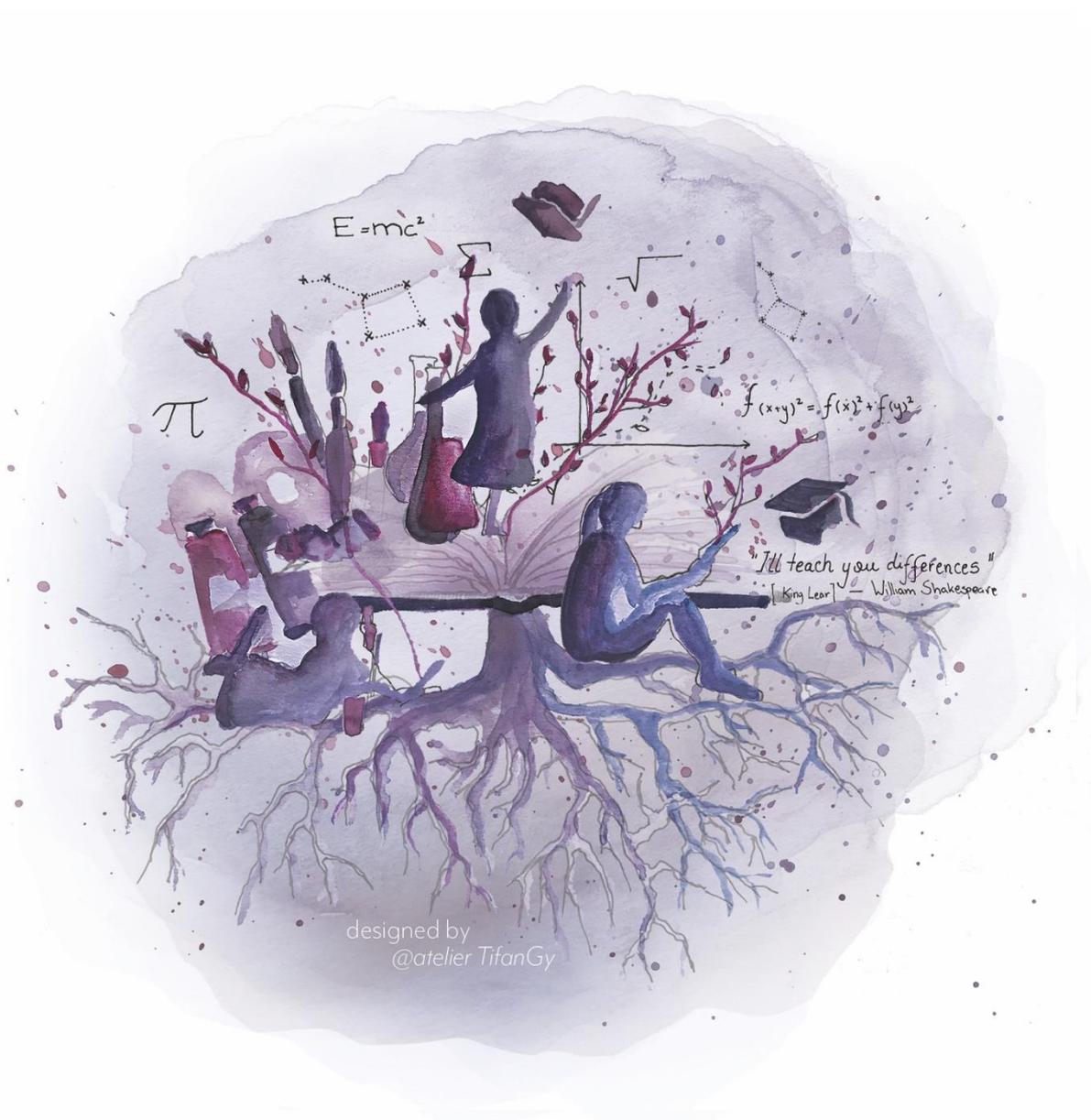


Tales of my Father: a story of immigration, racism and success

Professor Vini Lander



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Tales of my Father: a story of immigration, racism and success

Prof Vini Lander

Director of the Centre for Race, Education and Decoloniality (Twitter:
@ResearchCRED)

vini.lander@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

About Carnegie Research Summaries

As a School of Education that prides itself on our collaboration with practitioners, the Carnegie Education Research Summaries series was created to make our research truly accessible. With the peer review process often extremely lengthy and journals mostly behind paywalls, these summaries distil our research into shorter articles that focus on the key findings from our projects.

