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FINDING THEIR WAY: IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE STUDENTS IN A TORONTO HIGH SCHOOL

INTRODUCTION

The historical spaces of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have been inhabited, in unprecedented numbers, by those fleeing war, poverty, and famine. Their sense of dislocation, as well as their struggle to find voice, meaning, and balance in their new lives, can be regarded as a metaphor for the postmodern urban condition. This immigrant/refugee experience has created complex transformations in all metropolitan centres around the world but especially in those western countries that encourage immigration and offer a sense of possibility and hope for the displaced. Canada is one such country. Furthermore, the Canadian societal fabric is built upon the notion of a multicultural mosaic where, at least officially, the maintenance of minority languages and cultures is encouraged. Toronto, as the largest urban centre in Canada, is a very desirable destination in the global community in terms of immigration and resettlement. Indeed, in recent years, immigration levels in Canada have gone from approximately 85,000 to 220,000 annually, with one out of every four new immigrants settling in Toronto. Indeed, many immigrant and/or refugee students and their parents arrive in Toronto overwhelmed by forces of war, political oppression, and violence, by economic struggle and language barriers. They carry with them hidden but enduring scars that influence all aspects of their educational experiences.

Within this context of demographic shift and diversity, issues of cultural difference, conflict resolution, and sense of 'outsiderness' cannot be viewed as being peripheral to mainstream schooling. We must find ways in which to use our classrooms as safe places to learn, to become friends with the other, as Kristeva (1991) puts it, "urging us to welcome others to that uncanny strangeness" (p. 142). School, as the meeting place, becomes the borderland where cultures collide and intersect in fascinating and complicated ways. Being positioned as the 'outsider' or the 'other' in the context of school represents a myriad of multi-layered experiences in the immigrant student's story and focuses on the need to re-envision the meaning of classroom practice

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within a new paradigm of intercultural negotiation and understanding in a rapidly changing cultural, linguistic, and racial educational landscape. These children "are in constant interaction with the beliefs and attitudes of the host country . . ." (Akoodie, 1984, p. 254), and they are also being socialized by the beliefs and attitudes of their families. A considerable portion of the immigrant student's energy is caught up in negotiating and re-defining these two (and often disparate) worlds that weave and overlap with each other in complex and multi-dimensional ways.

In his book, *The Global Soul*, Iyer (2000) states, "More bodies are being thrown more widely across the planet than ever before" (p. 27). The objective of this interview study is to offer a glimpse into the lives of some newly arrived students of different racial, linguistic, and religious backgrounds as they confront the process of immigration and therefore personal and social displacement in the context of a Toronto inner-city high school. It is a time of trauma, upheaval, and often despair. Creating opportunities for these students to speak to their experience and to validate their sense of frustration and confusion in having to contend with their multiple realities is one of the ways we as researchers attempted to help them come to terms with living within and between cultural worlds and to confront the challenges they face. By listening to these students, we as researchers opened a dialogue with them about school, community, and family that is profoundly linked to their prior experiences of war, violence, and poverty in geo-political contexts throughout the world.

In the interview process, the conversations we had with our participants gave them a voice—a first-time opportunity to construct meaning for their emotionally as well as intellectually vulnerable stories. Given the belief that participants are the best informants of their own lives, we felt that in-depth interviews were the most promising vehicles for recovering these students' stories. All names are pseudonyms. Taken together, these interviews provide us with a first attempt at an exploration of a "collective story" (Richardson, 1997) about the fragile existence of high school immigrant and refugee students living on the margins in an urban, multicultural society like that of Toronto, the Canadian city which the United Nations has named the most ethnically diverse city in the world. This demographic (r)evolution is the motivating factor in our research inquiry as we attempt to focus on the needs of these immigrant populations and their acculturation dynamics through a more nuanced and interdisciplinary lens. As educators, we explore notions of language, culture, and identity in the interrelationships between home, school, and community.

This journey of immigration for the students in our study is about addressing the process of creating and re-creating multiple social identities, negotiations, and aspirations for the future in school and in the wider society. Our chapter is

divided into two parts—the first focuses on how our research and methodology are grounded in the powerful and multi-layered notion of being positioned as the 'other.' This is only a first attempt at illustrating and explaining the complex notion of 'outsiderness' in its many manifestations; to recognize the tensions and dilemmas, and also the strength and resilience, that these newly arrived students conveyed to us in very informal, 'grassroots' ways. The second part of this chapter offers a discussion on how being the 'other' is understood and engaged quite differently by different students. We share excerpts from the primary source interview material that we gathered and thus offer our participants' stories of everyday life experiences in and out of school. Finally, we conclude with some tentative reflections on the shaping, negotiation, and redefinition of their sense of 'outsiderness' within the daily hardships of adjusting to a new society.

