Sudarshan Srirangapatanam  
EDUC 140AC  
GSI: John Scott

**Becoming an American Student**

I was born and raised in India, a country which has taught me everything that I am today. Things I learned during my childhood are very special to me, whether it be my primary language [Kannada], Indian traditions, Hindu rituals, or the academics ranging from languages to sciences, since they together contribute to my primary discourses. My childhood was labeled to be very mischievous, in India that’s what they call a guy who fools around a lot and doesn’t take academics seriously, and always outgoing. One common complaint my mom had was that I never stay around the house, I was always out with my friends. Even though I wasn’t serious about my academics, I was passing my classes, purely because of my memory. When asked a question I had an answer but only outside the school. This wasn’t the case for all my subjects, though, I greatly struggled in Hindi [language], English and Social, which was comprised of geography, history and politics.

One important thing to note about the classes, in India, was that they all took place in one room. Meaning, we stayed in one place from the moment we entered till we exited the building, weekdays started at 9 AM and ended at 4 PM. A typical school day in India, for me at least, started by waking up early in the morning at around seven, getting ready with a clean uniform, breakfast, and a lunch box. My mom was supposed to start around the same time for her work, and I would present her my school journal to sign. School journal had a list all homework assignments and was to be signed every day by a parent upon verifying that they are done, this was the first thing teachers checked in school and without the sign we got punished. My intelligent plan was that in asking her to sign in a hurry, she wouldn’t ask me to show my completed assignments, which I wouldn’t have done to begin with. After completing my first hurdle I biked to my school with a heavy book bag, about 20 pounds, attached to the back of the bicycle. Around 9 AM, we [students] were supposed to make a line on the playground for prayer and physical education teacher walked around the ground watching students one by one. He would ask some students to step aside and I was recognized, every day, along with other students. Students called aside were punished for many reasons ranging from not having a tie to not polishing shoes. In the classroom, all of us were supposed to arrange our lunch bags in a corner and take our seats. Girls and boys, usually, sat in different rows and each row consisted of a long bench and a long desk. As we waited for our first teacher, we were required to sit quietly and one student, a teachers’ pet, was responsible for noting names of the students who broke the rule. Of many names, I would find mine at the very beginning, which meant that I was supposed to stand to the side of the room for a whole duration of the class, about an hour. During the class I and my friends, fellow peers who were also punished, stood right next to a window staring outside, watching buses and cars pass by. After a while, the teacher would surprisingly allow us to sit and then the whole cycle repeated until the lunch. During the lunch, we were to eat and do anything that pleases us, but, quietly. I and my friends happily roamed the whole school and return when it was time for our next class. Later that day, during sports, I would team up with my friends against my enemies, teachers’ pets, to take revenge. At around four we were getting dismissed and I would quickly bike home, with the same 20-pound bag and get ready to go out with friends and get back home right before my mom returned from work.

Schooling in India was very special to me since it allowed me to enjoy every day of my life, and to some, it might seem unconventional. As Paulo Freire notes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “banking concept of education” doesn’t promote a good teacher-student relationship and inhibits learning. Due to my action in my school, I was mediating this concept of oppressed learning. This was especially evident considering my progress reports, my scores throughout an academic year for Hindi was about 70 percent but my score in Kannada was just above 95 percent. In using schooling as additional time for my social interactions and learning only what I felt was interesting, I was equipping myself with “problem-posing learning” which Freire would consider as the most efficient form of learning. Even though I wasn’t consciously learning, I was acquiring knowledge in school. This distinction is very important to note, according to James Gee, acquiring is the process of learning unconsciously which makes the information more readily available and learning is the process of conscious learning. When I was watching busses pass by I was unconsciously involved in the learning environment, and, therefore, acquired the topic.