Stories are the secret reservoir of values: change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and you change the individuals and nations. Nations and peoples are largely the stories they feed themselves. If they tell themselves stories that are lies, they will suffer the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths, they will free their histories for future flowerings. (Okri, 1996)

Introduction

My father, Hari Singh Sewak, died at 9.30am on Monday 24th February 2020. I am writing this four months later on 5th June, his birthday. He would have been 85 years old today. I commit my thoughts and reflections to paper not only to remember him but to ensure the story of one man's quest to serve education and his community is recorded and celebrated appropriately. My father was a remarkable man in some ways and in others he may be considered as ordinary. So why is it important to tell his story?

There are very few narratives about the remarkable achievements of men and women such as my father, people of colour who have contributed to the advancement of their families and communities in Britain. These people lived their lives from day to day trying to improve them as a way to pave an easier path for their offspring to journey along. But these unsung heroes will be forgotten if we do not capture their stories now. They, and their achievements will remain only in the memories of those who love/loved them. Others will never know how they contributed to the growth, reputation and well-being of their communities, or how they enacted their values which in the case of my father were based on his faith, Sikhism. He worked hard to achieve success for himself, his family and his community. This is why there were over so many mourners at his funeral and why people I had never met came to give their heartfelt condolences to my siblings and me. This piece of writing is a tribute to my father and all like him who left their homes to start a new life in a new and alien country, one that did not always extend the warmest of welcome to him and his family.

'These unsung heroes will be forgotten if we do not capture their stories now'.

CRT and story telling

As a researcher working in the field of race and education, I utilise the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT postulates racism is part of our everyday life, it is endemic in our society not an aberrant feature, or just individual acts of race hate (Delgado and Stefancic 2017). Racism thrives on the single centred, dominant story told, learnt and oft repeated. This dominant story is one of silent privileges gained through enslavement, colonisation, imperialism and subjugation of disadvantaged others, namely, people of colour. As one means to counter racism, CRT promotes counter storytelling. These are not works of fiction, but stories about the experience of those of us racialised as Black and Brown people.

Critical race theory recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. In fact, critical race theorists view this knowledge as a strength and draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives (Solòrzano and Yosso, 2002, p.26)

This is why I am telling this story about my father and our family history. We need stories which counter the hegemonic Eurocentric narratives which pervade our education system and mainstream society. Counter narratives written and voiced by people of colour are designed to challenge the racism which underpins the structures of our society. We need to tell and speak the stories of Black and Brown people who have contributed to our communities and society because if we do not their commitment and endeavour would have been in vain. Otherwise they will evaporate from collective and community memory and remain the subject of faded recollection and reminiscence at family gatherings or merely rueful individual reflections as we silently compare our feeble efforts to effect change with those first-generation immigrants that have come before us.

In the beginning

My father was born in Singida in Tanzania, a gold mining region of East Africa. He used to say he was as precious as the gold mined because as the eldest son born some time after his eldest sister, and the loss of a boy child, he was very precious to his parents. He had four brothers and two sisters. As the eldest son he took his responsibilities very seriously. He started school at the age of eight. He and his brother Daljit were sent to boarding school along with an African servant who was sent with the express instructions to look after the boys but particularly their hair. As a Sikh my father and his brothers had long uncut hair which was always kept clean and tidy under a turban. My grandparents gave us the gift of faith which is precious to us all. The two boys were terribly homesick at boarding school and

would cling to each other crying for their parents and home. My father was academically bright and excelled in sport. I'm sure at school he displayed his nascent leadership qualities.