RESEARCH AS LIVED EXPERIENCE: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through exploring the precarious existence of students living on the borders of cultures and languages, we experienced the incongruity of cultures, the uncertainty of self, the desire to belong, and the formation of hybrid identities that are neither here nor there but 'in-between.' Immigrant students are a good example of such "border dwellers" (Feuerverger, 2001) within linguistic, cultural, social, and often racial or religious contexts. Dispossessed of their former homeland, living in a completely new environment, these students grapple with the fragility of their new identities, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power where the dominant culture is seen as the norm while the immigrant culture is considered deviant or inferior (Juteau, 1997). We wanted to hear about their social and cultural values, their multiple identities, and their aspirations for the future within the context of their school experiences, as well as in the wider society.

This interview study was based on a strong interactive relationship between ourselves as researchers and our participants through dialogue and conversation. As researchers, we searched for the patterns and narrative threads that would weave together their lived experiences of the necessity to find their way in a new society. Narratively speaking, our implicit or even tacit cultural and historical life experiences have a tremendous impact on teaching and learning experiences. "These culturally and socially embedded metaphors have a powerful shaping influence on the way in which teachers come to know teaching" (Clandinin, 1988, p. 9). The theoretical underpinnings of this study are consonant with interpretivists such as Geertz (1988) and Denzin (1988) who offer an understanding of theory not as explanation or prediction

but as interpretation or the act of making sense out of a social interaction. Indeed, they see theory building as focusing on the "lived experience" instead of abstract generalizations. Also, according to Glesne and Peshkin (1992) "the 'lived experience,' originating in phenomenology, emphasizes that experience is not just cognitive, but also includes emotions. Interpretive scholars consider that every human situation is novel, emergent, and filled with multiple, often conflicting meanings and interpretations" (p. 19). As Behar (1996) puts it, "I think that what we are seeing are efforts to map an immediate space we can't quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life" (p. 174).

In the high school in which we conducted our research, over 40 different languages are spoken. This is now a very common school situation in the Greater Toronto Area. The number of students who are learning English as a second language in Canada has climbed to unprecedented levels, particularly in Toronto and Vancouver. For example, in the Toronto District School Board, there are 117 schools where at least 25% of the student population is comprised of immigrants who have arrived in Canada within the last five years (Duffy, 2004). The interview sessions follow the experiential learning model derived from the work of Freire (1970) who envisaged the teacher/researcher as facilitator for the student and not as lecturer or transmitter of all knowledge; in other words, students and teachers are seen as partners in the teaching-learning experience. The questions that guided us in this exploratory study are, for example: How do some immigrant/refugee students' past and present lives intersect? What strategies do these students use to be able to navigate two (or sometimes more) disparate worlds? We explored the dynamics of power and identity 'borders' and of cultural and linguistic difference within these zones of diversity.

Conversation in the interview process became one of the most successful data-gathering tools during our school visits. Research is therefore seen as a social process not only as an intellectual one. Our experiences concur with Clandinin and Connelly (1994) and Eisner (1991) and others who contend that listening constitutes a salient part of conversation. These conversations with our participants were a metaphor for the teaching-learning relationship. Also, Mishler (1986) explains that, "Telling stories is a significant way for individuals to give meaning to and express their understandings of their experiences" (p. 75). More specifically, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) express this idea in their assertion that, "Education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories" (p. 2) Our intent was to, in Greene's (1988) words, "communicate a sense of their lived worlds" (p. 388).

THE MANY FACES OF 'OUTSIDERNESS': THE REALITY OF LIVING IN TWO WORLDS

This was the first time that any of these students had been invited to reflect on these difficult and often painful personal issues within a school (or any other) context, and we found it very challenging to balance voice and silence in the texts of our participants. These identity processes are fluid and constantly changing and under construction, like life itself. One can only wonder what they would respond a year from now—what they might say that they did not dare say to us during our conversations with them. But perhaps simply opening a space that allowed these students to consider their 'outsiderness' and their sense of loss as well as their fragile hopes for the future is an important beginning.

Said (1990) claims that the loneliness of exile is "compelling to think about but terrible to experience" (p. 357); "exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past . . . [They feel] an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives" (p. 360). The centrality of emotion in this immigration journey suggests that issues of war, trauma, and violence cannot be explained solely through an intellectual and cognitive process but rather through a different focus on affect, interaction, and interpretation. In other words, the lived experience needs to be seen as an interpretive rather than a causal story. Gilligan (1982) argues that a different developmental pattern can emerge when thinking is contextual and inductive rather than formal and abstract. In terms of the 'biographies of vulnerability' that permeated the discourse of our interviews, we as researchers are mindful of Oleson's (1992) claim that "body and self are intertwined" (p. 147). Accordingly, we try in our research to convey a sense of the mood and feeling of the interview sessions and to show how emotionally powerful these educational encounters became both for ourselves as researchers and for the students in their struggle to re-envision and reshape a meta-text for their life experiences.

