

## The Imagined Communities of English Language Learners in a Pakistani School

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This article reports a 2001–2002 study conducted among middle-school students in Karachi, Pakistan, in the wake of 9/11. In the context of their involvement in a global community-building project, in which students sought to develop the literacy and English skills of a group of Afghan refugees, students were asked to reflect on their perceptions of literacy and the English language, as well as their hopes for the future. Students saw the development of literacy, competence in English, and technological advances in the future as desirable and interdependent. They imagined a future society in which Pakistan was peaceful, true to the principles of Islam, and a contributing member of the international community. The authors suggest that the students' imagined communities are best understood with reference to a "politics of location" (Canagarajah, 1999) in which the English language coexists with vernacular languages, and local needs are balanced against global imperatives. In such a context, imagined communities are multiple and identities hybrid. The authors conclude that the challenge for educators is to harness our own imaginations in the pursuit of a peaceful and just global community.

Keywords: imagined communities, English education, Pakistan, globalization

A society is nothing but our attitude towards each other. (Zaib, Pakistani girl)

The word society is taken from the Arabic language. It means a group of people living together to promote their common interest. Society also means fellowship or companionship. We can say in short that society is a "web of relationships." (Mohammed, Pakistani boy)

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Zaib and Mohammed<sup>1</sup> are two 13-year-old children attending school in the teeming city of Karachi, Pakistan. Both children are participating in a global project that aims to encourage the development of community amongst children internationally. In the quotations, Zaib and Mohammed are reflecting on the kind of society they hope to have in the year 2020. As they grapple with their hopes for the future, they need to confront the very notion of what is meant by "society." Both Zaib and Mohammed have insightful conceptions of the way societies are organized, drawing on their understanding of the webs of relationships, common interests, and social attitudes that characterize human relationships in diverse communities.

Zaib and Mohammed know all too well what happens to society when these webs of relationships break down, when division occurs, and when attitudes are harsh and uncompromising. In the wake of 9/11, when the United States of America was attacked, and an international force retaliated against their neighbouring country, Afghanistan, they have seen refugees pouring into the city of Karachi; they have experienced temporary school closures; and they have witnessed a region in turmoil. This political strife was not of their making, yet they are part of the "collateral damage" of international politics. In such a context, what are their hopes for the future? And how is their educational experience implicated in the community they desire for themselves? We address these two broad questions in this article. In the following sections, we provide the theoretical framework for our article, outline our study and research questions, and then discuss our findings.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In his seminal work, *Teaching Against the Grain*, Simon (1992) makes the case that imagination plays a crucial role in determining what kind of future is worth struggling for. He draws the distinction between "wishes," in which there is no possibility for action, and "hope," in which action becomes central in the fulfillment of desire. As an educator, he considers the classroom and the school important sites of human possibility, because it is in the classroom where teachers and students struggle over social and cultural values. Thus, for Simon, teachers need to ask, consistently, how our practices relate to anticipated visions of community life. This focus on the future necessitates a consideration of the role of imagination in learning and teaching. Such imagination needs to be responsive to the situated histories and desires of both learners and teachers, acknowledging that human possibility takes seriously the ways in which desires for the future are informed by events and reconstructions of the past.

Theories of imagination and learning are developed more fully by Wenger (1998), who focuses on the relationship between imagination and identity. Extending notions of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), Wenger argues that

the imagination serves as a link between attempts to engage with practice, on the one hand, and align ourselves with broader enterprises, on the other. Thus, in Wenger's view, imagination is process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves (p. 176). It is this conception of imagination that Norton (2001) extends to her work on second language learning, focusing in particular on the relationship between imagination and investment in communities of practice. Drawing on data from her study of immigrant women in Canada (Norton, 2000), Norton (2001) makes the case that when language learners begin a program of instruction, they may be invested in communities that extend beyond the four walls of the classroom. If the language teacher does not validate these imagined communities of the learner, students may resist participation in learning. The central point she makes is that a learner's imagined community invites an imagined identity, and a learner's investment in the target language must be understood within this context.

