

Culture in Story-Telling: The Case of American and Pakistani Story Pals

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Abstract

In 2016, a Colorado-based American non-profit organization working on providing free education to children living in the slum areas of Sheikhpura, Pakistan initiated a PenPal program between middle-schoolers at a Carbondale community school, a charter school in a middle to upper-class income neighborhood with middle-schoolers at the Sheikhpura non-profit school for underprivileged children. Volunteering with the organizations, the author initiated a co-construct story program between each student pair at the schools as a way to examine how children engage in meaning-making through shared symbols and narrate through their created characters and scenarios the personal experiences of their cultural environments. This paper is a content analysis of the co-constructed stories to highlight themes of sense of self, cultural capital, cultural influences, and conflict resolution in children's narratives.

Keywords: Story-telling, content analysis, cultural influences, self-identity, cultural capital.

Introduction

In Sheikhpura, Pakistan, a Colorado-based non-profit organization working on providing free education to children living in the slum areas ran a free school for underprivileged children. The co-construct story program was started with the aim of creating an opportunity for these students to communicate and make friends with students studying in a completely different country and cultural environment, the Carbondale community school in Colorado, U.S.A. Parents and educators at the American school in turn wished that their children learn with children growing up in other cultures. Students needed to compose their story portions and proof-read them with the help of the teachers in an hour and then wait for students in the other country's school to continue their stories by elaborating on the same protagonists and characters and the setting. Middle school is an important phase in holistically nurturing the academic, professional, personal and social skills of students. The aim of the project was to build students' creative writing skills in English at the

Carbondale community school (hereon noted as CS) and in Urdu, Pakistan's national language, at the Sheikhpura school (hereon noted as SS).

Literature Review

Walton and Davidson (2017) listened to over 3,000 elementary school children tell their experiences through stories as a way to examine how children understand their social world at various developmental stages. The way children describe a scenario, mediate conflict, build relations, find support and resolve crises in stories can provide valuable insight to parents, teachers and researchers on how they absorb various social and personal experiences and negotiate their individual and social selves. This paper presents a content analysis of the stories to highlight how the fantasy characters and scenarios the CS and SS in pairs create highlights the way they absorb their daily life routines and social relations. The paper prioritizes a qualitative content analysis so as to bring out the nuances of identity construction, relations and worldviews of CS and SS students through their stories. The paper adopts a top-down approach by situating the story texts in relation to the cultural influences that shaped each student's contributions, and a bottom-up approach in noting narrative features such as the movement of the story and the turns and twists in plots students continued in each other's stories (Bradford, 2016).

Krueger (2015) notes stories as an important medium for conducting qualitative research as both their structure and emotional aspects provide insight on themes, emotions and the cultural lives of those telling them. He argues that stories, precisely because they are not descriptions bring out constructed ideas of the story-teller and how they hold attention, maintain flow and movement, and progress a story. These elements provide rich insight on the way a story-teller weaves in their memories and individual experiences as they navigate uncertainties and climaxes. The stories middle schoolers wrote in each pair followed the basic structure highlighted by Krueger involving a protagonist, a setting, time and place, a goal and a resolution to the plot or circumstance the protagonist finds themselves in. This paper highlights how the setting, time and place, scenarios and the conflict or crises the story protagonists are involved in and the way they come out of it communicate the CS and SS story-tellers' sense of self and cultural capital and how cultural influences are weaved into character development and post-climax conflict resolution strategies.

Engel (1994) notes that stories that children write provide rich data on the ways they draw on memories of past occurrences and perceptions to make sense of the world from their current age perspective and while being embedded in their sociocultural lives. Thus, children's stories carry a piece of them as narrated through their fictional characters and scenarios. In an extensive content analysis of 87 stories of second graders, Gómez and Maker (2011) found themes that they further compared along gender and ethnicity lines to highlight that amidst vivid descriptions of nature and animals, children stories reveal their own experiences and activities

and their sense of family and relations through their constructed characters. The purpose of this content analysis is to highlight how the CS and SS students made sense of their own cultural memory and displayed adult-like tackling of the world through their story protagonists.

