

Language, Art and Life: Reflections on Guiding Questions Cara Bucciarelli

For the field experience, we were asked to develop a set of guiding questions to help somewhat focus our attention during our time in India. Below is a photo of what I wrote back in the spring:

As a Spanish as a world language teacher for grades K-8, my curriculum includes a significant focus on the diversity of cultures in countries where Spanish is spoken. It is important that my students understand that each of the twenty-one countries who include Spanish as an official language are distinct, and in turn that each country includes many different communities. I have a particular personal interest in indigenous languages and cultures which extends into my teaching. In some of my upper grades classes, we begin to explore how such diversity is represented -- or not -- in a country's politics, arts, education policies and other spheres of influence. At the same time, over the past few years, I have been working to include more about Chicago and the many people who call our city home as well in an effort to be more culturally responsive to the needs of my students.

My guiding questions seek to explore how India also examines issues of language and culture within its own country. First, in what ways are indigenous, local and minority languages and cultures utilized in the school curriculum at the school, state and country level? I know that India has adopted the "Three Language Formula" and am curious to see how this functions, or not, in schools, in order to draw parallels between these policies and policies regarding the teaching in or of home languages in Chicago, the United States and in countries where Spanish is spoken. This guiding question is also timely as the United Nations/UNESCO declared 2022-2032 the Decade of Indigenous Languages. In addition, I wonder about the use of place-based learning in the curriculum. Do schools uplift or make visible local cultures and/or customs? Do schools encourage using students' funds of knowledge, and if so, what does this look like?

As a diverse country, I am also curious about the ways in which India as a country represents itself in its curriculum. Are there opportunities within the curriculum for students in one area to learn about other geographic regions, languages, cultures, religions and so on? Has the National Education Policy goal of inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) been successful so far in the eyes of teachers, students and schools? Does this inclusion favor certain regions, languages or communities more than others? What is the interplay between IKS inclusion and the Three Language Formula? How does India strive to teach its students about their own country while also working to create global citizens? Finally, I wonder about which educators, courses or types of schools may do the "heavy lifting" of creating or upholding policies and/or practices related to these ideas.

First up, language:

On our final day, we were likewise asked to reflect on these questions and on our experience overall. Of the language policy, I wrote on our poster "It's complicated," perhaps to the dismay of others. What does it mean to learn a language? A pragmatic approach might be what was said

to me at one point during the field experience: "A language is learned when it is needed." But how do we decide what languages are needed and by whom? How do we decide how much of a language is enough, or when the language should be learned?

Multilingualism is a way of life in India. It is estimated that India has over 1600 languages, 22 of which are recognized in the Constitution. The [Central Institute of Indian Languages](#) lists [primers in 117 languages](#) on its page. It is not uncommon for the average person to know two, three or four languages or more. However, where and how children and adults learn additional languages, I learned, can be contentious. Under the section on [multilingualism](#) and the three-language formula in the National Education Policy from 2020, schools are supposed to "wherever possible" teach in the local language or mother tongue until grade 5, with students also typically learning in English and in a second Indian language, often Hindi. According to supporters, the three-language formula, originally created in 1968, is meant to provide cohesion, promote continued multilingualism, and provide recognition of mother tongues in the school setting. However, detractors believe that the policy is not implemented evenly across states, that it ultimately promotes Hindi in areas where it is not typically spoken, thereby de-emphasizing local languages, and/or that it fails to address situations such as those in which students' mother tongues are varied or may not match the local language insisted upon by state governments. [This article](#) from the Times of India summarizes some of the current challenges.

Although my original question focused on the implementation of the policy, rather than on the politics of it, the degree to which extent states, rather than the federal government, should exercise control over educational policies is also a continual hot topic in the United States. How should local control in schools be exercised, and at what level? What types of decisions should be allowed to be made at the local school or district level, the state level, or the federal level, and about what? The answers to these questions are not always clear.

What then, of a country like the United States? Here, some would argue that learning a language other than English is never needed. However, here we have many children with a diversity of mother tongues, ones whose sounds may never be heard officially in a classroom. We, like India, are a pluricultural country. It is estimated that [22% of people](#) in the United States speak another language at home, a number that has significantly grown in recent years. Language learning, then, is more than pragmatic. It not only has cognitive or economic benefits, but it also can serve to unite, to recognize, to honor and to build understanding, empathy and connections across communities. As a world language teacher, I believe that the recognition of home languages and the teaching of languages other than English, even in predominantly monolingual communities, are both critical components of implementing global education and of building global competence in the United States. Not only will it help our students become better global citizens, but it will help them become better local citizens as well.

Cultural Education:

Much like languages, the idea of how to include cultural education in schools is another important topic in both India and the United States. India's National Education Policy seeks to promote Indian arts, culture and ways of knowing explicitly within the curriculum. We were

fortunate to attend a presentation and workshop with the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT) that showcased India's diversity of art, music and dances. At the Delhi District Institute of Education and Training (DIET) Moti Bagh, we saw future teachers engaged in creating artwork in Waril and Lippan styles and learning about Indian Knowledge System. In schools, classes and hobby clubs focused on art, dance forms such as Kathak and Bharatanatyam, and music are common.



"Art is an international language, understood by all." -quotation on the wall in the art room at Sarvodaya Vidyalaya School

I appreciated seeing how many opportunities students in India often seemed to have within their school day. With shorter class periods overall than many US schools, subjects such as the arts, sports, mindfulness and yoga were built into the school schedule. In addition, even if rehearsed, students seemed to have many public speaking or other opportunities to participate in assemblies, whether grade-level morning assemblies or larger events. Morning assemblies also serve to reinforce values and expectations and to build community. In my opinion, this focus on holistic development is something schools in the United States can learn from India. I look forward to thinking about the ways in which some of these practices might be adapted for my own school's needs and schedule, rather than relying on outside of school time, which can create disparities in who might be able to participate. I was recently encouraged by my school leadership's decision to hire a dance teacher. As a parent at the school where I teach, I think it is an excellent step towards providing all students with additional arts integration. I am excited to see how this addition might spark enthusiasm and help support our learners to grow in new ways.

Final Reflections

Given my own academic background, when traveling, despite noticing obvious differences, I typically look for commonalities. There were differences between the two educational systems, for sure, based in part perhaps on differences between the two countries along the spectrum of

collectivism versus individualism. Things like uniforms, seating arrangements, teaching styles, all things that might be considered more traditional in the US system. However, we might also add safety as a difference in the US, as well as informality and personal expression. However, just as there are differences, I also found much in common: smiles and curiosity, but also peer and parental pressures, a desire for success and well-being, to be recognized and to belong. To be loved.

One could say that India is a country full of differences: different geographies, foods, cultures, religions, languages, peoples. The varied regions and communities in the US, too, have their differences, even if we may seem uniform in certain ways. Both countries' educational systems continue to seek answers to important questions -- Who are we? What defines us? What do we value? What does it mean to be Indian? What does it mean to be from the United States? This constant, ever-evolving and at times contentious construction of identity is inherent in the ways in which we educate our children. Indeed, schools may be the first place other than home where children learn, play, and interact with others. One Fulbright alumna from India I spoke with described schools as being places with "pockets of possibilities." How we think about, care for and shape these possibilities will help define our world. May we all imagine and continue to reimagine them with curiosity, empathy and a sense of responsibility for our communities, both local and global, and for our entire world.