In this study, we wish to extend the work of Simon (1992), Wenger (1998), and Norton (2001) to incorporate the central insights of Anderson (1991), whose conception of the nation as an "imagined community" has been influential in debates on globalization, identity, and education. Robertson (1992), for example, draws on Anderson to make the case that not only the nation but also the world has become an imagined community. Such an imagined community, Robertson argues, is characterized by interconnectedness as well as a "global consciousness" (p. 183) that carries reflexive connotations. Such views are echoed by scholars such as Block and Cameron (2002), Burbules and Torres (2000), Hannerz (1996), and May (2001), who make the case that as identities become more hybrid and nation-states increasingly plural, many citizens no longer identify with one imagined community. At the same time, however, Robertson argues that the economic and political divisions of the world have relegated Muslim countries, as well as many developing countries, to secondary status as far as major economic forces are concerned.

Rassool (1999), similarly, extends Anderson's work to make the case that transnational centers of power, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, redefined the concept of national political accountability and extended governance beyond the nation-state. Under these conditions, the will of the people, the individual, and the international community do not necessarily coincide. She argues, however, that one salutary effect of globalization is the free flow of information on the Internet, which can undermine national censorship and create new social movements organized around minority-group interests. As Canagarajah's (1999) research suggests, minority groups such as the Tamils in Sri Lanka have become highly astute at using technology to further struggles for self-determination. Pakistani school children, we argue, are only too aware of their nation's marginal status in the world, and regard technology as providing crucial access to a larger imagined community.



## THE STUDY

Zaib and Mohammed are participating in a project begun at a more hopeful time in their school experience. The project, called the Youth Millennium Project (YMP), is a global initiative of the University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada and was motivated by research that suggests youth often feel powerless in the face of global events, believing that they have little contribution to make to social change (see [www.ympworld.org](http://www.ympworld.org)). The goal of the project is to provide youth with the opportunity to build self-confidence and community by creating a local plan of action that addresses a larger social issue. Local plans of action can be large or small, and include groups of students approximately 11 to 14 years of age. The YMP began in 1999 and currently comprises over 10,000 young people in 80 countries internationally. Schools learn of the project via diverse means. In Sri Lanka, for example, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Colombo distributed information about the project to high school principals, some of whom passed on the message to the United Nations clubs in their schools. If there is interest in the project, schools register with the YMP at UBC, and are linked with three other schools internationally. At the conclusion of the project, students submit reports on their activities to a YMP coordinator at UBC. Thus the YMP seeks to encourage community-building within and across national boundaries.

Bonny Norton met Farah Kamal while visiting schools in Pakistan in October 2000. Because we share an interest in literacy and social change, we considered the YMP an ideal opportunity for collaborative research (see Kamal & Norton, 2002). Thus, in March 2001, when the YMP was implemented in Zaib and Mohammed's school, which we have called Model Elementary School, we decided to conduct research on the ways in which students responded to this community-building opportunity. The larger study was conducted with 40 boys and 40 girls approximately 12 to 13 years of age. The research sample also included four teachers of language and social studies, as well as the head of the language department and the head of social studies. The research study was thus conducted concurrently with the implementation of the YMP and was carried out in three stages, each of which had a particular focus. In the first stage, March to May 2001, we collected data from all 80 students and gained insight into their experiences with the YMP; in October to November 2001, we focused on data from 26 students (13 girls, 13 boys) who were asked to reflect on their perceptions of literacy and the English language; and in February, 2002, we invited the participation of 20 students (10 girls, 10 boys), who provided insight into the kind of society they hoped to have in 2020. Some of the participants in the third stage of the research also participated in the second stage. Data were collected with questionnaires, interviews, and observations. Most of the on-site data was collected by Kamal, while Norton communicated with participants on e-mail.

At Model Elementary, a private school that includes children of both low and middle-income families, English is the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, in the classrooms we visited, children could be heard conversing in both Urdu and English during small-group work, and on the playground, Urdu was regularly heard alongside English. In response to a question directed to all the students at the beginning of the study, "In what language do you prefer expressing your thoughts and opinions?" 1 indicated Urdu, 5 indicated English, and 66 indicated both Urdu and English. When asked to comment on their responses, most students noted that the expression of ideas is the paramount goal, and that they switched from one language to another as the need arose. As one said, "Conveying my opinion is more important so when I think I am not doing it well in English I quickly switch to Urdu." In a similar vein, another noted, "We prefer speaking in both the languages switching from one to another to make ourselves clear." There seemed to be general agreement that "both these languages are impressive and can convey opinions, thoughts and ideas to people."