On completing his schooling my father went on to train as a teacher in Nairobi, Kenya. As a Sikh male my father used Singh as his last name as an adherent of his religion. But it was during his time training to be a teacher that he first used the surname Sewak (pronounced Sevaak). He was obliged to use a surname at college and when he was asked what his surname was he chose Sewak. Sewak comes from the Punjabi word 'seva' or service which is a key tenet of Sikhism. He and his family were active members of the Sikh community based around the gurdwara (Sikh place of worship). They freely gave their service to their community and my father did so through his work with the scouts, coaching hockey, supporting African children and much more we do not know about. My father also told us that he started writing poetry in Punjabi whilst at college and that he used the name Sewak as a pen name. The precise reason for the choice of surname will not truly be known but these two 'theories' are now enshrined in our family history.

'The men of the family were rounded up and taken away by soldiers'.

My father married my mother in December 1959. I was born two years later and my sister three years after. We lived in a top floor flat in Dar-es-Salaam with my father's extended family, comprising my grandparents, my uncles and aunt. In the mid-1960s there was an army uprising in Tanzania. My mother told us the story of her hiding under the bed with me when she was pregnant with my sister as bullets flew through the flat. The men of the family were rounded up and taken away by soldiers. Two of my uncles were badly beaten in this incident. As a result of this unsettling event, my father decided that Tanzania was not a safe country to bring up a young family. He applied to emigrate to Canada, Australia and the UK. As a family of four we gained permission to enter Britain.

In those days

I remember watching the rain create water trails diagonally along the car window as my uncle, who had been living in England for some time, drove us south to Portsmouth. We had just arrived from Tanzania. It was 1967, my sister and I were little girls. How strange I thought as I observed women with blue legs walking along the pavement. Why does she have blue legs and another such brown legs when

their faces are White, I thought? I had never seen nor worn tights or stockings before. Everything was strange, different and cold! We did not settle in Portsmouth but in Slough. We lived in one rented room in a small terraced house in a poor neighbourhood. Many Sikh immigrants to Britain found it difficult to get jobs whilst they still bore the visible symbols of Sikhism, the long hair tied up in a top-knot and covered by a turban and the unshorn beard. My father told us the story of being taken to the barbers by my mother's cousin and when he enquired why he was there, my mother's clean-shaven cousin retorted, "You won't get a job looking like that!" My father was quite insulted and vowed that if he couldn't get a job as a turbaned-Sikh then he would just return to Tanzania. He was not going to erase the symbols of faith and in so doing compromise his values.



I remember an Education Officer coming to assess me to ascertain my level of spoken and written English. I'd been educated in an English medium school in Dar-es-Salaam, so I passed with flying colours which meant I would be permitted to enter mainstream school. In the assessment I also managed to get my father a teaching job. Prior to this my father had taken a job in a toilet roll factory working an evening or night shift around his day job. He had no choice but to take a manual job because his Kenyan teacher training qualifications were not recognised by the British education system. He and my mother became immigrant factory fodder. When the Education Officer asked what does your father do? I told him he was a teacher. So began my father's teaching career in Slough. For the next fifty-three years even after retirement he continued to work in and for education. My father passionately believed in the power of education to transform

lives. My parents' favourite phrase was, "in rain, wind or storm you will never lose your education. It is a path to success". My father would repeat it to his many students who went on to achieve great success.

In 2012 I conducted an interview with my father for a small research project I was working on at the time examining the lived experiences of teachers, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds. In his eloquent Punjabi with flourished phrases my father explained how his teaching career had been established and how it progressed. In the first stages of his career he worked as a teacher with responsibility for "immigrant" children as they were referred to it those days. In the 1960s and 70s children arriving in Britain from the Indian sub-continent and those of Asian heritages were, like me assessed for English proficiency. Those whose levels of English were low were sent to immigrant reception centres,

sometimes referred to as language centres. They were usually housed within or on mainstream school sites in sometimes what were called “terrapin huts”. The children were taught English with their immigrant peers by White and teachers of colour until they were fairly proficient in spoken and written English at which point, they were sent into mainstream classrooms. This was usually a traumatic transition for them. They would have to endure racism from classmates and some teachers (Troyna and Hatcher 1992, Tomlinson 2008). The trauma of being separated from friends in the “language unit” and the culture shock of being in mainstream classrooms sometimes without any second language support meant they were left to sink or swim (Tomlinson 2008). They would often be placed in lower sets in secondary schools and teachers’ low expectations would play out in a self-fulfilling prophecy of low attainment (Milner 1982).

