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Item Type	article
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Download date	2026-06-08 04:52:57
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14849/9742

Bringing Personal Identity into our Learning Spaces

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This paper will integrate a personal narrative with published work to examine the journey and thoughts of a South Asian female identifying theatre educator working in higher education in theatre education. The paper will discuss stories of identity, its impact, and a discussion around what should be done with this information. It will illuminate the need for further research to engage more South Asian female voices in theatre education.

Keywords: ethnic identity, teacher preparation, South Asian, theatre teacher, autoethnography, female voice

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Introduction

This personal narrative, integrated with published discussion, will reflect on the identity of the author's personal and professional experiences as a theatre educator. I am specifically interested in a reflective exploration of my identity as a South Asian female identifying voice in theatre education. The sources used and discussions in this piece range from focusing on identity, othering, intersectionality, positionality, and personal experiences. While it is difficult to have a conversation about teacher preparation without discussing what happens in the PreK-12 classroom, this article will not focus on these issues in PreK-12 classrooms specifically unless in the context of identity in teacher preparation. General findings suggest that little research highlights the South Asian female identifying voice and theatre education. This is an opportunity to investigate my voice in theatre education and how to uplift the voices of those from the South Asian community and other marginalized communities in a field that continues to be dominated by predominately white institutions, artists, and educators. The hope is that this personal narrative integrated with published discussion will encourage future research.

My journey as a student and a practitioner in theatre education has been complicated. Little has been written on the experiences of Brown teacher-educators, preservice teachers, and teachers in schools (Shah, 2022). I remember in the '80s and early '90s, on standardized tests or any formal forms that needed to be filled out, I always had to check the box "other" when pertaining to my identity and did not realize until much later the impact that box would have. An educator needs to bring their own identity into their practice (Artiles, 2019). Only later in life did I truly understand that my exploration needed to consider intersectionality and positionality as part of my identity and as a theatre educator.

The Journey

In 1979, at a church, a 5-year-old girl walked down the church aisle, in the role of Mary, as part of the story of Jesus's birth. This girl was me. I was upset I was in the role to play Mary as all my friends were angels. My parents came to the United States in 1968 from India. They were so proud that I was selected to play Mary. I didn't want to disappoint them, but I wanted to be an angel like all my friends. They spent a lot of time sewing pieces of my costume from scraps of sari, sari blouses, and old clothes.

My friends had shinier costumes that looked much prettier. I could see the tinsel in their headpieces shimmering in the light. I wanted a shiny costume like them but instead was in raggedy clothes. I remember so vividly looking down at baby Jesus, a doll with one blue eye and one black, probably found in the church basement, sitting on one of those old rocking horse toys that you could sit on, placed on a platform on wheels. Joseph, another 5-year-old "actor," cried down the church aisle. He refused to look at me and did not engage with the horse or baby Jesus. A parent had to pull me down the aisle and force him to walk. I did what I was supposed to do and placed baby Jesus in the manger and then stood with the children's choir. Then, I was up. It was my first solo, and it kicked off the trifecta of the adult choir, youth choir, and children's choir singing together. I remember opening my mouth to sing, "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills, and everywhere. Go tell it on the mountain..." I had the congregation captivated, and it was here that, for the first time, I felt the power of the arts. I began honing my arts educator skills and could not have anticipated how this would become a pivotal moment in my life.

This is the beginning of my story.

Being first-generation and growing up in a predominately white, affluent area had a significant impact on me; I just didn't realize it at the time. My parents came to the US in the 1960s and they wanted to raise us "American." For example, not eating with our hands, speaking with no accent, and participating in more "American" after-school activities. After getting their citizenship, my parents were tasked with bringing over family members. My aunts and uncles came in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and by that time, there were more Indian schools, cultural opportunities, and churches. Family members whom I was close to had something I never had, a stronger connection to our culture. When opportunities came up, I was already so embedded in the "American" way of life. These experiences had a significant influence on my practice. I just didn't know it at the time. Looking at the lived experiences of teachers and students and the intersectionality of that with teacher's practice impacts the learning that occurs. (Artiles, 2019). Along my journey, I did not see anyone who looked like me, particularly in theatre education. There was little to no discussion when I was growing up of looking for playwrights who were Black, Indigenous, Latino, Asian, or any other ethnic background different than the traditional cannon, for example.