Allen & Lalonde (2015) note that to deconstruct children's stories, it is important to conceptualize children as cultural actors where culture is a "medium through which people act, as well as perspectives that stress the historically based nature of cultures and cultural practices and the developmental competencies that participation in cultural practices affords individuals (p. 71). The paper will present the cultural influences that work themselves into the narratives CS and SS children weaved. Individual enterprise and knowledge of elaborate vocabulary to describe the context of the story setting were part of the development competencies CS students were exposed to in their culture, as reflects in their stories. By the same token, familial familiarity, role of the community, sharing and congeniality were the development competencies culturally important to SS students.

To tap the rich creativity of students, Paley (1990) included storytelling in an elementary classroom to observe meaning-making process in children's narratives. Paley also experimented with collaborative storytelling activities in class which revealed a joint-meaning making process in which students unconsciously began using other students' symbols to construct their ideas. In my reading of the co-constructed storytelling, I noticed a similar borrowing of symbols as CS and SS students with otherwise very different cultural capitals and cultural influences continued each other's character and plot development and descriptions of fantasy worlds, objects and beings, thus showing that the pairing to continue a story engaged students in a meaning-making process that employed the cultural narrative styles and imagery they had absorbed from other students.

In a study conducted on textbook stories taught in American versus Japanese schools, the authors found that stories in the American textbooks highlighted individualism and those in the Japanese textbooks highlighted collectivism (Imada, 2012). In tracing the cultural influences theme, the results of this content analysis reveal how climax points and conflict resolution in the stories are mediated through individual prowess by CS students and through collective negotiation by SS students.

An implicit difference that can be seen in the cultural outlook of the CS and SS is in habitus and cultural capital, concepts famously attributed to Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1990) notes that it is not simply economic capital, but often more importantly the lifestyles, choices and material belongings viz a viz the cultural capital that determines a person's status in society. Habitus (1977), he notes is the embodiment of the cultural capital in an individual. The societal norms an individual is exposed to disposes them to particular choices, practices, value-placing and attitudes. Habitus is at play when an individual is so habitual to certain lifestyles and material belongings that they engage in the next action or decision based on a feel

for it. The concepts of cultural capital and habitus are integral to the content analysis in this paper of children's co-constructed stories.

Methods and Approach

A content analysis of the stories involved deconstructing the story setting, plot, climax and conflict resolution to analyze themes in children's story-writing thought process. The stories of four pairs of middle school students from the CS and SS were analyzed. The student pairs are here onwards noted as follows:

CS A-SS 1
CS B-SS 2
CS C-SS 3
CS D-SS 4

The stories were being written in English by the CS students and were translated by the author in the case of the SS students. Moreover, despite going to public schools, the American standard of living for all CS students was drastically higher than the street children who found a chance to continue their education at the Sheikhpura free school. Therefore, literacy gaps between the sections of the stories sent by the CS versus the SS were substantial, which were not important to the analysis. Similarly, it was taken for granted that the school environment at CS allowed for more instructional and administrative support and a period dedicated to the writing activity, whereas with educational gaps and lack of resources, minimal teacher support and time for SS students who finish school to return to a much physically, mentally and emotionally rigorous life was a given. If analyzed with a quantitative focus on analyzing for vocabulary richness, diversity and literacy levels in the story parts, the SS students' stories may fall short of meeting the CS students' story-writing preparation. That is why the aim was to conduct a qualitative content analysis to deconstruct the imaginative content that both CS and SS students used to learn through mutual story writing.

The way a story is started affects the continuity of it as well as the themes explored. In order to ensure that one side did not dominate the other in the way the imaginary tale traveled, half of the stories were started by Carbondale community school and the other half by Sheikhpura students. The rule students had to follow was that once started, they could not change the story. Each story had to do at least two rounds with the CS students and SS students respectively before being concluded. This encouraged students who felt that they could not relate to the cultural ethos constructed by students in the other country to add more supporting characters, situations and details on a scenario without changing the main plot.

Students enthusiastically participated in the project when they were told they would not be graded on the activity. Whereas for some students, grading is an activity that allows for student efforts to be counted thus making many students want their efforts to be recognized, it is often seen as a judgment on efforts and can induce anxiety and competition to achieve good grades others and steer students away from being creative in an uninhibited manner and building bonds with each other. Rules for participation included not avoidance of mention of political ideologies, figures and judgmental statements about one's upbringing, class, religion and other values. This reinforced for the students that they were co-constructing stories to make friends above all material, cultural and spatial odds.