November 2009 is the most memorable month of my life, it was during this month when I moved to the U.S. On the second of the month I and my mom were packing our stuff and I was given 1 cargo and 1 cabin bag to fit all of my stuff. I filled up my cabin baggage with my clothes and in my cargo bag, I placed books which I felt were interesting, puzzles, and a cricket bat. My gifts, awards and certificates were in my cargo bag as well, and the rest of the bag was filled with things my mother deemed necessary. I, my mom, and my grandmother left to the airport later than night and got our boarding passes at the ticketing center, my grandmother was traveling with us. Our flight was from Bangalore [BLR] to Chicago [ORD] with a connection at Frankfurt, Germany since it was through Lufthansa airlines. As I boarded the flight I was getting more and more excited since it was my first time traveling in air. As the flight took off, I looked through the window to see all of the buildings, lights and roads shrinking in size. We arrived in Chicago on the third of the month, and upon arrival I and my mom had to go through a long immigration process and my grandmother had to go through visitor process. During the immigration process, I and my mom had to wait for about an hour, after which an immigration officer approached us to take our fingerprints. The whole process took about two hours during which I and my mom observed the social interactions people were having. We saw a few people talking and couldn’t follow their conversation since we were both literate in British English and not American.

Upon exiting the airport, my uncle was there to pick us up. As we went in his car I looked out the window to see large flyovers and clean pavements to the side of the road. My uncle had brought me a banana which I eat and lowered the window, my uncle immediately asked me to stop. I was about to throw the banana peels out of the window, and he told me that here in the U.S we would be fined if we littered. We reached his house after about an hour of driving and I slept as soon as we reached his house because of the jetlag. After about a week in his house, all three of us [I, my mom and my grandmother] flew to Tampa, FL, where my dad worked. When I first arrived at the airport, my dad, my maternal uncle, and my dad’s manager were there to receive us, we were very happy to see them at the airport and they congratulated us. We opened our bags the next day and cleaned up the house, we also had a computer at home which I had to setup. It took us about a week to settle in, on the 19th of the November, we went to our regional middle school, named Pierce, to talk about the admission process. They asked us to provide certain documentation and took me to Mr. David and Mr. Peak, math and science teachers at the school. Both teachers asked me a few questions and told the counselor that I’ll have to take a test before they could join me in their classes since they had already passed first nine weeks. The admission office notified me and my parents about this and asked us to return the next day with some additional documents and told me that I’ll have to take a couple of tests, to which I reluctantly agreed. I was enjoying the break and didn’t want to return to school that quick.

It was about 9 AM on the 20th of the November when I and my parents reached the front office of the school. My guidance counselor said that she would meet us at 9:30 and we decided to be early, as we waited for her in the office the fire alarm went off. We had no idea what was going on and we just followed others around us, after we came back inside the counselor said that she would take me and told my parents to come back at 3 to pick me up. When I met my counselor I asked her about the fire and she explained that it was part of a drill and told me the plan for the day. The plan was to first take my math test and then lunch, then a science test and an English language speaking/listening test. I sat in Mr. David’s classroom to take my first test and after completing the test he sent me with one of his students to the guidance counselor. The counselor then took me to lunch and asked me to pick whatever I wanted to have for lunch. I hesitated a little and told her, “I forgot to bring money”, and she replied that I didn’t have to pay anything since I qualified for free lunch. We then went to Mr. Peak’s classroom to take a science test, I vaguely remember the test, but know for sure it was an easy one. I was able to finish the whole test in about 30 minutes, in fact before I could finish my lunch. My counselor asked me if I wanted to take a break, but I refused it and told her I was ready for the next test. After finishing the English test we selected my classes; the core classes were selected by the school and I was given two electives, I decided to go with physical education and animation design. At the end of the day, my counselor told me that the process was complete and I didn’t have to come on Monday. I was shocked for a moment, thinking that I must have failed the tests, I was extremely scared. I immediately clarified my doubt, terrified about the reply, and she told it was the week of thanksgiving. I was relieved and enjoyed another week of break, perfectly what I was waiting for.

