THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: A LITERACY NARRATIVE ACROSS GENERATIONS

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> Literacy is not simply a technical and neutral skill, but is imbued…with deep cultural meanings about identity both personal and collective. (Street, 1994: 20)

1. Introduction

In order to understand the particular issues defined in the context of Armenian literacy as well as my research study, it is important to make the historical connection and look at the historical context, albeit extremely briefly. In this section I will present short glimpses on two main events in the history of the Armenian people, which have had a major impact in creating, shaping, and maintaining the Armenian identity and through it, attitudes towards literacy. These two historical events are about 1500 years apart.

1.1. The alphabet

In the years 404-406 A.D., Mesrop Mashtots, a court scribe turned priest and scholar, created the Armenian alphabet. Born of humble origins in 362 A.D. in the village of Hatsekats in the Taron province, Mashtots rose to saintly rank, because of his visionary deed. His tomb in the village of Oshakan, in the republic of Armenia today is still a very popular shrine. The invention of the alphabet is considered nothing short of a leap of historical and political vision. Prior to the fifth century, Armenians had used a variety of scripts for communication and the country had a rich oral tradition. In the days of Mashtots, the kingdom of Armenia was effectively partitioned by the eastern and western regional powers of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Both the Armenian king, Vramshapuh, as well as the catholicos Sahak Partev, realized that the Armenian language itself could be the unifying factor needed. They asked Mashtots who was already a revered scholar, to set out to research and invent the alphabet (Bournoutian, 1993: 69-72). And thus history was

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made… Upon his triumphant return with 36 letters in hand, Mashtots with the continued support of the king and the catholicos, set out to open schools together with his students, to teach and to translate books. The written word took another power and meaning. Oral culture could now have permanence. The students of Mashtots became equally renowned scholars and opened their own schools. A large number of books were translated and written in a relatively short period. The fifth century came to be known as the golden age of literature in Armenian history. To this day, a special feast of the holy translators is celebrated in the nation's churches in the month of October. From this point on in history, books, writing, and the preservation of identity through language, took another meaning.

Armenian has 36 original letters in its alphabet. Classical Armenian used in church liturgy today forms the basis of modern Armenian. All 36 letters bear different sounds. With the outgrowing of various regional dialects two major directions took shape over the centuries –Eastern and Western Armenian. Western Armenian gradually lost the nuances of the pronunciations in its various consonants, while Eastern Armenian continues to retain them. To add more complications, Eastern Armenian underwent yet another transformation, something that has caused a rift between the two dialects, linguistically, politically and socially. In the 1920-s, in an effort to modernize the language, a number of new orthographies were tried out in the republic of Armenia, until one of them was considered the best and imposed through the education system. This of course meant a total upheaval in the system. Linguists, philologists, writers, poets, intellectuals were caught taking sides. To this day, this is considered one of the major issues, dividing the nation along very sensitive yet rigid lines, raking up emotions, creating havoc on a multitude of layers, historically, politically, socially, linguistically.

After Armenia gained its independence in 1991, the question of orthography in Eastern Armenian gained prominence again. It is still a contested and highly debated problem, with both diasporan Armenians and a growing number of local intellectuals pressing for a return to the classical roots. Even though no official stance is taken on the subject by the government, a number of official and scholarly publications thrive in the classical orthography within the republic of Armenia today.

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1.2. The genocide

The Armenian genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Turks from 1915-1922, is probably the single most seminal historical event in the recent history of the Armenian people. April 24 is the national genocide commemoration day. It marks the day all the intellectuals, politicians, writers, artists, were systematically rounded up, arrested, and sent off on a death march, to be executed a few months later. I will not go into any historical details here or issues of denial and revisionism that still plague this traumatic event. For Armenians though, this page in history and the issue of survival, created a new sense of urgency in safeguarding our identity, a concept that is enmeshed in the language/culture continuum as well as its duality. Concern for the loss of language, and thus the heritage, became of utmost importance. Even though there have been Armenian diasporan communities around the world since ancient times, the word diaspora now carries another layer of meaning. It signifies dispersion, displacement, loss, survival, integration, fear of assimilation, struggle. Nor are diasporan communities homogenous in any sense. We now talk of diasporas within diasporas, based on different immigration waves, countries of birth origin, Eastern and Western Armenian dialect usage, etc.