In the first stage of the research, from March to May 2001, we focused on the local plan of action that the students had implemented. Calling themselves "The Reformers," the students developed and implemented a plan to promote literacy amongst a group of Afghan refugee children in a local orphanage. They were successful in providing the Afghan children with a range of literacy material, including pencils, paper, and books, the latter of which were all written in English. The students planned to follow up on this project in September 2001. As they indicated in a report sent to coordinators at UBC in June 2001,

Our next YMP action plan is an extension of this plan during which we again focus on literacy. But this time, we plan to organize English speaking classes for the same group of children in the "Afghan Orphanage." We will conduct 15 classes of 2 hours each during which we will teach these students simple English phrases, used for daily life communication. We will take up this project in the 2nd Term beginning September 2001.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the political turmoil post 9/11, however, the students were unable to fully implement their action plan with the Afghan refugee children.

It was the data collected in the second and third stages of the research that gave us particular insight into the students' hopes for the future, and the ways in which their educational experience was implicated in the community they desired for themselves in the future. Norton addressed the first two questions to the students in an e-mail exchange; the third question was distributed by Kamal in the school. Responses to each question, which were all given in English, are addressed, respectively, in each of the three subsections of the "Findings and Analysis" section:

*Question 1:* I think it is very interesting that although you had considered a number of action plans dealing with social issues, the one that you decided to implement was about literacy. I have no doubt that your efforts to help the Afghan refugee children in your community were very welcome. I have a number of questions about this project. Why did you decide to focus on literacy? Why do you think literacy is important? How can children become literate?

*Question 2:* You said in your student report that your next step would be to help the Afghan children learn some simple English phrases. Why did you choose this as the next step?

*Question 3:* During the course of your involvement in the Youth Millennium Project, you have thought a lot about the society in which you live, and how you can address some of the educational and social challenges you have identified. As we reach the conclusion of this project, we would like you to write a paragraph describing the kind of society you would like to have in the year 2020. Explain how people will communicate in this society, both within Pakistan and the international community. Feel free to use your imagination.

## FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### Imagining a Literate Community

As children debated the social challenges their society confronted, they recognized the importance of literacy within their community. The fact that they chose a literacy project above all other possible action plans in the YMP provides strong support for this view. Most would agree with Maham's statement that "literacy is important for every field of life because when a person is literate he or she will be successful in their life." The children had many insights about the importance of literacy in the wider community, and a number of themes reemerged in the data. Significantly, the students held the view that literacy is not only about reading and writing, but also about education more broadly. "The word literate is known as to educate," said Samira, while Salma, similarly, noted that "the worldly meaning of literacy is educated or having education." Other students, however, extended this view to include the notion that a literate person has greater ability to reason than one who is illiterate. Shahid, for example, noted that a literate person "can make better decisions" than an illiterate person, while Kamran noted that "if we are not literate we cannot do any work with thinking." The comment by Fariha perhaps summarizes best the views of many of the students:



Literacy is very important because education gives understanding to people. The thinking of an educated person is different and he thinks properly about his country and people. An uneducated person thinks differently. He thinks of taking revenge and fighting with their enemies, but an educated person wants to solve big problems and settle their dispute of territories by arranging dialogues. They realize and analyze the situation and an illiterate person does not have this ability.

Although many students focused on the meaning of literacy for individual members of a community, other students focused on the importance of literacy for the development of a nation. "Literacy plays a vital role in the progress of a country" said Saman, while Nida noted passionately that "without education our beloved country Pakistan cannot develop." Indeed, Samira was of the opinion that "the person who is illiterate doesn't have any respect for his own country." The development of a country, students noted, lies in the education of children, "the stars of their countries." Thus an investment in the education of children is an investment in the future.