My schooling experience in the U.S was very different to that of schooling in India. My first day of school started with Mr. David which went easy since I knew the things they were teaching me. This was probably due to the disparity in the academic year of India and U.S, Indian schools academically are three months ahead. My second class was physical education and this class stunned me the most, the students were very disrespectful to the teachers and also very rude to other students. Some even tried to bully me, luckily I stayed close to a teacher at all times giving them no chance to bully me. As I started to get hold of the day I found myself in American History class and it was then when I decided to take studying seriously. The whole experience was very embarrassing to me since I couldn’t understand the language the teacher used in the class. Even though I knew it was English a part of me told me that it wasn’t, purely because I couldn’t admit that I did not know English. I started to cry in the classroom which was even more embarrassing, but the teacher was very nice. He stood next to me and gently asked me what the problem was and I explained to him in my thick Indian accent, “I cannot understand you, could you please write on the board.” I wasn’t sure if the teacher understood me, it was as if I was on another planet. The teacher all of a sudden started to write on the board and it was a huge relief, I knew that I could read English but couldn’t understand its spoken form in certain situations. My last class of the day was English and it was right next door to my history class, after that previous experience I was very scared to step inside the classroom. But my teacher Mr. Weiss assured me that he wouldn’t ask me any question during the instruction and that provided me with some confidence. Over the next few months, I sat in a corner watching people talk in both of these classes. Trying to understand as much as I could and to see how they interacted with each other. This was the first time in my life when I was fully immersed in an English environment and I wasn’t prepared for it.

Mr. Weiss [my English teacher] slowly started to talk to me about my difficulties and asked me who my favorite teacher was. I told him, without any hesitation, that it was Mr. Peak; he was my favorite simply because he always covered for me. One day in his class I used the word “thrice” and students just started to laugh, he quickly reacted saying that “thrice” is the most appropriate word for the context and the laughter was gone. Mr. Weiss told me that since he was my favorite teacher it was better if I communicate with others through him. Mr. Weiss was of a great support to bring my English skills up by providing me practice. He asked me to write anything and everything to bring my writing skills up. He also assured me that this would compensate for my grade in the class and that was a great confidence booster. Vygotsky, in this case, would argue that Mr. Weiss acted as a mentor who assessed my actual development level and established a plan to target my ZOPD to ultimately help improve my development. He was constantly advising me on grammar and spelling, admitting that I was right but I would have to adjust to new vocabulary. One common spelling error I did was using “colour” instead of “color”. He also used a scaffold in assisting me with practice including practice in speaking, listening and writing. This development was easily observable in my social interactions and my academic progress.

Within an academic year my FCAT, Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, scores went from a 2 to a 3 in reading. Towards the end of the year, I was having normal conversations with my peers at lunch table as well as in my classes. I was no longer scared of either my History or English teachers and they too became my “favorite”. All credit for my success and achievement in obtaining new discourses goes to my middle school teachers and my Indian science and math teachers. As Fillmore notes in her works, my ability to have normal and long conversations with my peers and teachers showed mastery of new material. This mastery, however, represented BICS [communicational] mastery and not necessarily CALP [academic] mastery. In order to become completely literate in new frontiers of my life, I must master both BICS and CALP. The discourses I learnt and acquired in India were of great help to me in assisting me to master CALP since they equipped me with tools to show my intelligence. In expressing my superiority in math and science I was able to respect from my peers as a more knowledgeable peer, and this contributed to a sense of power within the student community, especially when other students came to me for help. In becoming academically literate along with other students I was equal to them, but my lack of certain social discourses and English knowledge made me feel inferior to them. In using my previous academic discourses and superimposing them onto the newer ones, I was able to compensate for the inferiority with the respect I received. My primary and secondary discourses from India became a cornerstone for my development. They provided me with support to stay focused and motivated over a year of difficult times and finally helped both, directly and indirectly, to gain additional discourses and become literate as an American student.

The fact that I go to the world’s top Public University [Berkeley], that I am an American Citizen, that I am able to write a story about myself, that I am pursuing my interests all make me feel very proud of myself. The fact that my life started about nineteen years ago in a small hospital in a small town called Tumkur, and today I live a comfortable life on the west coast in a completely different country, about eight and a half thousand miles away, is unbelievable. And throughout my life, my primary discourses have been my support, motivation, and power. They have helped me gain new knowledge, master new discourses, and have helped me build on my experiences day by day. I hope and believe they will continue to do so in future, just as they did in making me a literate *American Student*