My experiences imprinted on me that gravitating toward whiteness was needed to be successful and to be "American." Society pushes us toward the dominant white culture, away from inherent ethnic identity, which impacts how we see ourselves (Henry, 2003; Malhi et al., 2009). A person's confidence can be shredded away when the message is sent that they are different or need to hide parts of themselves to be accepted. Often South Asian women position themselves as needed in different social or professional settings (Malhi, 2009). This ability to switch back and forth was something I identified with, yet early on in life did not realize what I was doing. It was not until I discovered my graduate program in 2001 that I finally felt I found people I could 100% fit in with. We all have an innate desire to belong, and young people seek to find something they can connect to (Rowe, 2009). We also have in us the desire to have meaning in our lives. While I never had any issues making friends, I never felt like I fit in 100% with the South Asian Indian community or 100% with my friends at school. No one made me feel that way; it was just a feeling. It wasn't until I found the theatre education community that I felt like I belonged somewhere 100% and found meaning, until June 2020, when polarizing conversations about equity were spotlighted and call-out culture was prevalent. Things became a very black-and-white issue, and I didn't know how I fit in and ultimately felt very alone. At the time, I just wanted to stay afloat and support these conversations. It felt wrong to engage in conversations about myself. But the reality is since then, I have been involved in thinking about how my lived experiences impact the landscape of my work. I realized for too long, that I had pushed aside my own needs and, at pivotal turning points, did not have someone who looked like me to be mentored by.

In Reflection

My roots come from India and the idea of feeling "othered" did not occur to me until I was an adult. Growing up in a predominately white area, I acclimated in a way that I thought I had to. While I fit in well with the school culture, there was always a feeling of not 100% belonging and I couldn't quite pinpoint why I had felt this way. Being far away from cultural connections, I never

fully engaged with the South Asian community, and when I did, I felt out of place. The experience in graduate school, being with like-minded people, is what I had connected with as the strongest part of my identity. The common bond was our love for the arts and youth. While there was representation from some different ethnic and racial backgrounds, mostly it wasn't diverse and there was little to no representation from India, and parts of my identity felt oppressed without me even realizing it.

Seeing ourselves in our work gives meaning and visionary leadership is born out of that meaning (Buss et al., 2023, p. 414). This connection is important to allow authenticity in who you are. Authenticity and confidence in who you are leads to growth. When meaning is present in work, workers are more apt to think about the future, and this is when people begin to grow into leaders (Buss et al., 2023). It is important to bring your authentic self into a classroom and theatre to experience a work of art. The education system in this country is not set up to include teachers of color and systems are not set up to support them (Kohli, 2019). Preservice teachers need to be encouraged to bring their identity and authentic selves to their practice and not to change to fit within the existing structures.

I had a very privileged elementary and secondary education. However, as an adult, I did not see myself in our curriculum. When children do not see themselves in what they are learning, it adds to the feeling of othering. Teachers need to be responsible for creating culturally responsive lessons that create space for all identities (Gorelov, 2022). I recognize it was the '80s and '90s when I grew up, slowly evolving and diving deep into cultural responsiveness may not have been prioritized as it is now. For example, I dreaded the first day of school. Teachers would constantly mispronounce my name. Not just my first name but also my last name; many would not ask me the proper way to say it, but in fact, they skipped over the last name and often mispronounced some phonetic version of my first name, and it needed to be phonetically spelled. It sent a message that my name did not matter. Very few teachers even tried to learn how to say my name. As an educator today, I wonder why some of them (not all) didn't learn how to say everyone's name correctly before meeting the class, especially a different name. I had to relive this nightmare every time we had a substitute teacher. Having grown up in the same district from 1st to 12th grade, my classmates would lovingly correct the teachers in unison. While it was sweet, and I felt supported, I was also embarrassed. I wanted to identify in the same way that my peers did as members of the school community, but there was a barrier, and this was an example of one.

Flash forward about 20 years. I was invited to have a plaque with my name on it at the high school I graduated to celebrate alumni who had made contributions to the arts. I was thrilled only to arrive that day and see my name not only misspelled but changed to a more common name. It was apparent someone needed to pay more attention to the change that spell check had made. So still I was reminded of the changes that needed to happen. Then a few years later, the uncomfortableness around my name came up again. This time it came up as a working professional who was a new faculty member. During a faculty meeting, as elections to serve on committees were on the agenda, a slate was written on the board for various committees. The colleague who wrote on the board used everyone's last name but mine. My last name is very long. One of my colleagues brought up that my name was the only name listed with the first name, and that faculty member looked down at me and

said, “Oh, she knows what I mean, don’t you? It doesn’t matter.” I will always regret not saying anything, but in that moment, I just wanted to hide under the table and this discussion to be over. I’m unsure if this person even realizes its impact on me, that I’m writing about it about ten years later.