As a child of refugees who came to Canada after World War II, Feuerverger (2000) resonates with this painful journey from the centre into the margins; it is an experience of war, mass expulsions, and death, a nomadic wandering in search of a sense of home and of legitimacy in the world. Richards also experienced cultural displacement. While her entry into marginality was voluntary and temporally confined to eighteen months, her sojourn in rural Korea was not without its hardships. Negotiating a culture and language so completely different to her previous experience has given her a profound appreciation for what these students face when entering Canadian society. This 'strangerhood' or 'otherness' in the 'diaspora' is a disturbing way to live and yet much of humanity in the early

twenty-first century experiences this 'foreignness'—as immigrants, as sojourners in a new land, or as displaced persons of war. The theme of Diaspora has become universal. We must accept the reality that the migration and subsequent dislocation of cultural groups are the signatures of our postmodern era. Therefore, now more than ever before, it is crucial to learn how to accommodate the 'stranger' and his or her own language and culture in our societies.

It is therefore essential to confront the diversity of the social and personal landscapes that these students inhabit in and out of schools in more nuanced ways. For example, Noguera (2003) states that a genuine commitment to address the *social* context of schooling is necessary in order to make significant and sustainable improvements in public education. Furthermore, in this present study, we wanted to explore the need for rethinking and reshaping an understanding of cultural diversity as a social phenomenon fundamentally linked to learners' sense of identity and self-worth within their cultural communities as well as in school.

THE FINDINGS

Our findings indicate that these students perceived their marginalized status of 'outsiderness' on a wide continuum ranging from something that they considered to be *a weight or negative force in their lives (sense of victimhood)* all the way to the other end of the spectrum where this 'outsiderness' was viewed as *a positive, regenerative force in their lives (sense of agency)*. Our discussion revolves around the notion of 'outsiderness' that our participants presented, in a myriad of manifestations, as they were constantly shaping and redefining 'being the other' and creating new social spaces and new identity constructions-in-progress in and out of school. The summary below attempts to open the discussion in the following section.

'Outsiderness' as a Negative Force

Outsiderness as a negative force characterized by or as:

- something to overcome or deny;
- trying to 'fit in';
- the desire to assimilate into Canadian society and give up their original identity;
- a dilemma or tension to manage (the reality of living in two or more worlds;
- an existence causing feelings of loss, deficiency, or confusion, even despair.

Outsiderness as a positive force characterized by or as:

- a strength to harness;
- embracing their 'in-betweeness' as something liberating;
- understanding the flexibility of identity formation as a means to better academic performance;

- gaining a sense of pride in knowing more than one language and in the supportiveness of their cultural group;
- transcending their former, problematic life through hope for a better future.

It is important to note, however, that the boundaries between these perceptions of 'outsiderness' were extremely porous and the students would move dialectically back and forth between the negative and positive aspects of their lived experiences.

A number of social theorists describe the effect that cultural displacement has on the immigrant's sense of identity and ability to function in society. They depict border existence as something that has a negative effect on self-concept, leading to feelings of demoralization and helplessness (Anzaldua, 1987; Bennett, 1993; Moraes, 1996; Goffman, 1963; Gue, 1985; Kanugo, 1982). Stonequist (1937/1961) describes the situation as "déraciné" (from the French "uprooted") as someone "who has lost something of his former self and has not yet acquired a new self" (p. 6). For the participants in this study, this dislocation of self led to a wide assortment of coping strategies and allegiances. Looking at themselves only through the mirror of the dominant society, those who view their outsider status as a negative force come to see themselves as "falling short of what they ought to be" (Goffman, 1963, p. 7) and thus suffer from the various physical and psychological symptoms associated with victimization. In her book, *La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldua (1987) explores the experience of straddling various geopolitical 'edges.' Inquiring into the various possibilities, impasses, and displacements of being a 'border person' (that is, as a minority group person—Chicana and lesbian—living and working in the dominant Anglo culture of the United States), Anzaldua gives us a vision of 'liminal' existence, which Heilbrun (1999) describes in these terms: ". . . betwixt and between . . . poised upon uncertain ground . . . a lack of clarity about exactly where one belongs and what one should be doing, or wants to be doing" (p. 3). Although she admits the importance of historical specificity in identity formation, Anzaldua also articulates a shifting notion of identity in which various selves are mutated and transformed. In this vein, Feuerverger (1994, 1997, 2001) argues that "minority students are 'empowered' or 'disabled' as a direct result of their interactions" (p. 127) with the dominant society.

In this study, many students had already been subjected to processes of exclusion in their home country. For so many of these interviewees escaping religious, gender, and racial persecution, being treated as 'other' was something that they had already experienced in their pre-migration culture(s) often in very malignant forms, such as war. Many spoke of their difference and marginality as something emanating from their prior traumatic experience, and therefore it has become a part of their worldview. Anzaldua (1987) discusses it

as "anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception, that causes a disruption in one's defences and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception" (p. 39). Traumatic life events, such as war, persecution, and cultural displacement caused many of our participants to feel out of sync with more established Canadian students their own age. We present excerpts from various interviews below. For example, a seventeen-year-old Tamil boy from Sri Lanka discussed the gaps in his education due to war:

> Here I had to learn what it is to sit at a desk and listen to the teacher. I am beginning to see how much I missed because I didn't go to school for many years because of war and I am only now learning to read and write in English. I can't read or write much in Tamil. It feels good to be here but also I feel very upset because I missed so much and I don't know how I can catch up.

