Chapter 2

The Jamaican Corner in a Virginian Classroom: Constructing an ESL Place-Based Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

A Jamaican teacher recruited to teach English in Virginia, USA reconstructed her childhood and adolescent experiences, which had nurtured sensitivity towards place and space in her own acquisition and learning of English. This sensitivity to place and space later gained pedagogical significance as she recognized that she had to reckon not only with geographical distance from her homeland but the cultural divide in her classroom with Hispanic and Chinese students who spoke mono-syllabic English and the American students who faced challenges with her Standard Jamaican English accent. There was, however, one thing that everyone in this multi-cultural classroom had in common: the concept “Bob Marley.” This thirst for more information about the Jamaican Reggae icon gave birth to the Jamaican Corner. From this corner, the students and their teacher, the researcher, navigated cultural borders through language and developed respect for the cultural diversity in their classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

The Seeds of Place-Based Pedagogy

There was a special chair in our living room. It hugged my little four-year old body when I curled up in it with a book. When it was my turn to read to the family, I sat in it and it became a big stage with lights. I was not afraid. I read, recited and rejoiced when I was applauded. I learnt very early that there were power and magic in places that were special. That living room chair took me anywhere I wanted to be. It was a place that allowed me to be me or whatever I wanted to be. It was a place from where I could enter the world of books.

A place-based pedagogy in teaching English perhaps got seeds from those childhood experiences, which awakened this consciousness that social experiences impact how one learns to learn and how one teaches himself/herself to teach. These dispositions are at the heart of the search for pedagogy which began with the search for and the ownership of space. Space took on pedagogic significance in my post graduate year at the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. My baccalaureate was in English, but I pursued a post graduate diploma in History. The class I was assigned to teach on my teaching practicum did not like history. I never allowed my students to know that I had no love for History myself. I did not let them know how much I longed for the comfort that knowledge of an old and well-known space brings. Instead, I used what I knew and loved. (English) to teach History. I used poetry to recreate the social contexts of whatever period in history we studied. That was when I saw a complete change in my students. They were eager to learn simply because it really did not feel like History. It felt like the subject, they could all relate to—English.

Appropriating Pedagogy: Making the Strange Familiar

What were the seeds that were sown in this dialogue with an American immigration officer who blew a strong wind of discouragement and was lost for words when I stood as firm as a Jamaican coconut tree?

Oh, you are going to teach in Virginia! I wish you luck! These kids here are not the easiest to handle!

Don’t worry! I am Jamaican!

There were some key things that emerged from this dialogue that were central to the understanding of the philosophy and principles that underpinned the pedagogy of a room of my own that defined a place-based pedagogy: daring to teach; celebrating
The Spelling Gap in English: Economy of Rules and Resolution of Puzzles
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