My father noted the immigrant/non-immigrant divide in his school and thought it unhealthy for both parties. How could each learn about the other if they were separated? Such a divide would maintain ignorance of the other. It would only lead to animosity. In an attempt to bridge the divide my father proposed he should teach maths and games within the mainstream school. He felt this would be a way to integrate his students and himself with the White students and teachers within the main school. However, as a brown Asian man with a beard and wearing a turban the integration project proved more difficult than he had envisaged.

‘They would often be placed in lower sets in secondary schools and teachers’ low expectations would play out in a self-fulfilling prophecy of low attainment’.

In his interview he described his encounters with racist pupils and parents. He suffered racist name calling from pupils, but he was not one to suffer in silence. He not only tackled it but tried to educate against it. He was supported by some, but not all of his colleagues. I remember one colleague, a White ally, who supported my father in his quest to educate against racism, to have himself recognised as a ‘legitimate’ teacher amongst the pupils and other staff and importantly to integrate minority ethnic youngsters within the school community. Mr Thomas and my father did succeed in achieving their goal and although they never managed to eradicate racism in school, they did diminish its occurrence. In my father’s hospitable manner and to thank his colleague for his support he invited him to dinner at our house. This was a standard practice with my father, relying on my mother to cook the meal and my sister and I were the kitchen support team. I

learnt a lot as a young girl from the conversations and interchange our guests had over dinner. I learnt about race, racism, multicultural and anti-racist education. My sense of social and racial justice was nourished through these conversations over dinner. Suffice to say my father was a staunch anti-racist.

Punjabi Class

As my father progressed in his career, he became an Area Education Officer. He continued to work for the education of minority ethnic children. He noticed the outcomes for these children were lower than their White counterparts. He tried in part to address this by providing private tutoring. He acted as an advocate for parents whose children were failing within the education system or those whose children were threatened with exclusion. But as he continued in his role as an education officer, he began to notice the needs of minority ethnic students were not met and the minority ethnic teachers he was working with were somewhat beleaguered by the education system and its failure to meet the needs of minority ethnic children, particularly those from Asian backgrounds. Whilst their cultures were “celebrated” through tokenistic celebrations of Diwali or Eid, curriculum initiatives such as multicultural education did not serve to diminish the institutional barriers to success. Teachers had low expectations of these youngsters, they continued to be in lower sets and gain unskilled employment on completing their education. The education system was not developing their full potential, or anywhere near it. My father saw this as a gross injustice.

My father also noted that in a drive to fit into the majority culture minority ethnic youngsters were also losing touch with their language, culture and religion. Yet the forces of discrimination and racism prevented their assimilation into the host culture and community. These first- and second-generation minority ethnic children and youngsters, particularly those with Asian backgrounds, were stuck as it was coined “between two cultures” (Taylor with Hegarty 1982). Some educationalists deployed this term and used it as an excuse to explain away the underachievement of this minority ethnic group.

My father was not wholly convinced by this argument and pursued the idea that minority ethnic communities and youngsters needed to maintain their mother tongue in order to understand their culture, maintain inter-generational dialogue and to understand their religion. He realised the issue was very close to home. On arrival from East Africa my sister and I were encouraged to speak English at home and of course at school. Our parents felt English language proficiency would accelerate our academic achievement. But this resulted in diminishing our oral proficiency in Punjabi, our mother tongue. Despite my attempts to become literate in Punjabi even now I can only read simple children’s books at the level of Spot the Dog! In his usual brilliant way and as a service to his community my father set up supplementary language classes on Sunday mornings to teach the Sikh children of Slough Punjabi. At the time, supplementary schools were set up by a number of

minority ethnic communities to provide instruction on religion, culture and mother tongue teaching (Taylor with Hegarty 1982). They relied on volunteers who were often qualified teachers in their countries of origin but whose qualifications were not recognised in Britain. These schools provided key support for their communities but were never recognised nor acknowledged by mainstream schools (Parekh 2000). My father persuaded a local headteacher to open his school on a Sunday. When this agreement was sealed the Punjabi classes started. The venture started small with 15-20 children of all ages, it increased through the years to 300 children giving up time on a Sunday to learn Punjabi, their mother tongue. These classes continue to thrive to this day.