Reflecting on what it was like to be a Tamil growing up in war-torn Sri Lanka,[i] another Tamil boy says:

> Tamils don't have enough freedom. There is lots of fighting and let's say we go to another place down in Sri Lanka, we have to show a pass. We have to take some report from the police station that we are leaving the same country, right? We cannot leave just when we want to because we have to get permission to leave the place, but the Sinhalese, they can go anywhere without any permission.

An eighteen-year-old girl describes a form of discrimination that she feels was directed at controlling women in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan:

> Back home, the girls were not allowed to go to school. They said the girls are supposed to sit home, clean, and cook, that's all and they are not supposed to have a good education except boys . . . It's not fair . . . Boys and girls are equal. They are supposed to both have education.

When discussing how the war in the former Yugoslavia had affected him, George, a Croatian adolescent, remarks:

> I realize now that some of my friends here never actually think about the things I'm thinking, that's the difference I realize in myself, it's like, internal. I have seen awful things. I feel old, not like a teenager should feel.

Forced to abandon their innocence by virtue of what they witnessed in their home countries, many students, much like George, expressed feeling "old before [their] time." The reality of living in two or more worlds causes feelings of loss, deficiency, anxiety, confusion, even despair. Many also are concerned about mental and physical health problems, especially of their parents or even other students in their classes. Furthermore, some are unaware that they too are suffering. For example, here is what a Bosnian seventeen-year-old girl said:

> Some other kids in this class have had bad times too in different countries. I'm not the only one. And my mother is not in good health. She has lots of stomach problems and she cries a lot. Lots of our relatives were killed. Here in Canada, I have to be strong.

Some students felt they were met with some amount of discrimination and hostility in school and in the community. Bert, a sixteen year-old Bulgarian boy, for example, says: "They'll [the Canadian students] call me a loser on the basketball court or they'll call me stupid." (Bert has lived in Canada for a year and a half). Tom, a Tamil, relates a story of where he works in a Chinese restaurant and is paid "less than the other workers because [his] English is not good." These findings are congruent with Corson (1993) who says that language is "the vehicle for identifying, manipulating and changing power relations between people" (p. 1). For many newcomers, their demarcation as 'inferior' was viewed as linguistic in origin. Therefore, students felt that their lack of proficiency in English impaired their ability to accrue social rewards: "I think if I could speak very good English, I think I would get more friends" (Sam, from Mainland China).

Other times, the students saw themselves stigmatized intellectually due to their lack of English. One Vietnamese boy related that when he first arrived in Canada, his English reading abilities were "so bad that the whole class laughed at me." These linguistic markers of difference were sometimes interconnected with the category of race. For example, Joe, a fifteen-year-old Tamil boy, said:

> When I see like some Canadian people, white people, they call me some names, if I even look at them, they just make fun of me like that and the teachers, they don't even pass me or give me full marks. Last time I collected 49 [a particular grade which he perceived as sufficient], but they don't change your timetable. Like there [Sri Lanka], they kill you with bombs. Here, they hurt you with feelings.

For some students, having to discard a former life and build a new self created feelings of vulnerability and loss. Sylvia, a Croatian teenager says:

> Of course life is better here than in Croatia, but it was very hard [coming here] because from my point of view, I was the best student in the school. Everybody knew me because I used to come half an hour earlier so everybody can rewrite my homework. Like in my free time, I tutored other students and those kinds of things . . . Now, I need the help. (in Canada for 10 weeks)

Others were haunted by a constant sense of tension and imbalance, a sense of uprootedness:

> You're not sure when you're talking to someone if it is a good guy or not. I don't know, but in my country, we could say what kind of person is he, but not here . . . I feel like an alien or something. (Frank, Iranian, 17, in Canada for 1 year and 3 months)

Frequently, feelings of confusion, shock, anger and panic, and shame in negotiating two or more cultures culminated in an overwhelming feeling of despair. Experiencing a negative change in her identity on a variety of fronts,

an Afghani girl says: "When I came here, I just, I didn't know anything at all. I mean, I couldn't even tell my name to somebody. It was extremely hard . . . The first, second week, I really did cry."

Lina, a sixteen-year-old girl from Albania, who is in Toronto only with her father, shared her sadness about the difficulties in becoming Canadian and securing a better future:

I just don't know if it will ever work out for me. It was bad in Albania but at least I was with my whole family. I miss my mother and my brothers so much. I haven't seen them for over a year and I don't know when we will be together again. It is all legal stuff. In the meantime, I am trying to learn English as well as I can because I want to go to university but will I be accepted? I want to be a lawyer but it is only a dream. I want to become Canadian and feel like I belong but that will take a very long time. Most days, I wake up in the morning feeling homesick and discouraged. And my father can't help because he is trying to make enough money to be able to get the rest of the family over here.