1.3. Meanings of "literacy"

The word literacy [*gragitutyun*] in Armenian is not used in the same sense as the English one. It is meant to only signify the elementary deciphering/decoding of the language, nothing more. Interestingly the word literate [*graget*] in Armenian refers specifically to established writers/authors. However, the words "language" [*lezu*] and "culture" [*mshakuyt*] are always used to talk about the preservation and continuity of the heritage. They are the two ingredients especially important for conserving the Armenian identity [*hayapahpanum*], most essentially in the diasporan contexts. Lately, a new word is put more and more into circulation [*hayakertum*], to indicate the active role of creating and constructing identity, as opposed to the more passive conserving aspect.

2. The study

A Discovery

It was our morning ritual.

I am a little girl, with waist-long curly hair, sitting on a small chair on the balcony. My mother is sitting next to me. She has a small tin plate on her knees, with little pieces of bread and apricot jam in it. We wave my brother goodbye as he leaves on the bus to school. My mother's soothing voice tells some magical story about a magical land, while the little pieces of bread and apricot jam vanish quickly.

The glass-paned wooden doors of the balcony leading to the living room are wide open. The sun has rushed in, flooding all corners. The bright rays of light play joyfully on the tiled floor. I am now sitting on the green sofa. My feet barely reach the edge. Everything is bathed in sunshine around me, including my mother's jet black hair. A book is open on my lap. I pour intently over it. My mother's arm embraces my shoulders. I watch as the ant scurries softly to safety under a tiny white-spotted red mushroom, to protect itself from the large and heavy raindrops of the thunderstorm. My mother's voice rings out and I look in wonder as the rooster, the sparrow, the squirrel, the rabbit, even the wolf hurry under the shelter of the ever-growing mushroom. Finally, the sun breaks out of the clouds. The animals, the birds, the insect all emerge from under the mushroom and look amazed at how tall it has grown with the rain. The sun shines on a small water puddle while the rabbit jumps in joy. I am still jumping around the puddle with the rabbit when my mother's voice grows still. I look up. I cannot believe the story has ended. I flip the pages back and forth, back and forth. I want to know all about the person who could make this mushroom grow bigger and bigger and bigger. My gaze rests on the first left-hand side page of the book. There is a curious pencil sketch of a man, a paintbrush in his left hand, a pen in his right. One hand is writing on a sheet of paper, the other is drawing a mushroom. All around him are sketches of rabbits, roosters, squirrels, wolves. I look in awe at this pencil-sketched person who could, through my mother's voice, make my book come alive.

Years pass. My magical book, my talisman is lost –probably passed on to my cousins. In my preteens, my mother surprises me one day with a new copy of my mystical childhood book. It was as if I had found a long lost friend. That is also when I make the discovery that the book was translated from Russian into English and retold to me in Armenian by my mother…

2.1. The saturday literacy group

For a long time, I reflected on the very different heritage language contexts and practices I grew up in back in Lebanon, compared to the children in our immediate circle. A major concern I always had observing them, was how Armenian was losing its functionality as a language. As a child, my first encounters in reading were in Armenian. That is what shaped my reality and thinking at a crucial formative age. I noticed that with the children in our circle, even though they were exposed to Armenian books from a very

early age, they were less likely to pick up a book in Armenian on their own and read it. They had no problem doing that in French or English. The issue intrigued and needless to say, disturbed me. It also became one of the major motivating forces to explore our collective literacy experiences across the generations. Eventually what began as a personal "experiment" and a quest, evolved into a research study.

When I first started planning the Saturday literacy group sessions in the summer of 2000, it was very far from my mind to also consider it as a research site. The sessions were primarily to be conducted within a very private circle, initially for my nephew and the two daughters of my friend. The idea for a reading and writing workshop in Armenian germinated after endless family talks on the poor state of Armenian Language Arts instruction in the different Heritage Language day schools the children attended. To a large extent, these discussions bordered on feelings of frustration, helplessness, and most of all an underlying concern that Armenian is not a language of reading, writing, dreaming, being for the children. My personal observations as an educator in the Armenian heritage language school system for twelve years, had indicated that the pedagogical methodology involved in the instruction of Armenian Language Arts in the Heritage Language schools, was seeped in very traditional modes, mostly bordering on rote memorization and drill exercises. Even though the oral literacy was adequate, however the reading and writing suffered the most. The teaching and learning of Armenian was not perceived either as functional or engaging in any way. As concerned family members, we felt that the Heritage Language schools did not fulfill their function in this respect. Our main objective was to make the Saturday meetings fun sessions, where we read, write, discuss about issues, come up with fun projects, and do it all in Armenian. The plan then was to provide creative, alternative avenues for the promotion of Armenian literacy.

