). The following school year, the district agreed to begin a “partnership program” where we could offer this cohort of students the intensive language, academic, and well-being support they needed. There wasn’t space in the high school that most ELLs attended, so the partnership program moved to a building that also housed programs for adolescents who had been incarcerated, were at risk of expulsion, and were in need of credit recovery.

“ARE WE THE BAD KIDS?”: IDENTITY AND SCHOOLING

The building was in a notorious section of town. It was old, run-down, and overlooked a dusty lawn littered with trash. Inside, the heating system boiled us. To any observer, this was a last-chance school. These schools exist all over the United States; they are the places for students who have, for one reason or another, been told they don’t fit in the mainstream schools. In some cases, as in ours, the buildings themselves also signify abandonment and exclusion. The students in the partnership program were from Rwanda, Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, and Burundi. They quickly recognized the exclusionary tactics. Parents pulled their children out, scrambling to place them in private or charter schools they couldn’t afford. We were left with the students who didn’t have parents, lived with cousins or siblings, or had parents who worked sixteen-hour days and simply didn’t have the time to struggle with school. “Are we the bad kids?” our students would ask, emerging from the metal detectors, behind schoolmates who wore ankle monitors and had cigarettes behind their ears. We acted surprised: “Why would you say that?” Inevitably, a student from another program would respond: “Look around. What do you think?”

LITERATE LIVES: ENGAGING WITH STUDENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES

To better understand funds of knowledge and identity, we used home visits. These visits taught us more about how students were “transacting knowledge” (Zipin 318; italics in original) in their lives and relationships outside of school; we also saw
how families used resources (hobbies, church, meals together) to navigate difficult times in resettlement. We found that some students knew how to fix and rebuild bikes, motorbikes, and cars. Back at school, we began acquiring discarded bikes, which the students repaired and used as transportation. Drawing on practices I saw in South Australia, we turned the school’s unfortunate courtyard into a garden where students could work with their hands as part of the school day. Both of these practices activated the complex multiliteracies students brought from their life experiences and offered opportunities for connection through work and talk (Esteban-Guitart and Moll 41). This might paint a precious picture, but the background was all askew. When we worked in the garden, students from other programs would yell “monkey” or “Africa” out the window, and we had to keep the bikes locked in a room to avoid theft; the larger school context reflected a society full of pain.

NOT A REFUGEE: CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

Our students became loud; they formed close relationships with each other, which played out in significant ways in the classroom. There were consistent outbursts, side conversations in Kinyarwanda, insubordination, and frequent disengagement with the work of literacy as a school practice (Street, “Society” 222). The largest lesson in radical hope came from our multilingual support officer (MSO), a Burundian American who supported refugee students and families across the district. He was sitting in our English class when we asked the students to contextualize some of their issues by using the language cue “it frustrates me when.” Responses included the following:

■ They ask me if we live in the tree.
■ They tell me to go back where I came from.
■ People want me to dance and sing African for them.
■ I am tired of telling my story, my refugee story.
■ Ebola. They ask me if we are the place with Ebola.
■ The security guard always following me.
■ When people tell my family I am bad, but they don’t know.
■ I miss the camps. I am lonely for the camps.
■ People say stuff to me I don’t understand, then they laugh.
■ I can’t read and I can’t write.

We pitied the gross misunderstandings, the powerlessness, and the anger they articulated. The MSO wouldn’t tolerate our sympathy. He turned to the class: “You have survived things as children that most adults cannot think of and you are here. Those other kids, they have survived things too and they are here. You are all survivors. You are not refugees anymore.” The students nodded quietly while the teachers deflated. Our protectionist pedagogies had silenced their power and, instead, taught them to smile, make gardens and bike clubs, ignore the bullies, and use nice English. We had separated them from what was real and vital about their new lives in the United States: the “flexibility, openness,” and “imaginative excellence” (Díaz 4) required to engage in authentic dialogue about our assumptions, divisions, and frustrations with each other.

USING THE COLLECTIVE VOICE: ART AS SOCIAL PRACTICE

We started examining how groups across the world speak back to instances of dominance, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia. We showed students several visual examples of socially engaged art, including the March 2016 silent protest by Black Lives Matter, in which they covered the names of the Hollywood stars with the names of individuals who had been shot by police. Raised in conflict zones, where art, comics, and literacy are often used as passive and active forms of resistance and social change, the students took to these discussions with ease, bringing their light and dark funds of knowledge as essential resources (Zipin 319). We explored vox pop (vox populi in Latin) and the many forms of media that use this technique to articulate the views of a group through short audio or video answers to one common question. The students
were particularly drawn to Kirk Docker’s work for Hungry Beast (Australia), where he interviewed thousands of people using vox pop. Docker has a remarkable ability to elicit honest responses from individuals who have never before been interviewed (see an example at vimeo.com/24707904). Ultimately, our students decided to conduct and record interviews with students from the other programs. Surprised by the number of students willing to engage, students organized themselves into groups, leading the conversation and asking the questions: “What makes you happy?”; “What frustrates you?”; and “What would you do if you had what you need?”

In listening to the tapes, students quickly noted instances of common experience, especially with students who had previously harassed them: birth, joy, death, love, absence, and struggle were all part of the conversations. One of our students remarked: “Because we coming to this school we are with the bad kids. Then, we got afraid of the bad kids because they say stuff to us in the hallways. When we talk with them, we surprised. Their lives are so hard. Like ours. They just don’t know us.” This simple opportunity opened all the participants to the concepts of “knowledge, identity, and being” (Street 78) that shape literacy as social practice. At the close of the 2017 school year, I interviewed several partnership program alumnae for a larger project on school transition. When asked about that year in their lives, one student responded: “I loved that bad school. I learned how to be a person again there.”

CONCLUSION

Paulo Freire said, “Humility is an important virtue for a teacher. The quality of recognizing—without any kind of suffering—our limits of knowledge concerning what we can and cannot do through education. Humility accepts the need we have to learn and relearn again and again” (15). In this article, we cannot offer pedagogical solutions that will save students from their pasts or their futures, bring them out of negligible literacy test scores, or even ensure they keep attending school. What we can offer is humility, to know, through our conversations as teachers and learners, that radical hope makes the “survival of the end of your world possible” (Díaz 4), and it is never far from our reach in the English classroom. What continues to be our greatest struggle as literacy educators is “how not to separate reading the word and reading the world” (Freire 20). Radical hope exists in our human abilities to speak, read, write, and draw in critical dialogue with and about our worlds. Here, literacy holds meaning. We will never be able to quantify a conversation around morning tea or the way a group of teenagers slipped into fearless discussions with each other, but these are tenets of lifelong literacy. These practices don’t simply set students up to learn the mechanics of reading and writing; they teach all of us how to be curious—how to be “a person again.”

WORKS CITED


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**READWRITETHINK CONNECTION**  
Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

The stories of an older family member can explain family traditions and establish heritage—and they can be cherished possessions that are passed among family members for years to come. Teens can take part in the process of building family histories by recording the stories, or memoirs, of family members. The activity suggests a range of ways to record stories, from writing memoirs to composing an alternative artistic representation such as a photographic collage, a series of panels telling a story, a painting, a video, a musical composition, or a sculpture. http://bit.ly/1AgCaQ

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