Many students attributed the disparity between developed and developing countries to literacy practices, noting, in particular, the literacy challenges that Pakistan faces: "The literacy rate in our country is much less than well-developed countries," said Rubina. Others made the case that high levels of literacy give a country a competitive edge in international politics. Shahid, for example, noted that "if a nation didn't raise its literacy it can't compete with other nations and it can't maintain independence." Many students agreed that developed countries are powerful because people in developed countries are literate. As Ahmed said, "We know that in developed countries everyone is educated and goes to school. That is why they are rich and have no problems."

Students recognized, however, that resources—what Nida called "funds and donations"—are needed to promote literacy in a country, and they offered many suggestions as to how resources could be shared to promote literacy in the broader society. "The most important thing," said Javed, "is that the people who are already literate should give free tuition and support to poor people." Fariha, similarly, noted that if children are unable to pay school fees, "we can educate them by opening schools in which they will not have to pay the fees. Tahira reported on a conversation she had with a person she called a childlabour, who had requested the provision of night school:

I spoke to a childlabour about education. They said that their parents are not able to earn enough in order to survive. ... "If any one will open night school for us we will get education, because we are not free in the morning and afternoon."

*Comment.* In his recent work on literacy and development, Street (2001) makes the case that if literacy projects and programs are to be effective in diverse regions of the world, researchers need to understand the uses and meanings of literacy practices to local people themselves. In the developing world, in particular, he notes that development workers need to understand what counts as learning and education, and who has the right to define what education is. His own research in Iran provides convincing evidence that people perceived to be "illiterate" backward villagers" (2001, p. 6) are engaged in diverse literacy practices, whether in traditional Quaranic schools or in the local fruit market. The consequences of ignoring or negating local experiences can have dire consequences. As Street notes,

Even though in the long run many local people do want to change their literacy practices and take on board some of those associated with Western or urban society, a crude imposition of the latter that marginalizes and denies local experience is likely to alienate even those who were initially motivated. (p. 7)

It is interesting to note to what extent the students' perceptions of literacy are consistent with current conceptions of literacy in Western academia. Like many contemporary theorists of literacy (see Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000; Heath, 1983; Luke, 1997) the students take the position that literacy requires more than an understanding of isolated symbols and discrete texts; they perceive literacy as associated with social and educational practices. Further, like Street (2001, p. 7), they recognize that "the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity, being."

In this regard, Samina's view that that "the person who is illiterate doesn't have any respect for his own country" requires further analysis. Given Anderson's (1991, p. 6) conception of the nation as an "imagined community" in which members of even the smallest nation don't meet or know most of the members of the nation, it is intriguing to consider the ways in which literacy practices, in general, and education, more specifically, serve to "invent" the nation. Indeed, Anderson makes the point that "print-capitalism ... made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (p. 36). Our data support the view that literacy is associated with nation-building, and that students were acutely aware that the very idea of "beloved Pakistan" was constructed through literacy practices in schools and in the wider community.

Significantly, however, students were also eager to use literacy to build relationships across nations, and imagined a global community in which nations can relate to one another on more equitable terms than currently exists. In this view, literacy would not only develop Pakistan, but also enable Pakistan to connect more democratically with other nations, thereby promoting greater international stability, and



reducing the isolation of Pakistan. Such views suggest that the relationship between literacy and community-building is perhaps even more profound than what Anderson (1991) had predicted, transcending national boundaries, and emerging in a variety of ways.

### Imagining English as a Language of Possibility

Like notions of literacy, the students' responses to the importance of English were complex and can be summarized in a number of related themes about the perceived usefulness of English, both locally and internationally. In seeking to teach the Afghan children "some simple English phrases," students were motivated by the belief that English is an international language and the language of science, technology, and the media. As Shahida said,

The English language is an international language spoken all over the world and it is the language of science. Therefore to promote their education and awareness with modern technologies, it is important to teach them English.

Students noted that knowledge of English would enable the Afghan children to communicate directly with people all over the world, without the help of translators, and to explain to the wider community how much they had suffered. As Fariha noted,

English is the language spoken commonly. This language is understood throughout the world. If the Afghan children learn English, know English, speak English, they will be able to discuss their problems with the people of the world.