2.2. The participants

2.2.1. The children

At the time the sessions were conducted, Daron[2] (my nephew) was nine years old and in grade 4. He attended one of the three Armenian Heritage Language day schools in

[2] The names of all the children are altered for confidentiality purposes.

Montreal, where I have taught for a number of years. Arevig is a month younger than Daron. She, together with her younger sister, attended another Armenian Heritage Language day school. Arevig was also in grade 4 at the time of the study. The third participant Arin, Arevig's younger sister, was seven years old and was in grade 3.

I have known both Arevig and Arin from their early childhood, through family and personal ties. All three children are very good friends, even though they attend different schools. They go scouting together once a week and their parents visit one another regularly. In both families, Western Armenian is the main language spoken at home. (In both cases the families have emigrated to Canada from the Middle East.) For all three of the children it is their first language and mother tongue. There is also a marked understanding in both families of the importance of nurturing and preserving the cultural heritage, especially through the language. Books and reading are an important aspect of that in both cases. The primary language of instruction in the schools the children attend is French. English is also taught from grade one. All three children are trilingual.

After meeting regularly every Saturday for six months, a fourth participant, the daughter of friends who shared similar concerns, joined our intimate circle. Talar was seven years old. She had attended an Armenian Heritage Language day school for a year. Her parents however had made a decision to pull her out of the Heritage Language setting at an early stage. She then attended a mainstream French public school. Since both her parents have originally emigrated from Armenia, Talar speaks the Eastern dialect of Armenian. Her father was concerned that ever since she had been out of Armenian school, she had started to forget the Armenian alphabet. Even though the parents speak only Armenian at home, Talar preferred to use French. Since her maternal grandmother's mother tongue is Russian, in fact, Talar effectively glides in and out of four languages.

Before Talar's arrival the main language of interaction in our small circle was in Western Armenian. Since I strongly believe that the children should not regard Eastern Armenian as an "other" or "foreign" language, I have always tried to include it in as many ways as possible. Talar's arrival changed the group dynamics naturally. The children immediately started using all the Eastern Armenian they knew, sometimes coming up with a beautiful funny mix of a language, in their efforts to make Talar feel more at ease. To

help Talar integrate into the group and feel confident enough not to resort to French or English, I also started speaking mostly Eastern Armenian during the sessions. Arevig was the first to go as far as experimenting with Eastern Armenian in her response journal. Arin soon followed suit and wrote a whole entry in Eastern Armenian. Towards the end of the year, all the children had tried to include Eastern Armenian in various forms in their literacy explorations.

2.2.2. The adults

I was the main person to plan and conduct all the sessions. Apart from myself, two people were involved at various stages of the planning and implementation phases. Hermig is the mother of Arevig and Arin. She is a close friend, herself an educator and Armenian Language Arts teacher for some years at one of the Montreal Armenian Heritage Language day schools. Since the sessions took place in the basement of their home, she would participate as regularly as she could manage. She was also instrumental in all the planning stages of all the sessions. Diane is a friend, an educator, a colleague both at the school where I taught, as well as in the Heritage Language Group (HLG) at the Faculty of Education, McGill University. Since she was a close friend and knew the children very well, she sometimes attended and participated in some of the sessions. She also helped plan especially the beginning sessions, and was instrumental in videotaping some of them. A third person, Armig, again a friend, colleague as well as a member of the HLG, is referred to by the children in their writing sometimes. They knew her well and deduced she must somehow be involved in our literacy activities as well.

2.3. The site

Together with the children, we set up a special "dedicated" corner in the basement of Arevig's and Arin's house, to conduct our Saturday meetings. Over the course of several months, the corner underwent some changes. In the beginning, a small sponge mattress covered with a spread together with some cushions acted as an improvised sofa. Later this was replaced by two wooden framed sofas, which were both more comfortable and provided a better seating arrangement. We had a large wooden table that we used as a common working area. A bookshelf was transformed to a writing materials corner. We

stocked that corner with a varied assortment of pens, pencils, different writing utensils, paper, and art material of all colours, shapes and sizes. We also had a small bulletin board and a special filing box, complete with individually named folders. The children loved the box. After each session, they would file all their papers, drawings, notes, sketches in their own folders.