Results

Stories of the CS and SS student pairs were analyzed along the themes of cultural capital, sense of self, cultural influences and conflict resolution. The personalities of the protagonists, the scenarios and circumstances they found themselves in, the relations they built as they moved to climax points and the ways in which they resolved crises and conflicts in the co-constructed stories revealed the above themes and the contrast between the CS and SS students' sense of these themes based on their respective cultures.

Analysis of Pair CS A-SS1 Story

In this pair story, the CS student notes that a girl moved out of a house where she had her own room with much dresser and wardrobe space. The CS student's contributions are focused on the mysterious stone the girl protagonist leaves behind in her room drawer in the old house that is manifesting in the dreams of those who know about it and making strange things happen.

Cultural capital and sense of self

In the CS student story, it is evident that their cultural capital is much higher than that of the SS. The girl is leaving to move into a bigger house where she immediately tours the house and uses the paint color theme blue therein to choose which would be her personal room.

Habitus is created gradually over time through the performance of the social habits that are considered the norm and valued in one's social environment. The girl in the CS student's story instinctively knows what to do upon arriving in the new house; find a bedroom that will be her own private space. The storyteller's cultural capital is seen in the way they assume that the girl similar to their own life was growing up in an environment where each child had a bedroom to themselves and where rooms were decorated around certain themes to appeal to children.

SS student was unable to relate to the concept of each individual in a family having their own bedrooms in a house. Not only did students at the SS non-profit school did not identify with this cultural capital, they also did not conceive of entire house

rooms being an individual's private space. With extended families being the norm in the SS students' culture, rooms are associated with tasks. Thus, the SS student continued the story by creating a friend of the protagonist that the latter had told about the stone. This friend is then seen calling the protagonist and telling her that she heard many instruments playing inside the stone and that a voice from inside it said that it knew that the protagonist had moved into a blue room and warned that it was a bad decision. The SS continues that from there on a desire to go back and check on the old house became the protagonist's life mission. In this way, the SS student reconnected the CS student's story embedded in much cultural capital back to something more familiar cultural theme to them; returning to one's family (read ancestral) home.

Analysis of Pair CS B-SS2 Story

In the CS B-SS2 pair, the CS student sets the story in a peaceful planet called the Happy Planet with four, rich seasons that is destroyed by a witch. The SS student added to the reason the doomsday scenario was witnessed on the Happy Planet; it was the impact the witch had on people's morality as she made them fight. This encouraged the CS student to continue the story by adding an old woman similar to the witch, but with wisdom warning the people against the witch's ploy. The SS student elaborated on the invisible witch scaring people and informing them of the consequences of turning her in and overpowered and released the old woman with a warning. The CS student drew the story to an end by the evil witch's attack on the old woman and the town's mayor and the two of them in turn overpowering the witch to bring an end to her.

Cultural influences, conflict resolution and identity

Much of what the CS student seems to have absorbed about their current social and political environment comes into descriptions of the mean witch jinxing people because she does not like that they are nice to each other. The CS student notes that an old woman understanding the witch's mission wishes to warn people by going to the town mayor. The mayor was more concerned about running the largest celebration in town, the Day of the Festival and was making announcements about it on the microphone. To get everyone's attention, the old woman grabbed the microphone to warn people. The scene becomes thrilling as people do not believe her and the mayor seeing his microphone snatched says, "Lock her up", grasping her arm. "Lock her up" was a three-beat chant that began at the Republican Party Conventions with supporters of Donald Trump's 2017 presidential candidacy referring to locking the Democratic party candidate, Hilary Clinton up due to misuse of her official email account. It is interesting to see the CS student described the old woman immediately contact the mayor to resolve the witch's ploy of making people mean and the crowd chanting what mirrored the political environment in the United States when the story was written.

The characters in the CS portions of the story carry themselves with a confident, individual sense of self. When the old woman figures out the witch's evil designs, she has a one-on-one encounter with the witch. In the SS student's continuation of the scene the people come together to find a solution to the witch's designs. The witch also addresses people directly telling them that because she does not like that they are nice and kind to each other, she will destroy them, thus making the witch a social problem, rather than an individual character. Later, the witch notes that whosoever comes in her way would go invisible like her, carrying the witch's image as that of a social anomaly that acts unkind, unsocial and mysterious and therefore cannot be seen among regular humans.