Muhammed, a teenager from Afghanistan, came to Canada with his uncle from a refugee camp in Pakistan. He is eighteen years old and works in an Afghani restaurant after school and on weekends to make enough money to live. His brother was killed in Afghanistan and his father is missing. He has only now reconnected with his mother by phone after several years. He says:

I feel really lonely most of the time. My uncle is good to me but he has his own family to worry about. I have to make it on my own. I hope I will see my mother again but I don't know how. It's nice being in school. The teachers here are kind to me but I have so much catching up to do. It's not easy learning how to read and write a new language well enough to be able to go to university. If it hadn't been for the Taliban and all that, I would have been able to become a doctor. That is what my parents wanted for me. Now I am like an orphan.

These stories are harrowing, steeped in misery. For those who experience their outsider status as a deficiency, this transformation is felt only as loss. Newly arrived students experience this sense of malaise most acutely; and, some continue to feel uneasy about their new status despite living in Canada for several years. Unable to find a way out of their cultural displacement, students who understand their difference as deficiency view outsiderness as a highly problematic and enduring liability. Anzaldua (1987) says: "Knowing is painful because after 'it' happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before" (p. 48). An eighteen-year-old Somali student said:

Will I ever feel 'Canadian?' It is a big question for me. I'm far away from where I came from and yet I still don't feel like I will ever belong here. And I know it will make a difference in what I end up doing later because my English is not so good.

Some other participants, however, believe that by giving up their distinctive linguistic, cultural, and social characteristics, they can raise the profile of themselves in spite of their 'border' status. These outsiders perceive the possibility of being able to recreate themselves in ways that the dominant society considers acceptable, as is encapsulated in the following excerpt from an interview with Raj, a fifteen-year-old Bengali boy:

> First of all, I met my friend, my first day in Canada in school, in Grade 6. Actually my friend's friend, used to make fun of me, so my friend taught me all this stuff and in the summer he taught me more English, so later on I got changed. But now my parents wonder whether I will forget my home country and language.

In this assimilationist interaction, "ethnic ties dissolve fairly easily" (Epstein, 1977, p. 46). Raj realizes that categorical discrimination exists toward immigrants, but he feels that it has no relevance for him as a member of that category because he wishes to transcend it. The perception is that in order to re-socialize himself, he must acquire the correct traits and dispositions of a "true Canadian," and thus his outsider status will "disappear." Indeed it seems that his intention was for his subjective yearnings to become part of his public persona—not without its difficulties. This student's ability to become more absorbed into the dominant culture tended to be aided by positive home attitudes toward the new culture. He spoke of his parents as encouraging him to speak English and to make Canadian friends.

Parents who were more accepting of Canadian beliefs and value systems tended to facilitate this 'assimilationist' position—but in a very ambivalent manner. It is not an easy or necessarily healthy transition psychologically, as Raj suggests. And not all participants found themselves located in situations where they could so readily "melt" into the dominant society. Where Canadian values were felt to be in conflict with home values, students often devised other solutions to the problem of living in two worlds, as mentioned in the next section.

The Delicate Balancing Act: On the Borders Between Cultures

Though most students genuinely desire to embrace their new Canadian identity, their earlier socialization in other cultural environments creates a competing framework for self-identification. They often find themselves on the borders where cultures collide. Wanita, a seventeen-year-old girl from Afghanistan, epitomizes this conflict when she says:

> It is hard because my mom sometimes gets mad at me . . . My dad is really, really strict and he doesn't totally agree with Canadian culture . . . and I don't do bad stuff, but still they want me to be perfect, like a perfect Afghani girl, but it's hard for me because I lived half of my life in Afghanistan, and half of my life in Russia, and now I'm in Canada, so I am in a lot of cultures.

A sixteen-year-old girl from Pakistan spoke about bringing a whole change of clothes to school so that she could fit into Canadian society:

> I leave the apartment looking like what my mother wears. And then I go into a restaurant nearby and go into the bathroom and change to these jeans and tee-shirt. I want to be Canadian and I hate looking different.

In order to reconcile these two versions of self demanded by vastly different cultural worlds, students compartmentalize their lives in such a way that will enable them to pass as authentic in both environments. Ron, for example, notes that he has become adjusted to living in a bifurcated world where he "becomes more Bulgarian at home" and then "becomes more Canadian at school." Attempting to keep the two worlds apart might mean only having friends over from the home society or only speaking at home in the ethnic language. As indicated above, it may mean dressing at home one way and dressing for school in a totally different (and sometimes clandestine) manner.

Such reconstructions of identity create what Butler (1999) discusses as more space for and recognition of the various actions and 'selves' performed daily in a social landscape blinded and even hostile to variety. This attempt to minimize the cognitive dissonance between Canadian norms and those of the students' homeland(s), however, was not always possible. Igor, a seventeen-year-old Russian immigrant, states how different families react to Canadian norms from the perspective of food at the dinner table:

> That's why we [he and his girlfriend] fight sometimes. Let's say, we are having dinner [in my home] and I don't like something so I'll just tell my parents, "I don't like this," and I'll say, "I want to eat something else [something more Canadian, less Russian]," and it would be a normal thing for me to say and they would understand me. But if I eat at my girlfriend's house [also Russian] and her mom's there, and I say something like this, they'd think I'm being be disrespectful or something . . . I mean, I have a right not to like something, right?