We met over the course of nine months, every Saturday afternoon, for at least 3-4 hours. We tended to be flexible and never kept strict hours. I started audiotaping our sessions as of February 2001. I have also videotaped two special sessions on genocide survivor narratives. During the very first session, on October 7, 2000, after we explained to the children the purpose of our sessions, we asked them to create their own scrapbooks to be used later as response journals. I kept a response journal in Armenian as well together with the children and responded to their entries on the spot, whenever they asked me to. Diane and Hermig also kept an Armenian response journal, although they used it at more irregular intervals. Apart from the journal, I also kept a session log to keep track of the activities of each session as well as a reflective field journal.

2.4. The sessions

This is how Arin responded in her journal on our "inaugural" day[3].

> My beautiful Hourig, I started liking this idea, because I like getting together this way and having fun. I wanted to ask you how you thought of this and it is a very good idea to read books and to write about them…
>
> (Arin, Response journal –Oct. 7 '00)

In general, we structured the sessions loosely around a reading and writing response framework. We started each session with a discussion on a particular topic, usually based on a subject of interest to the children. Whenever possible, I tried to link the topic to the reading activity that followed. After a discussion of our responses to the reading, we wrapped up with writing in our response journals. Eventually, the activities became more complex, with the addition of various writing events in different genres ranging from poetry to story writing; explorations in oral history; mini-research projects in areas of

[3] All quotations from the children's writings are translated into English. Italics are used to denote words that originally appear in English in the journals.

interest to the children, etc. The limited scope of this paper however, will only permit me to give you a small glimpse into the words and world the children created.

The children were particularly entranced by our series of sessions on poetry reading and sensory visualization activities. These in turn later led to intense poetry writing sessions. In one of our introductory sessions, Daron expressed his joy of reading poetry thus

> Today was a very happy day for me, because Hourig and Hermig read us two books as a gift for us. Today the thing that impressed me most was book reading. I liked the story of "Akhtamar"[4] the best. And now it's our break time. *Yoopy*!!! (Daron, Response journal – March 17, '01)

My reflections on a subsequent session are equally revealing. The children were in this instance completely caught by the spell of poetry.

> As I was reading "Parvana"[5] it was as if magic unfolded. Daron came and huddled right next to me. A few moments later Arin came and sat on my other side. They were both actually getting into the book! Then Arevig rose and sat across from us, next to Hermig. There was a look of total engulfment on her face. Daron started murmuring some of the words with me. Next, Arin was voicing the words. They were all literally hanging by the words I was uttering, the words I was reading. Daron and Arin took turns in turning the pages for me. I felt I was playing an instrument and they were turning the notes. It was all so beautiful. The moment we all enjoyed. The moment we all lived and shared together in Toumanian's beautiful poetry. The next wave of amazement came when they read the date at the end of the poem – 1902. "99 years ago," exclaimed Daron. "In a year it would be 100 years this was written," said Arin. "One century…" said Daron again. Toumanian had us all under his magic spell. (Hourig, Reflective journal – March 31 '01)

It was fascinating to see how the children were trying to make meaning out of the idea of the timelessness of poetry. At yet another deeper level, they had made connection with their collective heritage through the genre of poetry. Language had begun to unfold its magical mystery for them.

On another occasion, while I was away on a working trip to Armenia, the children continued the sessions under the guidance of Hermig and Diane. All three of us had spent

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[4] *Akhtamar* is a classic folk legend rendered to poetry by one of the best known classic children's authors, Hovhannes Toumanian (1869-1923), at the turn of the 20th century. We read the poem in its original Eastern Armenian.

[5] *Parvana* is a lyrical poem based on a popular legend written by Hovhannes Toumanian as well. See previous footnote for more details.

time beforehand planning the sessions, so that the children would not be affected by my absence. On one such Saturday, I placed a long-distance phone call from Armenia through an Internet service, to talk to the children. The ensuing conversation amid wild and cheerful shouts of surprise is one I will remember for a long time. The children kept interrupting one another to tell me a surprise was on its way to me through cyberspace. A short while after the conversation an email with an attachment was waiting for me in my inbox. Hermig wrote,

> We had a truly very interesting session, we read "soudlig vorsgan" and "jayn ou chghchigue"[6].. and everything took off from there. The kids were yelling to make their ideas be heard, virtually couldn't contain themselves, you can read the result of their efforts for yourself, and let us know of your assessment. We enjoyed it as much as they did. And you should see the long entries that they wrote in their scrap-books. And Daron is still writing, but I have to go… Diane has to go… (email from Hermig, November 4 '00)

The attachment contained a piece of collective writing, making use of the same humourous genre as one of the tales ("The tall-tale telling hunter") the children had read and responded to during that session. In this particular case, the author Hovhannes Toumanian made clever use of exaggerated contrastive images to build up an extremely humourous tale of an improbable hunting escapade. In their version, the children recounted their adventures before and during the session.