SS students not having developed the English style of storytelling with an abstract time and space, a tension point leading to a crisis and the climax followed by a resolution continued the CS students' stories by elaborating on the drama and the sentiment of the scene, but with a focus on people. In the SS student's continuation, the people got scared and started looking for the old woman who had warned them. That is when the witch began speaking to the people and told them that if they tried to find her, they would become invisible like her. The witch made the old woman who warned people unconscious and when she regained consciousness, the witch told her that she is weak and must begin preparing for the funerary rites of the planet as she would be putting an end to all festivals and rites from thereon. SS student's cultural norms speak through their elaboration on the witch's direct connection with the people and elaboration of the planet under the witch going through its funerary rites.

Analysis of Pair CS C-SS 3 Story

In the CS C-SS 3 pair, the CS student starts a lab experiment story where the brains of mice were switched out with those of humans. The SS student continued it to highlight the havoc the mouse caused in the lives of humans because it was still running around like a mouse. The CS student noted that the human with the mouse's brain had not become fully human yet and was out to take revenge from the scientist for locking him up in a lab.

Cultural influences

The CS students' stories in general show much exposure to science fiction and action movies as the student graphically portrays the details of the mouse not fully transformed into a human through a body formed without arms and limbs. In Pair CS C-SS 3, this is evident in exposure to a common American science fiction movie and series plot in which the protagonist is a mad scientist whose desire to invent and become god makes him fall a victim to the catastrophes caused by his own inventions. This influence is seen in a dramatic encounter of the scientist with the ill-formed mouse turned human in which the latter notes being put in a pitiful state by the scientist and that it has found its revenge in creating a brain for the mouse, too

followed by the last scene in which the half-human and the disoriented mouse are managing each other's disabilities through further enabling inventions and having the scientist hire someone to look after them. The CS student spends much time highlighting the graphics of the mouse-turned-human going wrong in morphology elaborating on body parts not being formed. The student's exposure to elaborate facilities available in America for the differently-abled can be seen in the ways in which the half-human and mouse learn to live the way they were created.

The stress on individualism versus collectivism is seen as the student elaborates on the scientist seeing the problem as one related to his invention and not one that breaks the moral and social order of humans. The scientist counters the mistake of the mouse not being quite like the humans by getting a kitty and attaching wheels to it to make it look like a human with legs and then finally giving it a *robo* suit to make it look like human without accentuating the fact that it isn't quite one. The cultural influence of the SS student can be seen in where they continue the scene after a mouse has been turned human and vice versa. Eating together is an important ice breaker in Pakistan and inviting a new acquaintance to eat with everyone is a way to make them part of the family. The storyteller notes that the humans seeing the new member in their community (the mouse) invited him to eat communally with everyone.

Conflict resolution strategies

Overall, conflict resolution through kindness and the restoration of the moral order seems to be important to the SS student. After the mouse and human experiment, the student noted that the scientists were happy that the experiment was successful and that they could contribute to many such accomplishments in the future. When around humans, the mouse couldn't stop being himself and began eating like a mouse, the SS student elaborated that the scientist decides to give it a chance since it is new to being human. The scientist brings the mouse in, but it begins to act like a mouse and causes havoc in the house, particularly in the kitchen. Similar to sharing food and hospitality, kitchen is a very important part of cultural life. Rats and mice are referred to by the same word and not unsurprisingly, the mention of rats signifies plague and disease which continue to affect the lower classes and is an unpleasant mention since sleeping in the open air is the norm. Where it is disastrous to see a rat near the kitchen, it is a social taboo to bring food into other parts of the house and near sleeping spaces. Thus, as the SS student continues the CS student's story, he turns the mouse/rat in the house story into a neighborhood problem. An old man visits the scientist to tell him, "Son, your friend has entered my house without permission and has turned it upside down" and continues to note that "the whole neighborhood is mad at you!". The student's narrative highlights him creating a culturally familiar scenario. An old man has high respect in SS student's culture and the old man in turn calling the scientist son points to a common practice in the public sphere for people to use kinship terms to make requests in a respectful

manner. The old man communicated the disaster to the scientist by telling him that the rat has turned the bedroom space in his house into a kitchen, a statement enough to indicate end of life to the scientist. Conflict resolution is also seen by the SS student showing that the scientist communicated the old man's concern to his team who run around everywhere trying to catch the mouse.