Students such as Jamshed also noted that English serves as a common language not only across nations, but also within nations:

We choose this as our next step because English is the international and global media language and most of the Afghan immigrants do not know English and have no particular language to communicate with local people. Therefore we choose this as the next step so they can communicate with local people.

Further, it is knowledge of English, students believed, that would redress imbalances between developed and developing nations. As Salma said,

The world is not at all really aware of the problems faced by the people living not only in third world countries but also in far away nations due to lack of knowledge about their culture, and about their language.

Finally, many students noted that knowledge of English gives people access to resources that will give them greater opportunity in life. Fariha noted for example that with English, "Afghan children will be able to get admission in schools." Further, knowledge of English would help the Afghan children develop their country when they return to Afghanistan. "If every citizen of the nation could take one step towards their betterment, they could follow the path of knowledge and success instead of the gun," said Zaib.

*Comment.* With only a few exceptions, the students demonstrated little ambivalence toward the English language and perceived it as an important tool for social, economic, and political advancement, both within Pakistan and in the international community. When students were pressed to consider whether the spread of English had any negative consequences, only two students noted that a country's native languages could be compromised, and only one noted that the spread of English would be accompanied by the spread of Western culture, "a bad sign." Such a positive evaluation of English needs to be understood against the backdrop of a substantial body of literature which suggests the spread of English is a form of Western imperialism, implicated in the loss of local and minority languages (Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Tollefson, 1991). An emerging body of research by scholars such as Canagarajah (1999), May (2001), and Brutt-Griffler (2002), takes up the challenge of earlier studies and helps to explain why English remains the lingua franca of the students' imagined communities.

In his recent work, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism* (1999), Canagarajah provides a number of important insights about the experiences of students living in what are sometimes called "periphery" communities—postcolonial communities that speak English as the first or dominant language or have acquired English alongside one or more local languages. Such countries would include those of India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Barbados, and Nigeria. Drawing on the work of postcolonial scholars, such as hooks (1989, 1990) and Said (1979, 1993), he argues that a particular "politics of location" (hooks, 1989) provides for a different understanding of the spread of English than that dominant in Western academia: "Just as center resistance is grounded in the social practice and cultural concerns of center communities, periphery thinking has to be shaped by its own location" (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 35). He suggests that a number of Western academics who have investigated the effects of the global spread of English have been paralyzed by dichotomizing perspectives that frame debates about English—arguing for and against English; for and against the vernacular (p. 3). He suggests, in contrast, that people can engage favorably with both English and the vernacular, and that people in marginalized communities have the human agency to think critically about their options and to work out ideological alternatives that promote their own empowerment. Further, in arguing for what he calls the "resistance perspective," Canagarajah makes the case that both English and vernacular languages are suffi-

ciently heterogeneous for diverse groups to make them serve their own purposes, and enable subjects to rise above their domination (p. 2).

May (2001), like Canagarajah (1999), argues that debates on the spread of English should be centrally concerned with the extent to which English is promoted at the expense of other languages in the public realm. By way of example, May cites the case of the English-only movement in the United States, which he describes as a deliberate attempt to marginalize other languages in the country. Our research suggests that the students at Model Elementary, although favorably disposed toward English, still had high regard for Urdu, and had no difficulty codeswitching between Urdu and English, as the need arose. Brutt-Griffler (2002), further, makes the case that those who equate the spread of English with linguistic imperialism may overlook what she understands as a more essential element, which is the desire of diverse nations to link to the world at large. This desire, she suggests, should not be confused with attempts to link with the United States or the United Kingdom, exclusively.

Clearly, the persistence of English in Pakistan is partly explained by Pakistan's geopolitical isolation. Pakistanis, like the Tamils in Canagarajah's (1999) study, have struggled for international connection and recognition, and have used English to reach out to international media, connect with the diaspora community, and communicate with hotlines and electronic mail. Pakistanis, like Tamils, have a powerful neighbor, India, which is not sympathetic to its interests; it has another neighbor, Afghanistan, that has been politically unstable for decades; and it has a government that has been struggling for legitimacy in a skeptical international community. Under these conditions, English provides Pakistanis with the opportunity to remain socially, economically, and politically connected—not only to the United States and United Kingdom—but to the wider international community.