Looking Ahead

As a South Asian female-identifying person, I did not see myself represented as an artist or educator in my training. It is complex and confusing. The education system in this country is centered around the white experience, and often, the multicultural curriculum is not a priority and should be integrated better into practice (Sleeter, 2017). For example, in teacher preparation, diverse field placements with multicultural curricular content encourage future teachers to bring their identity into learning spaces and be authentic so that children see that authenticity. (Alamo, 2020; Berry & Candis, 2013; Metz, 2019). Children want to see themselves in what they are experiencing and have an innate desire to belong (Tuhus-Debrow, 2022; Malhi et al., 2009; Rowe, 2009). In teacher preparation, it is vital to encourage authenticity in identity to disconnect from this idea of centering whiteness in the education system. Teachers will bring their identity into how they practice in the classroom, and who they are should be at the center of what they teach; however, if we continuously see white teachers, that will be at the core of what is taught (Daniels et al., 2019). If whiteness is what is presented, then there is a subconscious voice saying this is the way it is supposed to be (Gorelov, 2019; Malhi et al., 2009; Metz, 2018; Sleeter, 2016). Teacher training programs in theatre education should prioritize cultural responsiveness to create a stronger curriculum grounded in representation and social justice practice in addition to traditional pedagogy and content (Andrews et al.; 2019; Dyches et al., 2017; Reimers, 2006). It is education’s responsibility to enable and empower students to think this way. However, teacher education programs aren’t necessarily set up this way. Many teachers are evaluated with a post-positivist approach focusing on data and effectiveness rather than a transformative approach focusing on equity and justice (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022).

Theatre classrooms can be an intentional space where social justice topics can be an implicit part of the classroom, not just in content but also in how our theatre teachers manage the process of creating theatre. For example, the history of the students in the class should be considered, and their stories should be told (Metz, 2019). Theatre education programs must encourage more theatre teachers from diverse ethnic backgrounds and be intentional about this being part of the recruitment efforts. It will enrich the program as well as the schools these theatre teachers teach in and, in turn, their students. It is important to remember that the system in which we have been training teachers might need to be disrupted and that we think about what it means to engage all teachers truly. A theory of change presented by The National Center for Research on Educator Diversity (NCRED) is to use research–practice partnerships (RPPs) to address the lack of ethno-racial educator diversity (Gist et al., 2024). This also means that an equity-centered framework is needed for classroom evaluative purposes, not just valid and reliable evidence of student and teacher performance (Cochran-Smith et al., 2022).

My interest in this topic started when I realized I wanted to see someone who looked like me in this work at pivotal turning points in my career. Recently, I realized how much having immigrant parents impacted my perspective. I was raised to walk in someone else's path because, in their mind, that would ensure success. I often aligned myself with other minoritized groups to have proximity to and belong to a group, having some parts of my identity thrive and other parts buried. It was not until I reached a high point in my career that I realized the importance of looking deeper at what theatre education programs, practitioners in theatre education, and the field significantly need to evaluate to take responsibility for intentionally opening space for new voices. I also have been thinking about how the privileges I have been afforded have contributed to systems that have been put in place and what I can do to make different decisions intentionally. I started to wonder, in my role as a leader in arts education were there moments that I could have made a different choice to open doors for people who those doors might not have been opened for? What could I have done differently? How did I contribute to the systemic issues in arts education today?

Conclusion

While examining articles I noticed there are holes in research about identity in general, but also of the South Asian female-identifying voice in theatre education. While there is some work published on the importance of cultural responsiveness both in the classroom and in theatre company's selections, there is a need to examine representation from different ethnic populations and specifically focus on the South Asian experience to engage more female-identifying artist/educators. The research also began to uncover a need to examine social justice practices in teacher preparation programs in theatre education and look deeper at approaches to engaging pre-service teachers in learning about working with different ethnic populations and being culturally relevant when working in urban public schools. This might help evolve the field and engage more ethnically and racially diverse practitioners. I am asking myself, as a faculty member in a theatre education program, the following question: what are theatre education programs intentionally doing to engage ethnically diverse theatre teachers? There is not enough written on the complex makeup of Brown teacher-educators and the lack of representation in theatre education (Shah, 2022). Recently, there have been more discussions about the engagement of the Black and Latino population but no focus on the South Asian population specifically uplifting female-identifying voices in theatre education. Further research is needed on the complexity of South Asian female-identifying artist/educators, including consideration of positionality, intersectionality, and generational trauma, and a deeper understanding of what it means to hold position and power while experiencing marginalization and oppression and first-generation experiences in the theatre classroom.

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