Analysis of Pair CS D-SS4 Story

The story, started by the CS in CS D-SS4 pair, notes an encounter between a lost man and a friendly machine, a robot that speaks like humans. The machine relays to him that he is the last human left and all humans have been picked up by evil machines and locked away in captivity. The robot is willing to help him the man if he follows him. During the journey that follows, the lost man makes friends with a dog and they find themselves captured just like the other humans until a action sequence between humans and the evil robots in the robot kingdom leads to humans reigning supreme.

Cultural capital

The exposure to popular dystopic movies is clear in the CS pieces of the story. CS begins by painting a scenario where there are trees everywhere, it is green and the birds are chirping, but a man is lost about his whereabouts. The friendly machine informs the man that the evil machines captured and put away all humans and took over earth. It sets the plot for what the good use of machines and the personal enterprise of the human must do to not get the last human captured.

As the CS student elaborates on the journey from meeting the friendly machine to being captured by the evil robots, the point that robots are only functional if humans dig for oil to fuel them is done occurs several times. Cars are an important material possession in America and are attached to independence and individuality. Private cars as opposed to public transportation are maintained with great care and seen as synonymous with survival. Thus, the high importance placed on earning to keep the gas tank filled. The CS student's story parts highlight that robots may become as intelligent as they can and think that they can dominate over humans, but they are ultimately dependent on human brains used in digging for oil to fuel them. Even as the lost man and his dog friend are later captured, the robots reduce humans to slavery to continue digging oil for them. This is the climax point at which the robots start snatching each others' fuel tankers to stay alive and the friendly robot tells other robots that it is better to free humans for there would be no functioning robots if there were no humans in the robot kingdom. Such elaborations were not continued by the SS student as they could not relate to them. The student was advised by the teacher to continue other aspects of the lost man's journey.

Cultural influences

Pets in general and dogs in particular are considered as part of the family, like other humans and never as stray animals as in the SS student's culture. The CS student left

the story at the juncture where the lost human rides on the friendly robot to get to a safe place. Cultural influence can be seen as the next thing the two do is camp out. Camping is a chosen pastime for middle class Americans who would otherwise not be exposed to being outdoors, interacting with nature and cooking and sleeping outside as opposed to their routine temperature-controlled dwellings. The SS student could not continue this theme as camping does not evoke excitement, but destitution and homelessness in Pakistan. It was not an adventurous activity the routines of which the SS student could contribute to and therefore the SS student continued the plot by adding details on what happened when the lost human and machine woke up in the morning. They woke up to a stray dog staring at them amazed that a human and machine have made friends.

Sense of self

The SS student notes that the machine being friendly kindly asked the dog of its whereabouts and the dog noted that he lives in the jungle with his family. Conversations between protagonist and supporting characters and the evocation of family is a recurring theme in the SS students and highlights their cultural upbringing in extended family setups developing a collective sense of self-introduction.

The lost man in CS student's story parts being the only one to have escaped captivity before meeting the friendly machine is seen helping himself. The individual sense of self is highlighted as he does not miss seeing other humans around, but is making tough decisions to survive in a prehistoric hominoid fashion. "He looked around for something, anything that might help him survive in the gorgeous, yet still foreboding landscape. It was only mid-day, but the man knew when it got dark, it would get cold". Later CS notes, "Grabbing a large stone and sharp pebble, he scratched away until the rock had a fairl sharp edge. Next he found some strong reeds and made a rope-like material, he then chopped a strong stick off of a tree and tied everything together, creating an axe. He chopped down a few trees, he felt bad, but he knew he had to."

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to present the content analysis of stories co-constructed by middle schoolers (CS) participating in a cross-cultural friendship program in a charter public school in Carbondale, Colorado, USA and middle schoolers at a non-profit free school for underprivileged students in Sheikhpura, Pakistan (SS). By examining the scenarios, character-development, plot twists, climax and conflict resolution in stories co-constructed by each CS and SS pair, the enculturation, cultural capital, cultural sensibilities, exposures, cultural value systems, sense of self and sense of others' identities of paired students in each country are revealed. Critical content analysis of children's stories provides important insight on children's personal, cultural and global exposures. A qualitative analysis can provide

not only a high internal validity, but also a high external validity as it is replicable. The cultural capital of students paired at the American public school in a middle class neighborhood and at a non-profit school for underprivileged children in Pakistan was vastly different and so were the cultural influences.

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