Other students were, however, relieved at what they perceived to be greater tolerance and respect in their Canadian school and community. This seventeen-year-old male Serbian student had been in temporary residence in Germany before arriving in Canada and he shared this:

> I was surprised how well they treated me here [in Canada] when I came. It's very different from Germany. In Germany, there was discrimination everywhere. For example, one incident with me was eating with my friend, and he was Serbian so we were speaking Serbian in the subway and one lady came to me and said, "You're not allowed to speak another language here. This is Germany. You speak German here." But [in Canada] nobody ever made fun of me because of my accent, or my English.

These students shared with us how they struggle on a daily basis to recreate and reconstruct their identities. They are trying to 'work difference,' which Ellsworth

and Miller (1996) refer to as "the possibility of engaging with and responding to the fluidity and malleability of identities and difference, of refusing fixed and static categories of sameness or permanent otherness" (p. 24). The fact that self is not infinitely malleable creates a problem for those wishing to change various 'selves' according to context. In this instance, the conflicting norms invoked by Igor's home culture and that of his new culture lead to feelings of frustration. This process of 'living in two worlds' was further complicated by the lack of contact that some immigrants had with the homeland or lack of a viable community of support in their new surroundings. Also, it was often the case that the longer the immigrant had left the home culture, the harder it was to follow its incumbent norms, making the 'living in two worlds' option less tenable.

Finally, it is interesting to note that several students pointed to the danger that exists when people hold on too tightly to their original identities and are unable or unprepared to deal with their location of marginality in a new society. This may in fact lead to fractiousness and even violence. Frank, an Iranian boy, for example, speaks of a conversation he had with another student where assertions of each other's ancestral borders involved reinstating ancient forms of hierarchy, exclusion, and ethnocentric behaviour:

> When you move to another country, you like your [home] country more than when you lived in your country . . . Like you believe that your country is powerful and this stuff, it's better and stuff. It's kind of nationalism . . . Like, in my country, nobody can say bad things about my own country, but here, some other [Greek] guys come here and talk about my country's [Persian] history . . . and we had some losses to the Greeks, there were Persian and Greek wars that happened in history. And some Greek kids come and say to me, "We kicked your ass," at that time and I sometimes say, "Who cares? That was a long time ago," but some people still hold on to it.

This excerpt supports Connor's (1999) claim that those working for peace in ethnic conflict are dealing with issues that are not rooted in fact but in the perception of fact, "not with a chronological history, but with sentient or felt history" (p. 173). The Greek and Iranian (Persian) boys invoke their limited historical understanding of their nation's ancient past and use this knowledge as a platform for their own perceived personal power and superiority as a way of assuaging their sense of marginality as newly arrived immigrants. The two 'dead' empires are resurrected in an attempt to legitimize a current position of dominance, demonstrating to what extent feelings of nationalism can interfere with intercultural harmony in a diverse school. For example, many students bring the sectarian violence from their home countries into their Canadian classrooms. Here is what one student confided:

> There are lots of kids in this school who are really crazy, and want to bring the fights of their countries in here. Some Serbian kids hate the Bosnian kids because of the war and because they are Muslim.

And some of the Muslim kids think their way is the best way and don't know much about being Christian or anything. I heard some kids saying very bad things about Jews too. Some of our teachers are talking to us about how we have to learn to respect other people's cultures and religions.

These issues are beyond the scope of this paper, but we decided to include these two excerpts as they indicate a deeper tension in current immigration and acculturation issues that we began to unearth during this study. Religious belief and identity are currently major divisive factors in global society. Violent conflicts between members of different religious groups rage in many world regions, and some students in this study who have arrived from such areas are 'acting out' these issues (in the form of verbal and physical fights) in the school. This behaviour certainly reinforces the fact that multicultural education needs to be understood from more interdisciplinary and transnational perspectives. Diversity should become a source of real learning for all and offer cutting-edge ways in which to deal with intercultural conflictual issues constructively and creatively. We as educators must try to open spaces for dialogue so that these issues can be discussed in safe ways in order to bridge gaps and reconcile difference. It is a daunting task but a necessary one, given the growing friction in some inner-city high schools both locally and globally.

Thus far, this paper has described 'outsiderness' as something that poses additional hardships and stress on immigrant students. However, not all participants addressed the phenomenon of 'in-betweeness' as solely one of deprivation. Although most students saw their newcomer status as a detriment, some were able to re-envision the stigma of their difference and even felt that their marginality improved the quality of their lives, although this was never a simple matter. These views are classified in the category of " 'outsiderness' as a positive force" and are discussed below.