> And we laughed wholeheartedly
> Then we thought, Hourig will be reading this letter we have written…
>
> Today we had a very good day, although bad
> The sun shone brightly, although covered by clouds
> Diane and Daron went roaming, got lost, although found in the end
> They arrived at our house immediately, but we said – FINALLY
> Didn't get to read the books you chose, but ended laughing wholeheartedly
> We neglected Ananian, and gobbled up Toumanian[7],
> Armig couldn't come, she left her home and went south,
> Daron said, "Is she a bird to migrate south?"

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[6] *Soudlig Vorsgan* (The tall-tale telling hunter) and *Jayn ou Chghchigue* (The albatross and the bat) are humourous popular folk tales written by Hovhannes Toumanian.

[7] The children refer to the two Armenian authors Vakhtang Ananian and Hovhannes Toumanian. Vakhtang Ananian (1905-1980) was a well-known author in Armenia who has written both fiction and non-fiction books on themes of nature and particularly the animal kingdom. In my initial planning I had made provision for a reading activity based on Ananian's stories.

Hourig we didn't miss you, but in reality we did a lot
In body you're in Yerevan[8]
In spirit you're in our house
We got tired of writing
Come back soon so we can get finished with it!
(email attachment, November 4, '00)

On my return, I had a chance to read the entries in the children's response journals for that day. Daron's entry contained a never ending flow of events

> Today I had a very good and funny day, because Arevig, Arin, Hermig, Diane and I wrote a very long and funny letter to Hourig and sent it to her by email. I thought they [Arevig, Arin, Hermig and Diane] were doing this group work without me these past two weeks and when I came I found out and was very happy that they thought of me and didn't do the group work [without me]. We [came up] with the ideas all together and this letter was born from one of the stories [we read] and I was very surprised that this many ideas came out of one story and that story is "the tall-tale telling hunter". This big concept came out of a small story, can you believe it? Diane and I were late today, because we roamed around DDO[9] a bit. I mean, if we had gone a bit more, we would have reached St. Laurent[10] and be lost for an hour. And when we got back on Lake [street] and saw, "what is this? Is there a Lake A and Lake B?" and then said, "we must have the wrong place." The real problem was that as we were talking, we missed Roger Pillon[11] [street] and I forgot what title we gave the letter. Then we thought Hourig will be reading this letter.
>
> (Daron Response journal – November 4 '00)

By juxtaposing "big concept" with "small story", Daron stresses his amazement at how so many ideas and responses can germinate from one single source. There is a sense of wonder in his discovery and a tacit understanding I believe, that the knowledge collectively and creatively constructed is their own. His entry seems to have no ending since according to the email as well, Daron had kept on writing and writing. His "stream of consciousness" retelling of events is abruptly cut halfway, since again according to the email, Diane who was his ride back home, had to leave.

In her response journal, Arin had chosen to respond in English that day.

Diane,

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[8] Yerevan is the capital city of Armenia.

[9] DDO is the acronym for Dollard des Ormeaux, a suburb of the city of Montreal, where the houses of Arevig, Arin and Daron are located.

[10] St. Laurent is the adjacent town to DDO, again in the city of Montreal. It is where my apartment is located.

[11] The main street off which the house of Arevig and Arin is located.

> I love the way you treat us. I love youre ideas. I will write secret message and youl have too answer.
> (Secret Message)
> Answer: "I love to be here!" (Arin, Response journal – November 4 '00)

Her entry was completely directed to Diane. Once, Diane had mentioned that she read Armenian slowly and with a bit of difficulty. In the middle of her page Arin had devised a secret code to write her secret message for Diane. The code was entirely made up of a set of imaginary characters. Underneath, the secret message was written. Below it in parenthesis, the words "secret message" appeared. On the bottom left hand side of the page was an additional key on how to decipher the code –each set of characters divided by a comma was to be read as a single word. On the bottom right hand side was the answer, written upside down. I was fascinated by Arin's imagination as well as her choice of voice and subtle negotiation of multilingual literacies in this short entry.

Arevig had an equally long entry as Daron.