### Imagining a Global Future

It was intriguing to gain a glimpse of the kind of society these middle-school students desired for themselves in the year 2020. Although we asked students what kind of community they hoped to have in the future, many students also expressed reservations about what the future might hold. One dominant theme addressed issues of globalization in relationship to technology; another concerned the Islamic religion.

Most of the students think—and hope—that the society of the year 2020 will be technologically advanced so that people can connect more easily with one another both nationally and internationally. Indeed, for most of the students in the study, literacy, the English language, and technology were seen to be highly desirable and interdependent. The following comments from Shabbir reflect the comments of many of the students:

Everything will be so easily done that the inhabitants of any place won't have any difficulties in communication, both within the country and internationally.



Internet and e-mail at that time would be considered very minor facilities. ...  
The world would become so close that we won't feel any distance.

Nevertheless, although many students saw technology as a desirable feature of their imagined communities, others had reservations about scientific inventions and information technology. While Bassam, for example, noted that "the reserves of atomic weapons will increase which could destroy the earth," Azra noted that "the society will be well developed in terms of inventions but human beings will be separated from each other and will have different paths."

Globalization, in the students' imagined communities, necessitated a reassessment of the way people in the future would relate to one another. Students looked forward to a time when people would work cooperatively in teams, share resources, and live in peace. As Amna noted, "there will be more peace-loving, understanding people, and societies of Pakistan and of other countries will have unity and justice." Students like Saman suggested further that many countries will emerge from isolation and become a more integral part of the global community: "Not only Pakistan but countries of the world also will cooperate and unite with each other through giving up the policy of isolation." Greater unity, Bassam noted, would lead to greater peace: "Countries and nations of the world would come closer to each other due to modern and latest transport and technology. This would result in better understanding and less wars and conflicts."

The imagined community of many of the students was also one in which the principles of Islam were an integral part of day-to-day living. Some students envisioned a perfect Islamic society in which people would be more humane and would contribute to the development of their country. Nida wrote of the "three golden principles given by the Quaid-E-Azam [the founder of the nation]. Unity gives nation strength to face its enemies. No civilized society can exist and progress without discipline and nothing can be achieved without faith." Saima, in addition, noted as follows:

I would like to see an Islamic society where children respect old people, and older people love children. In an Islamic society where the ruler is full of justice and a kind man. A ruler who listens to everyone and follows good principles. A ruler who is not favouring his friends and relatives. There should be respect for women who live within the boundaries of Islam.

*Comment.* As they envision the year 2020, the students at Model Elementary do not predict the "withering away of the nation" (Hannerz, 1996, p. 81); they do not foresee the demise of Pakistani cultural practices; they do not anticipate a society in which local languages have no value. Rather, their imagined community is one in which the needs of the local are balanced against the imperatives of the global. The students noted, in particular, the ways in which global technologies

might enhance connection between people of diverse backgrounds and histories. Their central vision was one of hope.

Block and Cameron (2002, p. 5) note, however, that the jury is still out with regard to the effects of globalization on the world community, with one view equating globalization with Western imperialism, and another suggesting that globalization destabilizes the old order, offering new possibilities to previously marginalized groups. What is clear, they argue, is that the nation-state still continues to exert a significant influence on the lives of its inhabitants, and that language and education remain important areas of national policy. In this view, global developments, particularly in the economic sphere, are seen to put national interests at stake, and hence demand a national response. At the same time, the work of Kubota (2002) in Japan, Harris, Leung, and Rampton (2002) in England, and Heller (2002) in Canada, suggest that globalization reframes our conception of "the nation" and the role of language in defining it. As suggested earlier, the imagined community conceptualized by Anderson (1991) is made more complex by patterns of migration, changing demographics, and communication technologies.