'Outsiderness' as a Positive Force

'Outsiderness' was perceived as a strength to harness by a great many students, and these findings are congruent with the research of some theorists who note that there may be advantages to marginality (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1984; Wyn, Acker, & Richards, 2000). Some of the potentially positive outcomes that lie beyond the adversities endured by people in marginal situations include the hope for personal liberation, keener insight, and social change (Bennett, 1993; hooks, 1984; Seelye & Howell Wasilewski, 1996; Stonequist, 1961; Wyn, Acker, & Richards, 2000). By questioning what lies at the centre of the educational enterprise, students who view their 'in-betweeness' as a strength are able to resist the hold of those normative discourses that define their worth and thus use their marginality as "a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse" (hooks, 1990, p. 341). There was evidence in our data that some of the adolescents in our study in fact embraced their 'in-betweeness' as something quite liberating.

A sixteen-year-old female Afghani student, for example, talks about the hardships of her life but also includes her positive attitude toward some teachers in school. She is perhaps beginning to envisage the possibility of transcending her former problematic life:

I feel so alone sometimes and have so much to worry about. I was always afraid in Afghanistan and then I was in Russia and didn't feel comfortable there. But in Canada everybody's equal and you don't have to be afraid of other people or getting beaten up and you can rely on the . . . system. You can follow your own culture, you don't have to be afraid to wear your culture's clothes and no one will make fun of you . . . Not like Russia. I feel that school here is very supportive and my teachers are always trying to help me learn English better and they let me speak and write in my own language.

One of the benefits of coming to Canada, according to Sanjeet, a Kenyan boy of Indian (Gujurati) ancestry, is that his grades improved.

Well, that's one of the things that brought my marks up. There [in Kenya] I had a lot of friends in my class. We used to joke around in front the teacher. Yeah, I have less friends here; that's another reason why my marks went up. That's fine for me.

Unlike most students who experienced their loss of interaction with relatives and friends as difficult or even traumatic, a few of the interviewees enjoyed their new-found anonymity. By not caring about fitting in, Sanjeet feels he can devote more of his time and energy to the learning process and hence use his isolation to improve his academic performance. There is also the motivation to "catch up and do well in [his] grades so that [he] can enter university." Sanjeet perceives a greater flexibility in terms of identity formation and a chance at improving his professional future in Toronto, and therefore he feels less constricted than he did living in Kenya of Indian ancestry. This sense of hope in the midst of all the overwhelming changes taking place in his life was refreshing to witness. He was by no means the only student who felt this way. Many others viewed their immigrant status as a catalyst to forge a new identity and the possibility of a brighter future.

Anna, a sixteen-year-old girl from Kosovo, focuses on her new life in Toronto as a second chance:

I feel like I have a chance at a better life for myself. I know I have to work hard to make it happen. But now, as a new Canadian, it is possible. Before, in Kosovo, it was a dead-end. Even though I will never forget where I came from and I still have relatives there. That is home for me but so is Toronto now.

Reflecting on her understanding of herself as "Canadian," Mari, an (African) girl from Kenya, is aware of the flexibility of multiple identities which she embraces as a positive force:

With my friends here at school, I'm different. At home, I'm different but it doesn't matter because I am who I am and no one can change that except me . . . I think I'm a person who changes wherever I go. It's more fun because you've got more stuff to talk about, instead of the same stuff over and over.

Anna and Mari perceive their roots to be portable and flexible, allowing them to accept both old and new homes while still keeping their sense of self intact. Becoming attached to new ways of being and doing things, they express their hybridity as a kind of freedom that enables them to transcend the confines of their earlier problematic and more restricted cultural backgrounds. This tendency to move toward a fluid definition of self was particularly pronounced for those who had migrated from more than one country. For example, here is an excerpt from sixteen-year-old Maryam who lived in Bulgaria and then Italy before coming to Canada: "I was born in Bulgaria and feel Bulgarian but also I liked being in Italy. And now I am in Canada and I am beginning to feel like I will be Canadian."

Other students used their 'border' status to interrogate taken-for-granted norms of Canadianess. Multilingualism became a source of pride for many students and increased their sense of cultural and linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1977). Here are some excerpts.

Seventeen-year-old Nabia, from Somalia, says:

> When somebody goes to me and asks, "Okay, how many languages do you speak?" I say, "Three" . . . and I ask them and they say, "One" and [that] they are Canadian. And I say, "So am I." And you know they're not better than me. I can speak more languages.

Here Nabia develops a set of understandings about the immigrant student that enables her to move away from being "the victim of the distortion of the perception of others" (Grambs, 1992, p. 194). Rather than judging her success in terms of her ability to win mainstream approval, such as having the perfect (and therefore unmarked) Canadian accent, Nabia re-defines her worth in terms of her ability to speak and impart a second or third language. Her reworked definition of competence transforms Nabia as an object of other people's desires to a subject who creates the ground upon which she/he is to be considered desirable.

While Nabia recognizes there is a considerable amount of discrimination facing the immigrant student, she also believes that immigrant students' ability to survive in a new world in multiple languages and cultures is a testament to their sense of agency in the midst of marginality. By re-framing her marginality as a strength, Nabia is able to resist those forces that position the immigrant student as inferior.