> Today mom read us from Hovhannes Toumanian's tales. We wrote the most *hilarious* letter to Hourig anyone could have written. *By the way*, we spoke to Hourig on the phone. We had a great time today. Diane and Daron got lost when they were coming to our place. Apparently there is a Lake A and Lake B [street]. I have to say that Diane's hair and car are very beautiful. Hourig, Diane and mom have not made their scrapbooks yet. There are still two weeks for Hourig to come back from Armenia. Diane said that when she's going to write something, she always thinks about it first, then corrects her mistakes. And that is how we wrote the letter that we will be sending to Armenia for Hourig. Mom has forgotten how to type in Arasan [armenian font] so it took us a long time to type the letter and get finished with it. When we talked with Hourig, we had to shout, because the sound was not clear.
>
> (Arevig, Response journal – November 4 '00)

In her response, Arevig revealed a crucial strategy they used in writing their collective piece. Through Diane's subtle guidance, the children thought of creating, shaping and crafting their ideas first, before being tied down by the mechanics. At the bottom of her page she had two heart drawings with inscriptions inside. The first read "writing in my scrapbook", and the other "I love you Diane". On the opposite page she had drawn a big heart, half of which had the globe inside. I found that an especially moving metaphor for the invisible binding ties we all created that day, literally crisscrossing the globe, through the power of literacy.

3. Where does it all lead?

A family fable

He had only one box of matches.

My grandfather was an orphaned boy who had witnessed his younger brother lashed. He had watched his mother's eyes wither, her lips parched with thirst. He had looked in horror as they sold his sister to save her life. He had seen his father crumple into a lifeless heap, unable to bear the pain. He had held his grandmother's gaze, as she desperately held on to her last breath.

He had walked in the desert sands. He had stared death in the eyes and searched for its soul. He had sought hope and defied life. He had walked in the desert sands and survived.

The orphanage was his haven now. A roof, a cot, a bowl of food, a dry piece of bread, and a box of matches. Those were the gifts an orphan had.

"You were given only one box. We used them to learn the alphabet. We had no pencils, no notebooks. Just matches. Every morning we took them out of the box. Counted them. Then learned to line them in different shapes. Ayp – 5 matches. Pen – 5 matches. Kim – 6 matches[12]. There were never enough matches to learn all 36 letters in a row. How we guarded our match boxes. It was all we had."

I watch my grandfather's hands trace the shapes of the letters with invisible matches in the air. His voice stumbles. I listen to his silence.

His only possession was a box of matches.

My grandfather's story is not unique. Armenian genocide survivor narratives invariably refer to stories of mothers teaching the alphabet to their children by tracing the letters in the desert sands. That is the archetypal story of survival. The legacy it carries across generations sometimes feels like a burden, at other times a driving force. My, as well as countless other parents' and educators' concern for the preservation, transmission, and promotion of literacy are no doubt coloured by the resonance of these stories.

Hodge & Jones (2000: 303-304) argue that when a research study is carried out in a collaborative democratic model, where the researcher and researched in fact are co-researchers, then the researcher becomes a learner rather than an expert. This was truly what happened to me. What transpired from these sessions was fascinating. Time and time again, during and after the sessions, I realized that my view of "competency" in the Armenian language, or literacy in general, was challenged by the children. The real answer

[12] Ayp, pen and kim are the first three letters of the Armenian alphabet.

to my concerns was that they created, shaped, constructed their own knowledge of what the language should be for them.

I have come to realize that this case study became as much about myself as it was about the children who were involved in it. The more I looked into the children's words and texts, the more I understood I was watching through a looking glass. The insider/outsider stance was ever present, sometimes a blessing, at other times feeling like a curse. I was not a mere observer during these Saturday sessions. I was very much a participant. I spent endless hours planning for it. I created the space, both physical and emotional, for the children to express themselves. Through our coming together in that space, I also tried hard to weave my narrative of our collective experiences. After twelve years of teaching in Armenian schools (both in the Saturday and day school settings), coming across frustrations resulting from too traditional a pedagogical mindset within the school framework, these Saturday literacy group sessions finally became a nurturing place for me as well. I must admit – My main motivation to initiate these sessions was a deep-seated anxiety. I was scared. Scared that Armenian as a language, would lose its functionality for these children. Scared that they would never find out for themselves the beauty of a culture the language carries in its hidden recesses. Looking back at our collective experience now however, I see that I have learned to believe again a viable alternative is possible for the acquisition and learning of the heritage language; that nurturing creativity and responding to the texts the children create is an important facet in that learning process; and that learning and creating should not be disassociated from one another, but rather act as one whole.

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