The children at Model Elementary also expressed the hope that their society of the future would be a peaceful one in which the principles of Islam would be valued and respected. The students' investments in Islam, and their identities as Muslims were considered of paramount importance. In this regard, as Brutt-Griffler (2002, p. 175) argues, religious affiliation does not necessarily coincide with the nation-state. Islam, like Christianity and Buddhism, spans different nations across the globe. Further, Canagarajah (1999, p. 61) notes that when English took root in Tamil society in the 19th century, it was religion, and not language, that was central to ethnolinguistic consciousness. Thus in the Saivite revivalist movement, Tamils were encouraged to acquire English and Western scholarship, provided they continued to be Saivites. Given this perspective, it is interesting—although not surprising—to note that the future community desired by the students in our study was an Islamic one. Although these children had no difficulty finding a place for English within their imagined communities, they did not associate English with religious practices dominant in the West. Like Tamils in Sri Lanka, who maintained their Saivitian identity while learning English, these students had no difficulty acquiring English without sacrificing their identity as Muslims.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this study, students were given the opportunity to reimagine their community in a time of social and political instability. In Simon's (1992) and Wenger's (1998) formulation, the students did not only wish for change, but also harnessed their

imaginations to develop a project that could make a difference in the lives of community members. They also took the opportunity to envision the kind of society they would find desirable in the year 2020. Such an imagined community was one perceived to be literate, knowledgeable about English, and technologically advanced. It was a peaceful society, true to the principles of Islam, and respected in the international community. We have argued that the struggle for literacy, access to English, and technological progress are interdependent, and reflect the desire of a country in a postcolonial world to engage with the international community from a position of strength rather than weakness. We have sought to understand the students' investments in English from a geopolitical and historical perspective, and have suggested that the appropriation of English does not necessarily compromise identities structured on the grounds of linguistic or religious affiliation. Our data suggest that English and the vernacular can coexist in mutually productive ways and that the "politics of location" (Canagarajah, 1999) are important considerations in the social imaginary.

We conclude with an observation about conceptions of literacy held by both scholars and students. Like Canagarajah (1999) and Luke (in press), we take the position that if we wish to understand the meaning of literacy in the students' imagined communities, we cannot ignore the imperatives of the material world and the ways in which resources are distributed—not only nationally, but also internationally. Canagarajah (1999) makes a compelling case that in periphery contexts in which there is a daily struggle for food, clothing, shelter, and safety, "a diet of linguistic guerilla warfare, textual resistance, and micro-politics will not suffice" (p. 34). Luke (in press), similarly, argues that while we as educators might debate the meaning of critical literacy, we may not do justice to the lived experiences of physical and material deprivation in diverse communities throughout the globe. The students in the study made frequent reference to the relationship between literacy, the distribution of resources, and international inequities. For these students, an imagined community that is literate, skilled in English, and technologically advanced is also a community that has food, shelter, and peace.

However, it is of some concern that students might overestimate the benefits that can accrue from the development of literacy and the spread of English. Ahmed's assessment, for example, that people who are educated "are rich and have no problems" may lead to a crisis of expectations. Further, May (2001) made a convincing argument that there is no correlation between the adoption of English by developing countries, and greater economic well-being. Of even greater concern is the ways in which pedagogical and social practices may be serving, perhaps inadvertently, to reinforce the view held by the students that people who are literate are more rational and intellectually able than those who are not literate. If students in Pakistan, and perhaps in other parts of the world, equate literacy with rationality and intellectual ability, while at the same time



embracing English as *the* international language of science, media, and technology, is there a danger that they may consider people literate in English as more rational and intellectually able than those who are not? This is an important consideration for future research.

The imagined communities of students in Pakistan are best understood in the context of their complex identities in a time of social and political instability, both nationally and internationally. They value being literate, but recognize that literacy is a privilege. They see themselves as part of a larger community of English speakers, but not as second-class citizens of the United States or the United Kingdom. They regard themselves as members of the larger Islamic Pakistan nation, but they recognize Pakistan's marginal status in the international community. They desire technological progress but not at the expense of peace. If, as Zaib suggests, "A society is nothing but our attitude toward each other," then our challenge as educators is to understand how attitudes toward one another are socially constructed, to promote tolerance and respect for diversity, and to harness our imaginations in the pursuit of peace.

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Pseudonyms are used throughout the text.

<sup>2</sup>In the interests of clarity, minor corrections have been made to the grammar and spelling of the students' written comments.

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