Agra, a sixteen-year-old Romanian girl, shows a sense of empowerment in her becoming literate in more than one language:

> You know, I feel good about the fact that I can speak and read and write Romanian. It helps me in French because those languages are similar. Also, it's nice to show my ESL teacher that even though I'm not so good yet in English writing, I have another language where I do write well. And she [her ESL teacher] can see that and is making me feel much better about my chance at really learning how to write well in English.

As the value of their cultural capital increases in school, many students begin to have more positive desires for the future. In this way, they are in the process of transcending negative feelings of 'outsiderness'; the opportunity to reach forward offers many students a sense of hope. A female, sixteen-year-old student from mainland China is in the process of reconstructing her professional desires for the future as she sees her growing cultural capital as a valued resource in the future.

When I first came to school, I felt like a nobody. But I speak better English now and I write better and my teachers are treating me more like I am a good student. I'm starting to feel like I might go to college because I want to go into business administration. Also I speak Mandarin and Cantonese and the Chinese economy is becoming very important, so I might be able to use these languages in my work. It is going to be about being global where people will need to know other languages and cultures.

There were many other students who saw this possibility of greater success for themselves in a Canadian and transnational economy, offering them a shot at a better job. Here is one male seventeen-year-old from Iraq sharing his professional dream:

I have to work much harder than if I grew up here in Toronto. But some of my teachers tell me that I have a chance to get to university if I really work hard. And they are helping me and I will try. If I had stayed in Iraq, it would have been the end for me. I really want to try to become a dentist. Maybe I can. It's not impossible.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Continued waves of immigration to Canada have created educational challenges in terms of how to best serve newly arrived students and their parents within our schools. This need has become particularly acute as these students continue to be overrepresented in the dropout statistics (Duffy, 2004). What emerged uniformly from the interviews in this study were deep feelings of 'outsiderness.' The students were coming from personal lived histories of deprivation and trauma, from social upheaval, and often from war in their home countries and thus were entering the Canadian landscape with hidden (and not-so hidden) scars and were searching for a sense of belonging, for a way to begin again. Also, their perceptions of being situated as the 'other' are not homogeneous but rather multi-layered. Sometimes immigrant students feel that their identities are rejected by both Canadian and home communities; other times, they are able to create a space where their multiple identities are accepted and respected. Sometimes their own prior lived experiences of conflict and war create negative stereotypes about various

ethnic groups and religions, which they bring into the Canadian classroom. All these factors affect how they view their world. Indeed, these are crucial issues in terms of nation building and citizenship education for all students in Canadian society.

It was heartening to witness these students continually attempting to reconstruct the solitary spaces of 'in-betweeness' into more robust versions of their cultural selves, in whichever ways were possible. They were always in the process of interrogating, disrupting, and ultimately restructuring the notion of 'outsiderness' within the two extremes of 'outsiderness' as a negative force (sense of victimhood or deprivation) on the one end of the spectrum, and of 'outsiderness' as a positive force (sense of agency and hope) in their lives on the other end. The boundaries between these perceptions of 'outsiderness' were extremely porous, and the students would move dialectically back and forth between the negative and positive dimensions of their lived experiences, often fluctuating between the two. Many students, for example, pictured their 'otherness' as a dilemma or tension they were forced to manage. However, these students also perceived Canada's social boundaries as quite permeable in comparison to those in the countries of their earlier immigrant experience. They saw that students are not punished for speaking their first language or made to feel ashamed of their cultural background, and that Canada is a land where newcomers are generally made to feel welcome. Within the diverse mixture of peoples in Toronto, some cultural groups are more numerous than others and some students, for example, spoke of being able to rely on a large network of friends and relatives to help them adjust to the new country. In contrast, students from other cultural groups who lacked this supportive environment in their own group spoke of having to forge relationships with people outside their cultural backgrounds. Thus, some students were more buffered from the effects of 'being on the margins' than others.

Finally, what emerged from these findings is the need for a more critical lens in order to focus on how *all* students must learn to live together peacefully in multicultural, multi-faith, multiracial classrooms. What seemed very valuable for the students was to have an opportunity to tell their stories. Reclaiming voice was important. Undoubtedly more research into this complex and timely issue is necessary in order to explore the intricate and multi-faceted perceptions that students hold toward the 'other,' and as such, to generate curriculum and policies that will enable them—and indeed all Canadians—to respect the dignity and human rights of *all* persons in our civil society, both in and out of school.

NOTES

[i] Sri Lanka has been involved in ethnic conflict and civil war for over twenty years with little indication of lasting peace in the near future. At the center of the conflict is Sri Lanka's ethnic diversity, which became polarized between the majority Sinhala-speaking community and the minority Tamil-speaking community after the departure of the British and independence in 1948. Sweeping reforms that discriminated against the Tamil minority were enforced by the Sinhala government as a result of the social, political, and educational preferential treatment of Tamils by the British during their rule. Since 1983, the conflict has played out in the form of civil war between the Sri Lankan government and LTTE, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam, who are seeking autonomy and self-governance for the Tamils in the Northeast of Sri Lanka (Ganguly, 2004).

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