Khalsa Primary School

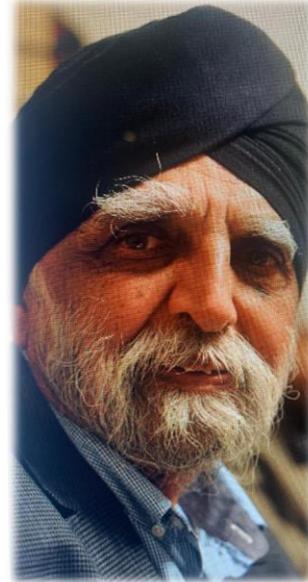
I believe one of my father's greatest and lasting legacies was the creation of the first Sikh primary school in the country. He campaigned tirelessly to gather funds from the Sikh community in Slough and other major conurbations the length and breadth of Britain. He and other supporters lobbied Slough Council and the Department of Education. Eventually permission was granted, land was acquired, and building started on this brand-new school which would serve the burgeoning Sikh community in Slough. Khalsa Primary School was opened in 2007 (<https://khalsaprimarieschool.com/>). Since then it has gone from strength to strength and achieved an Ofsted Outstanding grade in 2020. My father would have been absolutely delighted and so proud to have heard this news.

'The beliefs of the Sikh faith permeate the relationships in the school and everyday interactions with those from outside the school community'.

My father, whose Sikh faith had always been strong, believed there was a need for a Sikh faith-based school in Slough. His vision was for a school which would welcome Sikh children and those from other faiths and none. He believed a faith-based education would equip children with a sense of pride and security in their own identity, raise self-esteem and the attendant educational success from excellent provision. He envisaged the school to be part of, and the heart of the local Sikh community. His vision has been realised. The school with a built-in Gurdwara (the house of the Guru or Sikh place of worship) is the centre for worship not just for pupils and their families, but members of the wider Sikh community particularly on Sundays. It has become a model of education for other schools. It

enjoys the support of non-Sikh families and employs staff from a range of ethnic groups. Its ethos pervades the school grounds and its buildings. The beliefs of the Sikh faith permeate the relationships in the school and everyday interactions with those from outside the school community. The palpable sense of community envelops every visitor. I am so proud of my father in the realisation of his vision.

In 2015, the school honoured my father who in his sixty or so years of living in Slough was well known in the Sikh community as a “servant of the community” and as an outstanding educator. He always sought to give of his best to help and support his community and those outside it. On the day of his funeral, to honour my father, the school erected a marquee and his coffin lay in state for community members to pay their respects and bid their final farewells. There were over five hundred people at his funeral with standing room only in the crematorium. The tributes paid to him all echoed the same themes, his unstinting devotion to Sikhism and his embodiment of a key pillar of faith, that of service, or, *seva*, to his community and humankind.



The secret reservoir of values which drove my parents to Britain changed the story of our family. The values I was taught by my father are embedded in my work on race, racism and education as well as in my personal life. I make every effort to live by these inherited values to change the stories Britain tells itself and lives by. My hope is to contribute to the change in the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves in order to change individuals and hopefully this nation.

My father, Hari Singh Sewak’s life was well lived and steeped in the values of faith and service. May his story never be forgotten. Rest in peace dear Dad.

References

- Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2017) *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*. New York, New York University Press.
- Khalsa Primary School <https://khalsaprimarieschool.com/> Accessed 5th June 2020.
- Milner, D. (1982) *Children and Race Ten Years On*. London, Ward Locke Educational.
- Okri, B. (1996) *Birds of Heaven*. Phoenix.
- Parekh, B. (2000) *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain*. London, Profile Books Ltd.
- Soldrzano, D, & Yosso, T. (2002) *Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research*. *Qualitative Inquiry* 8(1), 23-44.
- Taylor, M. with Hegarty, S. (1982) *The Best of Both Worlds? A Review of Research into the Education of Pupils of South Asian Origin*. Windsor, NFER-Nelson.

Tomlinson, S. (2008) *Race and Education*. Maidenhead, McGrawHill.

Troyna, B. & Hatcher, R. (1992) *Racism in Children's Lives*. London, Routledge



LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY
CARNEGIE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION